PLAGIARISM AS REVOLUTION, CONCEPT AS CONTENT: APOTHEOSIZING THE AUTHOR UNDER THE AEGIS OF APPROPRIATION

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> "Art is either plagiarism or revolution."
> —attributed to Paul Gauguin

In "It's Not Plagiarism. In the Digital Age, It's 'Repurposing.,'" Professor Kenneth Goldsmith writes about his course "Uncreative Writing," which explores the concept of authorship. His students study the Internet's impact on the proliferation of plagiarism. Goldsmith observes that "the sheer penetration and saturation of broadband . . . makes the harvesting of masses of language easy and tempting," going on to discuss new artistic methods facilitated by the Internet that rely on appropriating previous artistic works ("It's Not Plagiarism").

In his course, Goldsmith encourages—and even requires—his students to plagiarize. Worried about the conventional and clichéd way in which creative writing is often taught, with students told that their job as authors is to produce works of originality, Goldsmith established his course as an alternative:

> We retype documents and transcribe audio clips. We make small changes to Wikipedia pages (changing an "a" to "an" or inserting an extra space between words). We hold classes in chat rooms, and entire semesters are spent exclusively in Second Life. Each semester, for their final paper, I have them purchase a term paper from an online paper mill and sign their name to it . . . Students then must get up and present the paper to the class as if they wrote it themselves, defending it from attacks by the other students. What paper did they choose? Is it possible to defend something you didn't write? Something, perhaps, you don't agree with? Convince us. ("It's Not Plagiarism")

By making his students express themselves in words not of their own choosing, Goldsmith forces them to confront what constitutes authorial intent. Though they copy, they engage in the significant job of arranging. Even in choosing which paper to plagiarize, his students necessarily express themselves. Moreover, as they are appropriating others' ideas, the aesthetic value of their products must derive entirely from the method of composition. "Uncreative Writing" proposes a radical redefinition of authorship for the digital age, which would make context the new content. Indeed, it suggests that even if it is impossible to create substantively original works, art may still derive its aesthetic value from its conceptual basis.

To justify his project, Goldsmith invokes the example of novelist Jonathan Lethem, whose February 2007 article in *Harper's Magazine*, "The Ecstasy of Influence: A plagiarism," epitomizes the kind of patch-written project Goldsmith extols. There is not a single new idea in Lethem's essay; instead, it synthesizes the ideas of a great number of authors—and indeed does so without obvious attribution. As Lethem's title points out, his entire essay is a plagiarism. Goldsmith writes,

> In academia, patchwriting is considered an offense equal to that of plagiarism. If Lethem had submitted this as a senior thesis or dissertation chapter, he'd be shown the door. Yet few would argue that he didn't construct a brilliant work of art—as well as writing a pointed essay—entirely in the words of others. It's the way in which he conceptualized and executed his writing machine—surgically choosing what to borrow, arranging those words in a skillful way—that wins us over. Lethem's piece is a self-reflexive, demonstrative work of unoriginal genius. ("It's Not Plagiarism")

That Lethem's finished product succeeds stylistically is unquestionable. Despite his almost complete reliance on appropriation, Lethem manages paradoxically to create a brilliant work of art by synthesizing his influences so beautifully. As Goldsmith points out, it is the conceptually elegant method by which Lethem crafts his essay that gives it its appeal.

Goldsmith characterizes copyright criticism as the centerpiece of Lethem's argument. "Echoing the cries of free-culture advocates such as Lawrence Lessig and Cory Doctorow, [Lethem] eloquently rails against copyright law as a threat to the lifeblood of creativity," he writes ("It's Not Plagiarism"). Yet, Lethem does much more than simply criticize copyright. Lethem's observation that all works of art embody their antecedents leads him to argue that copying is not only inevitable, but desirable. Many masterpieces owe their creation to artists' inspiration by predecessors. Thus, Lethem questions the traditional conception of authorship, which rests on the assumption that creators produce works of unique inspiration (63).

This assumption underpins Jane Ginsburg's 2009 article "The Author's Place in the Future of Copyright," in which Ginsburg, a Columbia law professor, defends the traditional view of authorship. In stark opposition to Lethem's critique, she views copyright as vital in protecting this tradition. "Vesting copyright in authors," she writes, "made authorship the functional and moral center of the system" (148). Ginsburg believes that authorship is the basis of a social system of value. Lethem's argument for copying, she suggests, is an affront to authorship. To allow anyone to plagiarize an author's work would be to reduce its value and thus be an attack on the author. Ginsburg worries that "the advent of new technologies of creation and dissemination of works of authorship not only challenges traditional revenue models, but also calls into question whatever artistic control the author may retain over her

work" (148–9). The prospect of authors losing their creative control scares her, because she equates authorship with originality and fears the demise of originality.

Ginsburg criticizes advocates of a free culture who claim that copyright "somehow degrades the noble calling of disinterested creativity" (152), labeling them "techno-postmodernists." She writes: "If the author is dead, or must be dethroned, then the reader not only lives, but reigns supreme. Readers give meaning to the texts they peruse; reading itself becomes a creative act" (151). The postmodern theory supposes that readers rather than authors give meaning to texts today in the act of reading them. This would undermine the traditional concept of authorship by devaluing the role of the author. Ginsburg views techno-postmodernism as nihilistic because it challenges her value system. Ginsburg argues that "the Internet gives concrete effect to the postmodernist theory of reader as creator, for all readers can remanipulate the text, and none can impose unilateral significance" (151). As Goldsmith points out in his article, the Internet makes appropriation easy, which Ginsburg would argue facilitates the dethroning of the author.

It would be easy to label Goldsmith a techno-postmodernist and to interpret his course as an attack on authorship, yet the opposite is true. By reimagining what the author can be in the 21st century, Goldsmith defends authorship against those who would devalue it. Ginsburg might see the goal of the course as manipulating text to expose a lack of "unilateral significance," fitting with her thesis about readers' replacement of the author (Ginsburg 151). However, Goldsmith's course is concerned not with the role of the reader, but of the writer. It is not a course in techno-postmodernism. The "new writing has an electronic gleam in its eye," but "its results are distinctly analog, taking inspiration from radical modernist ideas and juicing them with 21st-century technology" ("It's Not Plagiarism"). Indeed, Goldsmith rightly rejects the nihilistic notion that authorship is dead. He agrees with Ginsburg that this is a theory under which "individual creativity is discredited" (Ginsburg 152). Rather, Goldsmith argues that the new literature is "a writing imbued with celebration, ablaze with enthusiasm for the future, embracing this moment as one pregnant with possibility" ("It's Not Plagiarism"). Ginsburg's account of the techno-postmodernists does not reflect Goldsmith's argument: he suggests that by copying, writers can create works of aesthetic value—and that this is perhaps the only source of creativity left to artists today. Goldsmith is trying not to dethrone, but to inaugurate, the author.

Lethem represents better the idea behind Goldsmith's course; indeed, his theory defends postmodernism from charges of nihilism, reinterpreting what postmodernism means in the context of authorship. Lethem examines T.S. Eliot's preoccupation with attribution, implying that it reflects a broader social paradigm. Lethem argues that this obsession with citation "can be read as a symptom of modernism's contamination anxiety. Taken from this angle, what exactly is postmodernism, except modernism without the anxiety?" he asks (62). Lethem suggests there is nothing nihilistic about this postmodern approach to creation. Rather, he reconciles postmodernism with a

concept of authorship, suggesting that authors may still create original works of art using techniques of appropriation. Copying, Lethem says, allows authors to "make the world larger" (65). This strongly implies that he has not abandoned the possibility of creating works of originality.

In light of Lethem's claim that appropriation reinforces authorship, it is possible to consider Goldsmith's course a reaction to the supposed nihilistic reductionism of Ginsburg's techno-postmodernists. Goldsmith's seeming willingness to concede the death of originality proves chimeric, as he ultimately suggests that copying allows his students to produce work of incredible creativity. Goldsmith observes that his students will at first invariably react with horror to his instruction that they copy. Yet, ultimately, they reconsider their objections. Goldsmith describes how "after a semester of my forcibly suppressing a student's 'creativity' by making her plagiarize and transcribe, she will tell me how disappointed she was," not because her creativity had been stifled, but "because, in fact, what we had accomplished was not uncreative at all; by not being 'creative,' she had produced the most creative body of work in her life" ("It's Not Plagiarism"). Goldsmith's seeming dismissal of authorship is an attempt to reclaim it in an age in which, to many, it seems impossible to create a substantively original work.

Indeed, Goldsmith's article can be interpreted as an articulation of a fundamental principle of authorship: that creation is as much about methodology as about material—and, moreover, that through plagiarism his students elevate method to material. For Goldsmith, the "trend among younger writers who take [Lethem's] exercise one step further by boldly appropriating the work of others without citation, disposing of the artful and seamless integration of Lethem's patchwriting," reveals that "context is the new content" (Goldsmith 3). Modern technology has created an aesthetic sensibility that considers appropriation an essential aspect of authorship. What matters is no longer what one says, but the mode of her saying it. Still to Goldsmith, the postmodern writer gains authorship by creating a work of aesthetic merit. Thus, in a world in which "long-cherished notions of creativity are under attack, eroded by file-sharing, media culture, widespread sampling, and digital replication," Goldsmith's course "rise[s] to that challenge by employing strategies of appropriation, replication, plagiarism, piracy, sampling, plundering, as compositional methods" ("Uncreative Writing" 1). "Along the way," he writes in his syllabus, "we'll trace the rich history of forgery, frauds, hoaxes, avatars, and impersonations spanning the arts, with a particular emphasis on how they employ language" (1). Goldsmith's course thus focuses on employing language to express old ideas in new ways, which he believes permits new authorship.

Yet there is an ambiguity at the heart of Goldsmith's idea. Writing of the beauty of plagiarists' products, Goldsmith concludes that "far from being coercive or persuasive, this writing delivers emotion obliquely and unpredictably, with sentiments expressed as a result of the writing process rather than by authorial intention" ("It's Not

Plagiarism"). Goldsmith seems to distinguish between compositional method and creation, the latter alone associated with traditional views of authorship.

In this, he channels postmodernist French philosopher Michel Foucault, who argues that authorship is a modern concept, sure to wither away. Foucault claims in his 1969 essay "What Is an Author?" that "the author does not precede the works; he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction" (Foucault 119). Thus, he argues authorship is a characteristic of, rather than requisite for, a work. Authorship matters to Foucault only because it affects the perception of a work. Foucault anticipates presciently the controversy over the disappearance of authorship. Moreover, he argues that "the author function will disappear . . . in such a manner that fiction and its polysemous texts will once again function according to another mode, but still with a system of constraint—one which will no longer be the author, but which will have to be determined or, perhaps, experienced" (119). Foucault expresses the postmodern theory that claims that authorship will be replaced by a different lens through which to interpret text.

Foucault does not address Ginsburg's concern, shared by Lethem and Goldsmith, about the demise of originality, but another idea from the same essay may better reflect the postmodern development in authorship. Foucault advances the concept of "discursivity," a specific—and heightened—form of authorship in which creators establish not only an idea but an avenue for ensuing ideas. "Founders of discursivity," Foucault writes, "are unique in that they are not just the authors of their own works. They have produced something else: the possibilities and the rules for the formation of other texts" (Foucault 114). He gives as his examples Freud and Marx, who pioneered fields of thought. Perhaps the new aesthetic sensibility of the digital age extends the realm of Foucauldian discursivity to include all works that are plagiarized by the "techno-postmodernists." These works spawn methodological progeny in a parallel fashion to Marx's and Freud's inspiring their heirs. If Goldsmith's methods of appropriation can indeed be considered an extension of the realm of discursivity, then the very plagiarism that Ginsburg decries as defacing an original work instead uplifts it, giving the original creator's authorship a discursive character. Viewed this way, Goldsmith's process could heighten authorship itself.

Lethem provides perhaps the best extension of Foucault's theory of authorship. Asking whether "our appetite for creative vitality require[s] the violence and exasperation of another avant-garde, with its wearisome killing-the-father imperatives," Lethem suggests "we [might] be better off ratifying the ecstasy of influence—and deepening our willingness to understand the commonality and timelessness of the methods and motifs available to artists" (67). Lethem proposes to end discussions of modernism and postmodernism, and instead to embrace methods of reuse as a definitive aspect of authorship. To do so would be to embrace the

collaborative character of authorship in contemporary times. This is exactly what Goldsmith does in "Uncreative Writing."

By employing plagiarism, Goldsmith revolutionizes the concept of authorship, which he says derives not only from the substance of a work but also from its very composition. Like Ginsburg, he maintains that authorship still lives, but he differs from her in his rejection of the limited view of authorship which she defends. Instead, sharing Lethem's view that plagiarism allows contemporary artists to create works of originality, Goldsmith expands authorship twice: once by recognizing the significance of appropriation and again by extending Foucault's discursivity.

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