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## Originality, Imitation, and Plagiarism

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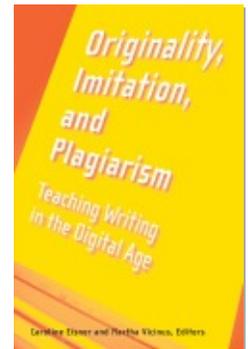
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# Instinctual Ballast

## *Imitation and Creative Writing*

Christina Pugh

In his *Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*, Richard A. Lanham defines mimesis as “imitation of gesture, pronunciation, or utterance; self-conscious role-playing, as when a rhapsode reenacts the poem he is reciting” (102). As defined by Lanham and discussed by thinkers from Plato to Erich Auerbach, mimesis and imitation are inseparable from the endeavor of representation itself; most creative arts are distinctly mimetic in their practice. In our contemporary landscape, however, creative *writing* is almost never taught with mimesis at the forefront of students’ or teachers’ minds. Instead, the pedagogical method in many workshop courses seeks to enable the student to “discover” her own voice, as if she existed in a form of literary vacuum. Students in such courses might be asked to do an occasional imitation exercise, but the serious practice of imitation is seldom pursued in any focused manner in most creative writing programs.

Even in a literary culture that continues to prize “originality,” however, imitation is a viable apprenticeship for a writer. In the past few years under the auspices of the Northwestern University creative writing program, I have taught undergraduate creative writing courses that consisted *only* of reading and imitating a handful of major American poets: Robert Frost, Elizabeth Bishop, Louise Bogan, Gwendolyn Brooks, and James Merrill; and though this sort of course goes against the grain of many curricular expectations, I have been astonished at the caliber of poetic work that imitation yields from students.

Because the imitation course is an amalgam of what we might, in other circumstances, think of as discrete “literature” and “creative writing” courses, it rejects the way in which institutions cordon off complementary aspects of the mind into separate disciplines. This helps students, in turn,

to begin to reject the myths and clichés of who the scholar and the poet should be: those discrete and supposedly mutually exclusive perimeters that determine how we identify ourselves as producers of literature, whether “critical” or “creative.” The course thus cultivates the writer, to parse Luce Irigaray, “which is not *one*.” It’s built upon a radical valuation of the writing act itself—what Stevens called “the poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice”—and the ways in which such an act emerges both steadily and unpredictably from a lifelong act of reading.

The task of the writer who is not *one* writer, then, is to reinscribe disciplinary boundaries that are fluid as well as rigorous. There’s a way in which the straight workshop format, as practiced in some programs and institutions, can relegate the reading act to what is “not said”—almost to the realm of the unconscious. A poem might have been “influenced” by another, and we may learn as much over the course of workshop discussion; but that influence is thought to lie, almost indiscreetly, outside the artificial boundary that contains what is thought to constitute creative production. In such courses, reading is ground but not figure; the assumption, but not the task at hand. Yet this is precisely the task that writers need to consider in their own work, since text necessarily generates text. Many creative writing courses may not actively ask how to read as a writer: how should I be reading; what can I be reading; and especially: how, in this culture of images, can I line my life with words, with print? These questions are not only crucial for undergraduates, who are still very much in the stage of formation, but also should be vital to any writer for whom the re-formation of self and work remains a perennial value. By making literary texts the centerpiece of our courses rather than the background, we can teach our students not only to read as writers—“poetry is an art that reading, at its best, can imitate,” Mary Kinzie explains (2)—but also to write as readers. This is a viable practice that literary critics from Helen Vendler to Judith Ryan have discussed. (Indeed, Ryan’s *Rilke, Modernism, and Poetic Tradition* re-creates Rilke’s writing desk.)

Italo Calvino knew quite a lot about the Reader, whom he allegorized as a character in *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*. The male writer goes in search of this female Reader, Ludmilla by name, who keeps a crowd of picture frames in one corner of her wall:

The frames are all different, nineteenth-century Art Nouveau floral forms, frames in silver, copper, enamel, tortoiseshell, leather, carved wood; they may reflect the notion of enhancing those fragments of real

life, but they may also be a collection of frames, and the photographs may be there only to occupy them; in fact some frames are occupied by pictures clipped from newspapers, one encloses an illegible page of an old letter, another is empty. (Calvino 144)

What is the import of that last, superfluous, melancholy frame in the Reader's house? Perhaps it constitutes a certain moment of transformation that Calvino did not fully envision—in which the reader, steeped and saturated in text, opens a portal to her own writing. The empty frame becomes incipience, or the blank page. Then the beautiful distinctions—man/woman, writer/reader—must themselves be blurred, be productively confounded, and all the genders mixed up. For the reader can only be courted by the writer *within* the self that is not one.

Saul Bellow said that the writer is a reader moved to emulation. Certainly the performing arts place a high value on emulation, or imitation, as do many pedagogical practices in the visual arts (think of aspiring painters who copy the masterpieces hanging in museums). Despite the perennial literary-critical debates regarding the role of mimesis *within* literary representation, however, few educators think of literature as a practice that a writer must learn by performing mimesis of previous writers. Nevertheless, the ballet student learns his art through a muscular, bodily mimesis of the teacher's equally muscular gesture; and here the analogy becomes more than strictly conceptual: because we need to feel poetic meter in our breath and heartbeats, we can't write iambic tetrameter without learning to walk in tetrameter first. Imitation forces us to confront the poem not as an ethereal emanation of our personal wish, but as something distinctly material: something we make through the labor of arrangement and rhetorical manipulation.

A comparison to the other arts can often bring this particular pedagogy home to skeptical students in the early days of an imitation course. That, of course, would be the time when they learn the course requirements: reading and discussing five twentieth-century poets, as well as writing both a weekly imitation poem and an analytic paper that makes an argument, via close reading, about one of the poet's poems. This is serious work—and the imitation poems are serious imitation, not parody: they are, in other words, what Nicholas Delbanco calls a "sincere imitation" (xxvi). As Delbanco elaborates, such an imitation can never be accomplished without intensive reading and study of the work to be imitated:

You cannot copy what you glance at nor remember what you speed read nor repeat what you half heard; the reason one writer chooses semicolons, or another elects an appositive comma, or a third prefers the absence of standard punctuation marks, has a great deal to do with the world view expressed, and a complex or compound sentence or parenthetical observation (such as the one we're engaged in) will represent a different way of looking at the linkages of things—the way the past impinges on the present as does the present on the future in an unbroken line of descent or argument if represented with a dash—than does a simple or short. (xxvi)

Delbanco aptly describes the way in which the imitation poems necessitate—are, in fact, constitutionally impossible *without*—intensive and sometimes self-changing reading of the poet to be imitated. I have told the students: *Put on the nerves and musculature of the poet before you begin. This is not about biography, the poet's or yours.* It's about taking your life into the poem—a different way of taking your life into your hands. For one quarter, the students learn to be sibyls: to let the poet in question speak *them*. This is not a mystical transformation; it is instead the natural outgrowth of attentive reading. Moreover, it involves much more than retaining a certain meter or line length, though it does require that, too: it also involves assimilating the ways in which a certain poet builds sentences incrementally, syntactically, across lines; the wild geography of what I call that poet's "diction universe"; what the poet would include or exclude from a particular poem. (*I want to be able to pick the poem out of a line-up*, I have told the students—and this is how the poems are evaluated and discussed in the imitation workshop.) In one particularly memorable class discussion, we debated whether or not James Merrill would have actually used the phrase "reality TV" in his work, had he lived to see it. Contrast, too, is paramount: the precise degree of microscopic sheen in Bishop's "The Bight" or "Sandpiper"—what Richard Wollheim would have described as "seeing-in"—is unthinkable in a poet like Frost. Only by dwelling within the poet's work can we access the caul of preverbal synergies that Seamus Heaney called the "instinctual ballast" of a particular poet: "What kinds of noise assuage him, what kinds of music pleasure or repel him, what messages the receiving stations of his senses are happy to pick up from the world and what ones they automatically block out" (62). For Heaney, instinctual ballast is what causes the later Yeats to clatter with consonants while Wordsworth remains the smooth and receptive oar in water, the glittering circles inscribed by the young boat-thief in book 1 of *The Prelude*.

Kinzie has also eloquently discussed the timbre of reading that imitation requires, as well as the primacy of the literary material at hand:

Perceiving how shape emerges from the half-shaped background provides the reader with a lens, or vantage, similar to the writer's. But this does not require us to say much about the lives of the poets or how they went about making their works; I am more interested in how the poems themselves wrestle with their tasks and occasions. For task and occasion arise only from a clear sense of poetic mission, a mission that articulates itself most strongly when responding (among other spurs) to a poetic tradition. (14)

Such an emphasis on the material and making of the poem also gives students the freedom to cross over—to cross purportedly indelible lines that separate different races, genders, and sexual orientations: not biography, again, but the conditions or threshold of production. By its very nature, imitation challenges the received notion that writing must arise from, or be somehow ratified by, personal experience. One of the most fascinating movements in the imitation class, for me, was the pivot from the work of James Merrill to Gwendolyn Brooks, a movement that required many of the students to consider the limitations of their whiteness and to figure out how to mobilize particular aspects of African-American vernacular in a way that would have to remain “sincere,” in Delbanco’s terms. Brooks herself, having mastered both vernacular and more conventionally “literary” registers of speech, is a terrific model for the variegations of a writer’s voice—or a writer, again, who is not *one*.

All of this certainly flies in the face of such credos as “Write what you know,” “Find your own voice,” “Your experience is the best subject for writing.” But as someone who came to writing through and with a doctorate in literature, none of those instructions seemed right to me in the first place. With so much of my life vested in reading, in writing, how could I separate it into book and nonbook? What of my voice, or my plural voices, really belongs to me, and how would I be able to gauge the degree or percentage of that ownership? Perhaps because I did study literary theory, these ideas don’t reduce me to despair; instead, they may have actually given me permission to write in the first place, despite so many creative writers’ indignation over the very title of Foucault’s “The Death of the Author.” If I had ever found writing to be an act of the ego alone, I think my inchoate sense of modesty—or a certain love of privacy—would have prevented me from doing it. (In an essay entitled “The Uses of Doubt,”

Stacey D'Erasmus has written forcefully against the often unspoken assumption that writing must be ego-driven.) If indeed there is a way in which poetry functions as Eliot's "continual extinction of personality" (2076), can it also be a concomitant enlargement of what we consider to be the singular, limited personality as such? "Enlargement" is, of course, a world away from "inflation."

Keats's notion of "negative capability" is closely related to such enlargement. For him, the ability to be "in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (70–71) is what Shakespeare possessed in droves, and a capacity that every poet should cultivate in herself. This is certainly a marvelous description of the writing process, but isn't it also a dead ringer for the reading act? We could say much more about the play between agency and self-dissolution in the case of the reader who is also a writer; but considered in the light of negative capability, the seeming strictness of the imitation assignments is revealed as something more than literary apprenticeship: it can constitute some of the most vertiginous artistic freedom imaginable.

An imitation course thus refines the boundaries of what we categorize as "the creative." It requires a student to do something more dangerous than to trust his own experience or to tell the story she thinks she wants to tell. Imitation unmoors the writer from her comfort zone of familiar syntax, diction, and line. If there is a philosophy subtending imitation, it is surely globally similar to that of deconstruction: both practices suggest that writing is never transparent, or innocent, or a straightforward means of self-expression.

Does anyone own his writing, then? Are imitation and plagiarism commensurate? At first blush, I'm inclined to separate them—to agree, that is, with Christopher Ricks's admonition, "Plagiarism is a dishonesty" (223). Clearly, however, plagiarism has a much more ambiguous role in the creative arts than in criticism, as poets have incorporated other poets' lines into their own work for millennia. The genre of classical poem known as the cento, which comprises one hundred borrowed lines, is an excellent example of what we might now call naturalized plagiarism. For some, Eliot's *The Waste Land*, despite its footnotes, also constitutes plagiarism writ large. The imitation course, however, does not ask students to incorporate particular lines from the master poets' work. Students are asked to put on strategies and verbal proclivities, as opposed to "lifting" pieces of text from the poet to be imitated. Indeed, such cutting and pasting would interfere with the generative writing—in another's voice—that they are

being asked to do. If plagiarism has any role at all in the course, perhaps it would be the creeping and paradoxical sense of *self*-plagiarism described by William Gaddis in *Agape Agape*: “I’ve never seen my, seen this plagiarist because I am the other one it’s exactly the opposite, I am the other” (22). I am the other: the writer who is not one.

Lastly, pedagogy seeks practical outcomes. Some might wonder how such concentrated imitation affects creative writing students and whether such a course actually allows them to remain “creative,” in the popular sense of the term. In my experience, it does. Some students told me that they came to depend on the imitations: that they took great pleasure in that relinquishing of self. Many of these students also went on to write senior thesis projects in creative writing—projects that may have germinated in some of the imitation poems, but that grew in ways that exceeded the strict boundaries of the imitation course. What’s more, the students also learned enormously from their own resistance to imitating particular writers. Clearly, some imitations feel easier or more “natural” than others, and these experiences help students to begin to unearth and to articulate their own “instinctual ballast,” in Heaney’s terms. If imitating Frost feels like the proverbial walk in the park, it’s almost certain that Merrill will be more of a struggle, and this very contrast will reveal something important about the student’s emerging goals and capacities as a poet.

Perhaps most importantly, the challenge of imitation spurs students (in an almost Bloomian sense) to produce poems that are fine poems in their own right, even if taken out of the strict imitation context. A couple of years ago, one of my students wrote a superb Frost imitation that was later published in a small but nationally distributed literary magazine. Thus imitation doesn’t always announce itself as such to the reading public; neither, of course, does an imitative inception disqualify a work from standing as its own autonomous entity. Robert Lowell’s *Imitations* volume, for example, famously troped the boundaries of imitation and “autonomous” artistic conception. More recently, Susan Stewart’s *Columbarium*, winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award for poetry in 2003, has been discussed in the context of imitation.

However gratifying to the student and teacher, publication is not the ultimate goal of the imitation course. Instead, imitation allows undergraduate students to be what they are: apprentice writers. When they imitate, these students are apprenticing to the very best and are thus slowing down their own writerly gestation process in an age when the rush to publish is infecting even the undergraduate population. Writers are not made in an

instant; and no matter what form our writing may eventually take, there is a very real sense in which we are the verbal concatenation of what we have read: whether our work be experimental or traditional is immaterial. Imitation recognizes and mobilizes this essential element of literary learning, and it allows students to learn viscerally from the tradition in which they strive to make their mark.

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