THE ECSTASY OF INFLUENCE

A plagiarism

By Jonathan Lethem

All mankind is of one author, and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated. . . .

—John Donne

LOVE AND THEFT

Consider this tale: a cultivated man of middle age looks back on the story of an amour fou, one beginning when, traveling abroad, he takes a room as a lodger. The moment he sees the daughter of the house, he is lost. She is a preteen, whose charms instantly enslave him. Heedless of her age, he becomes intimate with her. In the end she dies, and the narrator—marked by her forever—remains alone. The name of the girl supplies the title of the story: Lolita.

The author of the story I've described, Heinz von Lichberg, published his tale of Lolita in 1916, forty years before Vladimir Nabokov's novel. Lichberg later became a prominent journalist in the Nazi era, and his youthful works faded from view. Did Nabokov, who remained in Berlin until 1937, adopt Lichberg's tale consciously? Or did the earlier tale exist for Nabokov as a hidden, unacknowledged memory? The history of literature is not without examples of this phenomenon, called cryptomnesia. Another hypothesis is that Nabokov, knowing Lichberg's tale perfectly well, had set himself to that art of quotation that Thomas Mann, himself a master of it, called "higher cribbing." Literature has always been a crucible in which familiar themes are continually recast. Little of what we admire in Nabokov's Lolita is to be found in its predecessor; the former is in no way deducible from the latter.

Still: did Nabokov consciously borrow and quote?

"When you live outside the law, you have to eliminate dishonesty." The line comes from Don Siegel's 1958 film noir, The Lineup, written by Stirling Silliphant. The film still haunts revival houses, likely thanks to Eli Wallach's blazing portrayal of a sociopathic hit man and to Siegel's long, sturdy auteurist career. Yet what were those words worth—to Siegel, or Silliphant, or their audience—in 1958? And again: what was the line worth when Bob Dylan heard it (presumably in some Greenwich Village repertory cinema), cleaned it up a little, and inserted it into "Absolutely Sweet Marie"? What are they worth now, to the culture at large?

Appropriation has always played a key role in Dylan's music. The songwriter has grabbed not only from a panoply of vintage Hollywood films but from Shakespeare and F. Scott Fitzgerald and Junichi Saga's Confessions of a Yakuza. He also nabbed the title of Eric Lott's study of minstrelsy for his 2001 album Love and Theft. One imagines Dylan liked the general resonance of the title, in which emotional misdeemeanors stalk the sweetness of love, as they do so often in Dylan's songs. Lott's title is, of course, itself a riff on Leslie Fiedler's

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Love and Death in the American Novel, which famously identifies the literary motif of the interdependence of a white man and a dark man, like Huck and Jim or Ishmael and Queegue—a series of nested references to Dylan's own appropriating, minstrel-boy self. Dylan's art offers a paradox: while it famously urges us not to look back, it also encodes a knowledge of past sources that might otherwise have little home in contemporary culture, like the Civil War poetry of the Confederate bard Henry Timrod, resuscitated in lyrics on Dylan's newest record, Modern Times. Dylan's originality and his appropriations are as one. The same might be said of all art. I realized this forcefully when one day I went looking for the John Donne passage quoted above. I know the lines, I confess, not from a college course but from the movie version of 84, Changing Cross Road with Anthony Hopkins and Anne Bancroft. I checked out 84, Changing Cross Road from the library in the hope of finding the Donne passage, but it wasn't in the book. It's alluded to in the play that was adapted from the book, but it isn't reprinted. So I rented the movie again, and there was the passage, read in voiceover by Anthony Hopkins but without attribution. Unfortunately, the line was also abridged so that, when I finally turned to the Web, I found myself searching for the line "all mankind is of one volume" instead of "all mankind is of one author, and is one volume."

My Internet search was initially no more successful than my library search. I had thought that summoning books from the vasty deep was a matter of a few keystrokes, but when I visited the website of the Yale library, I found that most of its books don't yet exist as computer text. As a last-ditch effort I searched the seemingly more obscure phrase "every chapter must be so translated." The passage I wanted finally came to me, as it turns out, not as part of a scholarly library collection but simply because someone who loves Donne had posted it on his homepage. The lines I sought were from Meditation 17 in Devotions upon Emergent Occasions, which happens to be the most famous thing Donne ever wrote, containing as it does the line "never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee." My search had led me from a movie to a book to a play to a website and back to a book. Then again, those words may be as famous as they are only because Hemingway lifted them for his book title.

Literature has been in a plundered, fragmentary state for a long time. When I was thirteen I purchased an anthology of Beat writing. Immediately, and to my very great excitement, I discovered one William S. Burroughs, author of something called Naked Lunch, excerpted there in all its coruscating brilliance. Burroughs was then as radical a literary man as the world had to offer. Nothing, in all my experience of literature since, has ever had as strong an effect on my sense of the sheer possibilities of writing. Later, attempting to understand this impact, I discovered that Burroughs had incorporated snippets of other writers' texts into his work, an action I knew my teachers would have called plagiarism. Some of these borrowings had been lifted from American science fiction of the Forties and Fifties, adding a secondary shock of recognition for me. By then I knew that this "cut-up method," as Burroughs called it, was central to whatever he thought he was doing, and that he quite literally believed it to be akin to magic. When he wrote about his process, the hairs on my neck stood up, so palpable was the excitement. Burroughs was interrogating the universe with scissors and a paste pot, and the least imitative of authors was no plagiarist at all.

CONTAMINATION ANXIETY

In 1941, on his front porch, Muddy Waters recorded a song for the folklorist Alan Lomax. After singing the song, which he told Lomax was entitled "Country Blues," Waters described how he came to write it. "I made it on about the eighth of October '38," Waters said. "I was fixin' a puncture on a car. I had been mistreated by a girl. I just felt blue, and the song fell into my mind and it come to me just like that and I started singing." Then Lomax, who knew of the Robert Johnson recording called "Walkin' Blues," asked Waters if there were any other songs that used the same tune. There's been some blues played like that," Waters replied. "This song comes from the cotton field and a boy once put a record out—Robert Johnson. He put it out as named 'Walkin' Blues.' I heard the tune before I heard it on the record. I learned it from Son House." In nearly one breath, Waters offers five accounts: his own active authorship: he "made it" on a specific date. Then the "passive" explanation: "it come to me just like that." After Lomax raises the question of influence, Waters, without shame, misgivings, or trepidation, says that he heard a version by Johnson, but that his mentor, Son House, taught it to him. In the middle of that complex genealogy, Waters declares that "this song comes from the cotton field."

Blues and jazz musicians have long been enabled by a kind of "open source" culture, in which pre-existing melodic fragments and larger musical frameworks are freely reworked. Technology has only multiplied the possibilities; musicians have gained the power to duplicate sounds literally rather than simply approximate them through allusion. In Seventies Jamaica, King Tubby and Lee "Scratch" Perry deconstructed recorded music, using astonishingly primitive pre-digital hardware, creating what they called "versions." The recombinant nature of their means of production quickly spread to DJs in New York and London. Today an endless, gloriously impure, and fundamentally social process generates countless hours of music.

Visual, sound, and text collage—which for many centuries were relatively fugitive traditions (a cento here, a folk pastiche there)—became explosively central to a series of movements in the twentieth century: futurism, cubism, Dada, musique concrète, situationism, pop art, and appropriationism. In fact, collage, the common denominator in that list, might be called the art form of the twentieth century, never mind the twenty-first. But forget, for the moment, chronologies, schools, or
even centuries. As examples accumulate—Igor Stravinsky’s music and Daniel Johnston’s, Francis Bacon’s paintings and Henry Darger’s, the novels of the Oulipo group and of Hannah Crafts (the author who pil- 
laged Dickens’s Bleak House to write The Bondswoman’s Narrative), as well 
as cherished texts that become trou-
bling to their admirers after the dis-
cove ry of their “plagiarized” ele-
ments, like Richard Condon’s novels 
or Martin Luther King Jr.’s ser-
mons—it becomes apparent that ap-
propriation, mimicry, quotation, al-

cussion, and sublimated collaboration 

In a courtroom scene from The 
Simpsons that has since entered into 
the television canon, an argument 
over the ownership of the animated 
characters Itchy and Scratchy rapidly 
escalates into an existential debate 
on the very nature of cartoons. “Ani-
mation is built on plagiarism!” de-
clares the show’s hot-tempered 
cartoon-producer-within-a-cartoon,

Roger Meyers Jr. “You take away our 
right to steal ideas, where are they 
going to come from?” If nostalgic 
cartoonists had never borrowed from 
Fritz the Cat, there would be no 
Ren & Stimpy Show; without the 
Rankin/Bass and Charlie Brown 
Christmas specials, there would be 
no South Park; and without The Flint-
stones—more or less The Honeymoon-
ers in cartoon loincloths—The Sim-
psons would cease to exist. If those 
don’t strike you as essential losses, 
then consider the remarkable series 
of “plagiarisms” that links Ovid’s 
“Pyramus and Thisbe” with Shake-
speare’s Romeo and Juliet and Leonard 
Bernstein’s West Side Story, or 
Shakespeare’s description of Cleo-
patra, copied nearly verbatim from 
Plutarch’s life of Mark Antony and 
also later nicked by T. S. Eliot for 
The Waste Land. If these are ex-
amples of plagiarism, then we want 
more plagiarism.

Most artists are brought to their 
vocation when their own nascent 
gifts are awakened by the work of a 
master. That is to say, most artists are 
converted to art by art itself. Finding 
one’s voice isn’t just an emptying and 
purifying oneself of the words of oth-
ers but an adopting and embracing of 
filiations, communities, and discourses. Inspiration could be called in-
haling the memory of an act never ex-
perienced. Invention, it must be 
humbly admitted, does not consist in 
creating out of void but out of chaos. 
Any artist knows these truths, no 
matter how deeply he or she sub-
merges that knowing.

What happens when an allusion 
goes unrecognized? A closer look at 
The Waste Land may help make this 
point. The body of Eliot’s poem is a 
vertiginous mélange of quotation, all-

cussion, and “original” writing. When 
Eliot alludes to Edmund Spenser’s 
“Prothalamion” with the line “Sweet 
Thames, run softly, till I end my 
song,” what of readers to whom the 
poem, never one of Spenser’s most 
popular, is unfamiliar? (Indeed, the 
Spenser is now known largely be-
cause of Eliot’s use of it.) Two re-

dones are possible: grant the line to 
Eliot, or later discover the source 
and understand the line as plagi-

Eliot evidenced no small anxi-
This tendency encourages us to see the objects in our world only in terms of how they can serve us or be used by us. The task he identified was to find ways to restitute ourselves vis-à-vis these "objects," so that we may see them as "things" pulled into relief against the ground of their functionality. Heidegger believed that art had the great potential to reveal the "thingness" of objects.

The surrealists understood that photography and cinema could carry out this reanimating process automatically; the process of framing objects in a lens was often enough to change the course of that art: courts were asked whether the photographer, amateur or professional, required permission before he could capture and print an image. Was the photographer stealing from the person or building whose photograph he shot, pirating something of private and certifiable value? Those early decisions went in favor of the pirates. Just as Walt Disney could take inspiration from Buster Keaton's Steamboat Bill, Jr., the Brothers Grimm, or the existence of real mice, the photographer should be free to capture an image without compensating the source. The world that meets our eye through the lens of a camera was judged to be, with minor exceptions, a sort of public commons, where a cat may look at a king.

Novelists may glance at the stuff of the world too, but we sometimes get called to task for it. For those whose ganglia were formed pre-TV, the mimetic deployment of pop-culture icons seems at best an annoying tic and at worst a dangerous vapidity that compromises fiction's seriousness by dating it out of the Platonic Always, where it ought to reside. In a graduate workshop I briefly passed through, a certain gray eminence tried to convince us that a literary story should always eschew "any feature which serves to date it" because "serious fiction must be Timeless." When we protested that, in his own well-known work, characters moved about electrically lit rooms, drove cars, and spoke not Anglo-Saxon but postwar English—and further, that fiction he'd himself ratified as great, such as Dickens, was liberally stewn with innately topical, commercial, and timebound references—he impatiently amended his proscription to those explicit references that would date a story in the "frivolous Now." When pressed, he said of course he meant the "trendy mass-popular-media" reference. Here, transgenerational discourse broke down.

I was born in 1964; I grew up watching Captain Kangaroo, moon landings, zillions of TV ads, the Banana Splits, M*A*S*H, and The Mary Tyler Moore

*Double Mona Lisa (Peanut Butter + Jelly)," by Vik Muniz, from Byler: A Vik Muniz Primer © 2005 Aperture. Artwork courtesy Aperture, New York City. Licensed by VAGA, New York City. Muniz's work will be on view through May 7 at P.S.1, in New York City.*
dence members for the crime of exalting and enshrining their work. The Recording Industry Association of America prosecuting their own record-buying public makes as little sense as the novelists who bristle at autographing used copies of their work of others: Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Fantasia, Pinocchio, Dumbo, Bambi, Song of the South, Cinderella, Alice in Wonderland, Robin Hood, Peter Pan, Lady and the Tramp, Mulan, Sleeping Beauty, The Sword in the Stone, The Jungle Book, and, alas, Treasure of Third World or "primitive" artworks and styles by more privileged (and better-paid) artists. Think of Picasso's Les Demoiselles d'Avignon, or some of the albums of Paul Simon or David Byrne: even without violating copyright, those creators have sometimes come in for a certain skepticism when the extent of their outsourcing became evident. And, as when Led Zeppelin found themselves sued for back royalties by the bluesman Willie Dixon, the act can occasionally be an expensive one. To live outside the law, you must be honest: perhaps it was this, in part, that spurred David Byrne and Brian Eno to recently launch a "remix" website, where anyone can download easily disassembled versions of two songs from My Life in the Bush of Ghosts, an album reliant on vernacular speech sampled from a host of sources. Perhaps it also explains why Bob Dylan has never refused a request for a sample.

Kenneth Koch once said, "I'm a writer who likes to be influenced." It was a charming confession, and a rare one. For so many artists, the act of creativity is intended as a Napoleonic imposition of one's uniqueness upon the universe—après moi le déluge of copycats! And for every James Joyce or Woody Guthrie or Martin Luther King Jr., or Walt Disney, who gathered a constellation of voices in his work, there may seem to be some corporation or literary estate eager to stop the bottle: cultural debts flow in, but they don't flow out. We might call this tendency "source hypocrisy." Or we could name it after the most pernicious source hypocrites of all time: Disnial.

SOURCE HYPOCRISY, OR, DISNIAL

The Walt Disney Company has drawn an astonishing catalogue from Planet, a legacy of cultural sampling that Shakespeare, or De La Soul, could get behind. Yet Disney's protectorate of lobbyists has policed the resulting cache of cultural materials as vigilantly as if it were Fort Knox—threatening legal action, for instance, against the artist Dennis Oppenheim for the use of Disney characters in a sculpture, and prohibiting the scholar Holly Crawford from using any Disney-related images—including artwork by Lichtenstein, Warhol, Oldenburg, and others—in her monograph Attached to the Mouse: Disney and Contemporary Art.

This peculiar and specific act—the enclosure of commonwealth culture for the benefit of a sole or corporate owner—is close kin to what could be called imperial plagiarism, the free use of books for collectors. And artists, or their heirs, who fall into the trap of attacking the collagists and satirists and digital samplers of their work are attacking the next generation of creators for the crime of being influenced, for the crime of responding with the same mixture of intoxication, resentment, lust, and glee that characterizes all artistic successors. By doing so they make the world smaller, betraying what seems to me the primary motivation for participating in the world of culture in the first place: to make the world larger.

YOU CAN'T STEAL A GIFT

My reader may, understandably, be on the verge of crying, "Communist!" A large, diverse society cannot survive without property; a large, diverse, and modern society cannot flourish without some form of intellectual property. But it takes little reflection to grasp that there is ample value that the term "property" doesn't capture. And works of art exist simultaneously in two economies, a market economy and a gift economy.
The cardinal difference between gift and commodity exchange is that a gift establishes a feeling-bond between two people, whereas the sale of a commodity leaves no necessary connection. I go into a hardware store, pay the man for a hacksaw blade, and walk out. I may never see him again. The disconnectedness is, in fact, a virtue of the commodity mode. We don’t want to be bothered, and if the clerk always wants to chat about the family, I’ll shop elsewhere. I just want a hacksaw blade. But a gift makes a connection. There are many examples, the candy or cigarette offered to a stranger who shares a seat on the plane, the few words that indicate goodwill between passengers on the late-night bus. These tokens establish the simplest bonds of social life, but the model they offer may be extended to the most complicated of unions—marriage, parenthood, mentorship. If a value is placed on these (often essentially unequal) exchanges, they degenerate into something else.

Yet one of the more difficult things to comprehend is that the gift economies—like those that sustain open-source software—coexist so naturally with the market. It is precisely this doubleness in art practices that we must identify, ratify, and enshrine in our lives as participants in culture, either as “producers” or “consumers.” Art that matters to us—which moves the heart, or revives the soul, or delights the senses, or offers courage for living, however we choose to describe the experience—is received as a gift is received. Even if we’ve paid a fee at the door of the museum or concert hall, when we are touched by a work of art something comes to us that has nothing to do with the price. The daily commerce of our lives proceeds at its own constant level, but a gift conveys an uncommensurable surplus of inspiration.

The way we treat a thing can change its nature, though. Religions often prohibit the sale of sacred objects, the implication being that their sanctity is lost if they are bought and sold. We consider it unacceptable to sell sex, babies, body organs, legal rights, and votes. The idea that something should never be commodified is generally known as inalienability or unalienability—a concept most famously expressed by Thomas Jefferson in the phrase “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights...” A work of art seems to be a harder breed; it can be sold in the market and still emerge a work of art. But if it is true that in the essential commerce of art a gift is carried by the work from the artist to his audience, I am right to say that where there is no gift there is no art, then it may be possible to destroy a work of art by converting it into a pure commodity. I don’t maintain that art can’t be bought and sold, but that the gift portion of the work places a constraint upon our merchandising. This is the reason why even a really beautiful, ingenious, powerful ad (of which there are a lot) can never be any kind of real art: an ad has no status as gift; i.e., it’s never really for the person it’s directed at.

The power of a gift economy remains difficult for the empiricists of our market culture to understand. In our times, the rhetoric of the market presumes that everything should be and can be appropriately bought, sold, and owned—a tide of alienation lapping daily at the dwindling re-doubt of the unalienable. In free-market theory, an intervention to halt proprietization is considered “paternalistic,” because it inhibits the free action of the citizen, now repossessed as a “potential entrepreneur.” Of course, in the real world, we know that child-rearing, family life, education, socialization, sexuality, political life, and many other basic human activities require insulation from market forces. In fact, paying for many of these things can ruin them. We may be willing to peek at Who Wants to Marry a Multi-millionaire or an eBay auction of the ova of fashion models, but only to reassure ourselves that some things are still beneath our standards of dignity.

What’s remarkable about gift economies is that they can flourish in the most unlikely places—in run-down neighborhoods, on the Internet, in scientific communities, and among members of Alcoholics Anonymous. A classic example is commercial blood systems, which generally produce blood supplies of lower safety, purity, and potency than volunteer systems. A gift economy may be superior when it comes to maintaining a group’s commitment to certain extra-market values.

THE COMMONS

Another way of understanding the presence of gift economies—which dwell like ghosts in the commercial machine—is in the sense of a public commons. A commons, of course, is anything like the streets over which we drive, the skies through which we pilot airplanes, or the public parks or beaches on which we daily. A commons belongs to everyone and no one, and its use is controlled only by common consent. A commons describes resources like the body of ancient music drawn on by composers and folk musicians alike, rather than the commodities, like “Happy Birthday to You,” for which ASCAP, 114 years after it was written, continues to collect a fee. Einstein’s theory of relativity is a commons. Writings in the public domain are a commons. Gossip about celebrities is a commons. The silence in a movie theater is a transitory commons, impossibly fragile, treasured by those who crave it, and constructed as a mutual gift by those who compose it.

The world of art and culture is a vast commons, one that is salted through with zones of utter commerce yet remains gloriously immune to any overall commodification. The closest resemblance is to the commons of a language: altered by every contributor, expanded by even the most passive user. That a language is a commons doesn’t mean that the community owns it; rather it belongs between people, possessed by no one, not even by society as a whole.

Nearly any commons, though, can be encroached upon, partitioned, enclosed. The American commons include tangible assets such as public forests and minerals, intangible wealth such as copyrights and patents, critical infrastructures such as the Internet and government research, and cultural resources such as the broadcast airwaves and public spaces. They include resources we’ve paid for as taxpayers and inherited from previous generations.
They're not just an inventory of marketable assets; they're social institutions and cultural traditions that define us as Americans and enliven us as human beings. Some invasions of the commons are sanctioned because we can no longer muster a spirited commitment to the public sector. The abuse goes unnoticed because the theft of the commons is seen in glimpses, not in panorama. We may occasionally see a former wetland paved; we may hear about the breakthrough cancer drug that tax dollars helped develop, the rights to which pharmaceutical companies acquired for a song. The larger movement goes too much unremarked. The notion of a commons of cultural materials goes more or less unnamed.

Honoring the commons is not a matter of moral exhortation. It is a practical necessity. We in Western society are going through a period of intensifying belief in private ownership, to the detriment of the public good. We have to remain constantly vigilant to prevent raids by those who would selfishly exploit our common heritage for their private gain. Such raids on our natural resources are not examples of enterprise and initiative. They are attempts to take from all the people just for the benefit of a few.

**UNDISCOVERED PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE**

Artists and intellectuals despondent over the prospects for originality can take heart from a phenomenon identified about twenty years ago by Don Swanson, a library scientist at the University of Chicago. He called it "undiscovered public knowledge." Swanson showed that standing problems in medical research may be significantly addressed, perhaps even solved, simply by systematically surveying the scientific literature. Left to its own devices, research tends to become more specialized and abstracted from the real-world problems that motivated it and to which it remains relevant. This suggests that such a problem may be tackled effectively not by commissioning more research but by assuming that most or all of the solution can already be found in various scientific journals, waiting to be assembled by someone willing to read across specialties. Swanson himself did this in the case of Raynaud's syndrome, a disease that causes the fingers of young women to become numb. His finding is especially striking—perhaps even scandalous—because it happened in the ever-expanding biomedical sciences.

Undiscovered public knowledge emboldens us to question the extreme claims to originality made in press releases and publishers' notices: Is an intellectual or creative offering truly novel, or have we just forgotten a worthy precursor? Does solving certain scientific problems really require massive additional funding, or could a computerized search engine, creatively deployed, do the same job more quickly and cheaply? Lastly, does our appetite for creative vitality require the violence and exasperation of another avant-garde, with its wearisome killing-the-father imperatives, or might we not be better off ratiifying the ecstasy of influence—and deepening our willingness to understand the commonality and timelessness of the methods and motifs available to artists?

**GIVE ALL**

A few years ago, the Film Society of Lincoln Center announced a retrospective of the works of Dariush Mehrjui, then a fresh enthusiasm of mine. Mehrjui is one of Iran's finest filmmakers, and the only one whose subject was personal relationships among the upper-middle-class intelligentsia. Needless to say, opportunities to view his films were—and remain—rare indeed. I headed uptown for one, an adaptation of J. D. Salinger's *Franny and Zooey*, titled *Pari*, only to discover at the door of the Walter Reade Theater that the screening had been canceled: its announcement had brought threat of a lawsuit down on the Film Society. True, these were Salinger's rights under the law. Yet why would he care that some obscure Iranian filmmaker had paid him homage with a meditation on his heroine? Would it have damaged his book or robbed him of some crucial remuneration had the screening been permitted? The fertile spirit of stray connec-
tion—one stretching across what is presently seen as the direst of international breaches—had in this case been snuffed out. The cold, undead hand of one of my childhood literary heroes had reached out from its New Hampshire redoubt to arrest my present-day curiosity.

A few assertions, then:

Any text that has infiltrated the common mind to the extent of Gone With the Wind or Lolita or Ulysses inexorably joins the language of culture. A map-turned-to-landscape, it has moved to a place beyond enclosure or control. The authors and their heirs should consider the subsequent parodies, refractions, quotations, and revisions a honor, or at least the price of a rare success.

A corporation that has imposed an inescapable notion—Mickey Mouse, Band-Aid—on the cultural language should pay a similar price.

The primary objective of copyright is not to reward the labor of authors but "to promote the Progress of Science and useful Arts." To this end, copyright assures authors the right to their original expression, but encourages others to build freely upon the ideas and information conveyed by a work. This result is neither unfair nor unfortunate.

Contemporary copyright, trademark, and patent law is presently corrupted. The case for perpetual copyright is a denial of the essential gift-aspect of the creative act. Arguments in its favor are as un-American as those for the repeal of the estate tax.

Art is sourced. Apprentices graze in the field of culture.

Digital sampling is an art method like any other, neutral in itself.

Despite hand-wringing at each technological turn—radio, the Internet—the future will be much like the past. Artists will sell some things but also give some things away. Change may be troubling for those who crave less ambiguity, but the life of an artist has never been filled with certainty.

The dream of a perfect systematic remuneration is nonsense. I pay rent with the price my words bring when published in glossy magazines and at the same moment offer them for almost nothing to impoverished literary quarterlies, or speak them for free into the air in a radio interview. So what are they worth? What would they be worth if some future Dylan worked them into a song? Should I care to make such a thing impossible?

Any text is woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages, which cut across it through and through in a vast stereophony. The citations that go to make up a text are anonymous, untraceable, and yet already read; they are quotations without inverted commas. The kernel, the soul—let us go further and say the substance, the bulk, the actual and valuable material of all human utterances—is plagiarism. For substantially all ideas are secondhand, consciously and unconsciously drawn from a million outside sources, and daily used by the garnerer with a pride and satisfaction born of the superstition that he originated them; whereas there is not a rag of originality about them anywhere except the little discoloration they get from his mental and moral caliber and his temperament, and which is revealed in characteristics of phrasing. Old and new make the warp and woof of every moment. There is no thread that is not a twist of these two strands. By necessity, by proclivity, and by delight, we all quote. Neurological study has lately shown that memory, imagination, and consciousness itself is stitched, quilted, pastiched. If we cut-and-paste ourselves, might we not forgive it of our artworks?

Artists and writers—and our advocates, our guilds and agents—too often subscribe to implicit claims of originality that do injury to these truths. And we too often, as hucksters and bean counters in the tiny enterprises of our selves, act to spite the gift portion of our privileged roles. People live differently who treat a portion of their wealth as a gift. If we devalue and obscure the gift-economy function of our art practices, we turn our works into nothing more than advertisements for themselves. We may console ourselves that our lust for subsidiary rights in virtual perpetuity is some heroic counter to rapacious corporate interests. But the truth is that with artists pulling on one side and corporations pulling on the other, the loser is the collective public imagination from which we were nourished in the first place, and whose existence as the ultimate repository of our offerings makes the work worth doing in the first place.

As a novelist, I'm a cork on the ocean of story, a leaf on a windy day. Pretty soon I'll be blown away. For the moment I'm grateful to be making a living, and so must ask that for a limited time (in the Thomas Jefferson sense) you please respect my small, treasured usemonopolies. Don't pirate my editions; do plunder my visions. The name of the game is Give All. You, reader, are welcome to my stories. They were never mine in the first place, but I gave them to you. If you have the inclination to pick them up, take them with my blessing.

KEY: I IS ANOTHER

This key to the preceding essay names the source of every line I stole, warped, and cobbled together as I "wrote" (except, alas, those sources I forgot along the way). First uses of a given author or speaker are highlighted in red. Nearly every sentence I culled I also revised, at least slightly—for necessities of space, in order to produce a more consistent tone, or simply because I felt like it.

TITLE

The phrase "the ecstasy of influence," which embeds a rebuking play on Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence," is lifted from spoken remarks by Professor Richard Dienst of Rutgers.

LOVE AND THEFT

"...a cultivated man of middle age..., to "...hidden, unacknowledged memory?" These lines, with some adjustments for tone, belong to the anonymous editor or assistant who wrote the dust-flap copy of Michael Maar's The Two Lolitas. Of course, in my own experience, dust-flap copy is often a collaboration between author and editor. Perhaps this was also true for Maar.

"The history of literature..." to "...borrow and quote?" comes from Maar's book itself.

"Appropriation has always..." to "...Ishmael and Queequeg..." This
paragraph makes a hash of remarks from an interview with Eric Lott conducted by David McNair and Jayson Whitehead, and incorporates both interviewees' and interviewees' observations. (The text-interview form can be seen as a commonly accepted form of multivocal writing. Most interviewees prime their subjects with remarks of their own—leading the witness, so to speak—and gently refine their subjects' statements in the final printed transcript.)

"I realized this..." to "...for a long time." The anecdote is cribbed, with an elision to avoid appropriating a dead grandmother, from Jonathan Rosen's The Talmud and the Internet. I've never seen 84, Charing Cross Road, nor searched the Web for a Donne quote. For me it was through Rosen to Donne, Hemingway, website, et al.

"When I was thirteen..." to "...no plagiarist at all." This is from William Gibson's "God's Little Toys," in Wired magazine. My own first encounter with William Burroughs, also at age thirteen, was less epiphanic. Having grown up with a painter father who, during family visits to galleries or museums, approvingly noted collage and appropriation techniques in the visual arts (Picasso, Claes Oldenburg, Stuart Davis), I was gratified, but not surprised, to learn that literature could encompass the same methods.

CONTAMINATION ANXIETY

"In 1941, on his front porch..." to "...this song comes from the cotton field." Siva Vaidhyanathan, Copyrights and Copywriters.

"...enabled by a kind...freely reworked." Kembrew McLeod, Freedom of Expression. In Owning Culture, McLeod notes that, as he was writing, he happened to be listening to a lot of old country music, and in my casual listening I noticed that six country songs shared exactly the same vocal melody, including Hank Thompson's "Wild Side of Life," the Carter Family's "I'm Thinking Tonight of My Blue Eyes," Roy Acuff's "Great Speckled Bird," Kitty Wells's "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels," Reno & Smiley's "I'm Using My Bible for a Roadmap," and Townes Van Zandt's "Heavenly Houseboat Blues."...In his extensively researched book, Country: The Twisted Roots of Rock 'n' Roll, Nick Tosches documents that the melody these songs share is both "ancient and British." There were no recorded lawsuits stemming from these appropriations...

"...musicians have gained..." through allusion." Joanna Demers, Steal This Music.

"In Seventies Jamaica..." to "...hours of music." Gibson.

"Visual, sound, and text collage..." to "...realm of cultural production." This plundered, rewrites, and amplifies paragraphs from McLeod's Owning Culture, except for the line about collage being the art form of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, which I heard filmmaker Craig Baldwin say, in defense of sampling, in the trailer for a forthcoming documentary, Copyright Criminals.

"In a courtroom scene..." to "...would cease to exist." Dave Itzkoff, New York Times.

"...the remarkable series of plagiarisms..." to "...we want more plagiarism." Richard Posner, combined from The Becker-Posner Blog and The Atlantic Monthly.

"Most artists are brought..." to "...by art itself." These words, and many more to follow, come from Lewis Hyde's The Gift. Above any other book I've here plagiarized, I commend The Gift to your attention.

"Finding one's voice...filiations, communities, and discourses." Semanticist George L. Dillon, quoted in Rebecca Moore Howard's "The New Abolitionism Comes to Plagiarism.

"Inspiration could be...act never experienced." Ned Rorem, found on several "great quotations" sites on the Internet.

"Invention, it must be humbly admitted...out of chaos." Mary Shelley, from her introduction to Frankenstein.

"What happens..." to "...contamination anxiety." Kevin J.H. Dettmar, from "The Illusion of Postmodern Allusion and the Politics of Postmodern Plagiarism.

SURROUNDED BY SIGNS

"The surrealists believed..." to
the Walter Benjamin quote. Christian Keatley's Cinephilia and History, or the Wind in the Trees, a book that treats feminist fetishism as the secret at the heart of film scholarship. Keatley notes, for instance, Joseph Cornell's surrealist-influenced 1936 film Rose Hobart, which simply records "the way in which Cornell himself watched the 1931 Hollywood potboiler East of Borneo, fascinated and distracted as he was by its B-grade star"—the star, of course, being Rose Hobart herself. This, I suppose, makes Cornell a sort of father to computer-enabled fan-creator reworkings of Hollywood product, like the version of George Lucas's The Phantom Menace from which the noxious Jar Jar Binks character was purged; both incorporate a viewer's subjective preferences into a revision of a filmmaker's work.

"...early in the history of photography" to "...without compensating the source." From Free Culture, by Lawrence Lessig, the greatest of public advocates for copyright reform, and the best source if you want to get radicalized in a hurry.

"For those whose ganglia..." to "...discourse broke down." From David Foster Wallace's essay "E Unibus Pluram," reprinted in A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again. I have no idea who Wallace's "gray eminence" is or was. I inserted the example of Dickens into the paragraph; he strikes me as overlooked in the lineup of authors of "brand-name" fiction.

"I was born... Mary Tyler Moore Show." These are the reminiscences of Mark Holser from Negativland, a collaging musical collective that was sued by U2's record label for their appropriation of "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For." Although I had to adjust the birth date, Holser's cultural menu fits me like a glove.

"The world is a home... pop-culture products." McLeod.

"Today, when we can eat..." to "...flat sights." Wallace.

"We're surrounded by signs, ignore none of them." This phrase, which I unfortunately rendered somewhat leaden with the word "imperative," comes from Steve Erickson's novel Our Ecstatic Days.

USEMONOPOLY

"...everything from attempts..." to "defendants as young as twelve." Robert Boynton, The New York Times Magazine, "The Tyranny of Copyright?"

"A time is marked..." to "...what needs no defense," Lessig, this time from The Future of Ideas.

"Thomas Jefferson, for one..." to "...respective Writings and Discoveries." Boynton.

"...second comers might do a much better job than the originator..." I found this phrase in Lessig, who is quoting Vaidyanathan, who himself is characterizing a judgment written by Learned Hand.

"But Jefferson's vision..." owned by someone or other. Boynton.

"The distinctive feature..." to "...term is extended." Lessig, again from The Future of Ideas.

"When old laws..." to "...had been invaded." Jessica Litman, Digital Copyright.

"I say to you..." woman home alone." I found the Valenti quote in McLeod. Now fill in the blank: Jack Valenti is to the public domain as ______ is to ______.

THE BEAUTY OF SECOND USE

"In the first..." to "...builds an archive." Lessig.

"Most books...one year..." Lessig.

"Active reading is..." to "...do not own..." This is a mashup of Henry Jenkins, from his Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture, and Michel de Certeau, whom Jenkins quotes.

"In the children's classic..." to "...its loving use." Jenkins. (Incidentally, have the holders of the copyright to The Velveteen Rabbit had a close look at Toy Story? There could be a lawsuit there.)

SOURCE HYPOCRISY, OR, DISNIAL

"The Walt Disney Company...alias, Treasure Planet..." Lessig.

"Imperial Plagiarism" is the title of an essay by Marilyn Randall.

"...spurred David Byrne...My Life in the Bush of Ghosts..." Chris Dahlren, Pitchfork—though in truth by the time I'd finished, his words were so utterly dissolved within my own that had I been an ordinary cutting-and-pasting journalist it never would have occurred to me to give Dahlren a citation. The effort of preserving another's distinctive phrases as I worked on this essay was sometimes beyond my capacities; this form of plagiarism was oddly hard work.


YOU CAN'T STEAL A GIFT

"You can't steal a gift." Dizzy Gillespie, defending another player who'd been accused of poaching Charlie Parker's style: "You can't steal a gift. Bird gave the world his music, and if you can hear it you can have it."

"A large, diverse society..." intellectual property." Lessig.

"And works of art..." to "...marriage, parenthood, mentorship." Hyde.

"Yet one... so naturally with the market." David Bollier, Silent Theft.

"Art that matters..." to "...bought and sold." Hyde.

"We consider it unacceptable..." to "...certain unalienable Rights..." Bollier, paraphrasing Margaret Jane Radin's Contested Commodities.

"A work of art..." to "...constraint upon our merchandising." Hyde.

"This is the reason..." person it's directed at." Wallace.

"The power of a gift..." to "...certain extra-market values." Bollier, and also the sociologist Warren O. Hagstrom, whom Bollier is paraphrasing.

THE COMMONS

"Einsteins's theory..." to "...public domain are a commons." Lessig.

"That a language is a commons..." society as a whole." Michael Newton, in the London Review of Books, reviewing a book called Echolocals: On the Forgetting of Language by Daniel Heller-Roazen. The paraphrases of book reviewers are another covert form of collaborative culture; as an avid reader of reviews, I know much about books I've never read. To quote Yann Mar-
tel on how he came to be accused of imperial plagiarism in his Booker-winning novel Life of Pi.

Ten or so years ago, I read a review by John Updike in the New York Times Review of Books [sic]. It was of a novel by a Brazilian writer, Moacyr Scliar. I forget the title, and John Updike did worse: he clearly thought the book as a whole was forgettable. His review—one of those that makes you suspicious by being mostly descriptive . . . oozed indifference. But one thing about it struck me: the premise. . . . Oh, the wondrous things I could do with this premise.

Unfortunately, no one was ever able to locate the Updike review in question. "The American commons . . ." to "... for a song," Bollier. "Honoring the commons . . ." to "... practical necessity," Bollier. "We in Western . . . public good," John Suton, Nobel Prize-winning and co-mapper of the human genome. "We have to remain . . . to benefit of a few," Harry S Truman, at the opening of the Everglades National Park. Although it may seem the height of presumption to rip off a president—I found claiming Truman's stolid advocacy as my own embarrassing in the extreme—

I didn't rewrite him at all. As the poet Marianne Moore said, "If a thing had been said in the best way, how can you say it better?" Moore confessed her penchant for incorporating lines from others' work, explaining, "I have not yet been able to outgrow this hybrid method of composition.”

UNDISCOVERED PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE

...intellectuals despondent . . . to "... quickly and cheaply," Steve Fuller, The Intellectual. There's something of Borges in Fuller's insight here; the notion of a storehouse of knowledge waiting passively to be assembled by future users is suggestive of both "The Library of Babel" and "Kafka and his Precursors.”

GIVE ALL

"...one of Iran's finest . . .” to "... meditation on his heroine?" Amy Taubin, Village Voice, although it was me who was disappointed at the door of the Walter Reade Theater.


"...the future will be much like the past” to "... give some things away," Open-source film archivist Rick Prelinger, quoted in McLeod. "Change may be troubling . . . with certainty," McLeod.

"...woven entirely . . .” to "... without inverted commas," Roland Barthes. "The kernel, the soul . . .” to "... characteristics of phrasing." Mark Twain, from a consoling letter to Helen Keller, who had suffered distressing accusations of plagiarism (!). In fact, her work included unconsciously memorized phrases; under Keller's particular circumstances, her writing could be understood as a kind of allegory of the 'constructed' nature of artistic perception. I found the Twain quote in the aforementioned Copyrights and Copywrongs, by Siva Vaidhyanathan. "Old and new . . .” to "... we all quote." Ralph Waldo Emerson. These guys all sound alike!

"People live differently . . . wealth as a gift," Hyde. "... I'm a cork . . .” to "... blown away," This is adapted from The Beach Boys song "Til I Die," written by Brian Wilson. My own first adventure with song-lyric permissions came when I tried to have a character in my second novel quote the lyrics "There's a world where I can go and/Tell my secrets to/In my room/In my room." After learning the likely expense, at my editor's suggestion I replaced those with "You take the high road/I'll take the low road/I'll be in Scotland before you," a lyric in the public domain. This capitulation always bugged me, and in the subsequent British publication of the same book I restored the Brian Wilson lyric, without permission. Ocean of Story is the title of a collection of Christina Stead's short fiction.

Saul Bellow, writing to a friend who took offense at Bellow's fictional use of certain personal facts, said: "The name of the game is Give All. You are welcome to all my facts. You know them, I give them to you. If you have the strength to pick them up, take them with my blessing." I couldn't bring myself to retain Bellows' "strength," which seemed presumptuous in my new context, though it is surely the more elegant phrase. On the other hand, I was pleased to invite the suggestion that the gifts in question may actually be light and easily lifted.

KEY TO THE KEY

The notion of a collage text is, of course, not original to me. Walter Benjamin's incomplete Arcades Project seemingly would have featured extensive interlaced quotations. Other precedents include Graham Rawle's novel Diary of an Amateur Photograhper, its text harvested from photography magazines, and Eduardo Paolozzi's collage-novel Kex, cobbled from crime novels and newspaper clippings. Closer to home, my efforts owe a great deal to the recent essays of David Shields, in which diverse quotes are made to closely intertwine and reverberate, and to conversations with editor Sean Howe and archivist Pamela Jackson. Last year David Edelstein, in New York magazine, satirized the Kaavya Viswanathan plagiarism case by creating an almost completely plagiarized column denouncing her actions. Edelstein intended to demonstrate, through ironic example, how bricolage such as his own was ipso facto facile and unworthy. Although Viswanathan's version of "creative copying" was a pitiable one, I differ with Edelstein's conclusions.

The phrase Je est un autre, with its deliberately awkward syntax, belongs to Arthur Rimbaud. It has been translated both as "I is another" and "I is someone else," as in this excerpt from Rimbaud's letters:

For I is someone else. If brass wakes up a trumpet, it is not its fault. To me this is obvious: I witness the unfolding of my own thought; I watch it, I listen to it: I make a stroke of the bow: the symphony begins to stir in the depths, or springs on to the stage.

If the old fools had not discovered only the false significance of the Ego, we should not now be having to sweep away those millions of skeletons which, since time immemorial, have been piling up the fruits of their one-eyed intellectuals, and claiming to be, themselves, the authors!