

# Tomasz Swoboda: Plagiarism by Anticipation

Let's enter the word "plagiarism" into a search engine alongside the name of any so-called canonical author. How many results popped up? How much indisputable evidence to suggest that Thomas Mann, Marcel Proust, Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz rewrote someone else's texts, perhaps with subtle alterations, in parts of their own work? How many indications to suggest that numerous other passages of their texts also contain unauthorised (?) borrowings, waiting to be corroborated in a matter of time? And if all of this is true, what implications does it hold for our understanding of the historical-literary process? Surely this does not imply that all writers whose works raise such doubts should be labelled as, say, literary frauds, criminals or clandestine collaborators, and thereby—erased from literary history, or at least its canon.

## Plagiarism

The word "plagiarism" derives from the Greek *plagios*—oblique or slanting. A "plagiariser" was someone who appropriated other people's slaves, a child abductor.<sup>1</sup> The term did not, of course, apply to literature or art—not because plagiarism was not committed, but precisely because it was so prevalent, and, in a sense, even encouraged. As we know, all classical and classicist poetics, that is, until the late 18th and early 19th centuries, rested upon the concept of *mimesis*, which, among other interpretations, was understood as imitation; whether of nature, ancient texts, or more broadly—of all model works. It was not until the arrival of Romanticism that the concept of originality was introduced as a positive aesthetic value, together with the notion that literature emerges from reality or of its own accord, rather than being derived from pre-existing literature. We essentially remain within this paradigm to this day, somewhat contrary to logic, since the exponential growth in text production is rapidly decreasing the possibility of writing something that has not yet been written.

And thus, the Library of Babel fills up, or rather—this way we keep discovering ever new shelves and racks within it. Nevertheless, the inevitability of plagiarism is not the only reason for the existence of this phenomenon. Moreover, as per the legal definition, producing a text that is identical to another simply due to the

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1 J. Fux, "Le postmoderne et la question du plagiat littéraire", *Revista de Letras* 2011, no. 2, p. 68.

exhaustion of word combinations in language could not be considered plagiarism because the latter implies intentionality. Reflecting on these intentions, Jacques Finné refers to diverse motivations such as the tempting ease of “creation”, the desire for fame coupled with a lack of talent, lack of time, as well as the will to improve a failed work or to preserve a work threatened with destruction, as famously exemplified by Sholokhov’s *Quiet Flows the Don*.<sup>2</sup>

Regardless of the causes, intentions, or lack thereof, the course of the creative process and its results, it still seems that the broadly understood concept of plagiarism in literature should be considered a peculiar, alternative, as it were, yet paradoxically, to some extent legitimate form of writing, in which memory, of both the author and reader, plays a crucial role. In the case of the author, according to the logic of the Library of Babel, the act of forgetting is the *sine qua non* of traditionally understood creation. In the case of the reader, on the other hand, solely their memory determines whether that which we could call the antiplagiaristic pact (I pretend to write something that no one has written yet, and you pretend not to have read it before) can even function at all.

An interesting approach to the process of plagiarism was developed by the French group Oulipo (*Ouvroir de littérature potentielle* – “Workshop of potential literature”). By creating or discovering structures—be it mathematical or algebraic—that enable the production of literary texts *ad infinitum*, they addressed the issue of plagiarism in a rather ludic fashion. Nevertheless, the conclusions that this strategy yields for literary theory are by all means serious. In a sense, the Oulipians propose the equivalent of conceptual art in literature. What matters most to them is an invented formula, an idea, a discovery intended to create a certain possibility, a potentiality, while the final effect, the text itself, remains to some extent a secondary matter. This did not, however, prevent masterpieces such as Georges Perec’s *Life: A User’s Manual* from being written within the group.

The question of plagiarism was raised by Oulipo’s co-founder, the mathematician François Le Lionnais: “Occasionally, we discover that a structure we believed to be entirely new had in fact already been discovered or invented in the past, sometimes even in a distant past. We make it a point of honor to recognize such a state of things in qualifying the text in question as ‘plagiarism by anticipation’”.<sup>3</sup> Even stronger is Marcel Bénabou’s irony, or rather self-irony, in his book *Pourquoi je n’ai écrit aucun de mes livres* (*Why I Have Not Written Any of My Books*), the title of which paraphrases Raymond Roussel’s *Comment j’ai écrit certains de mes livres* (*How I Wrote Certain of My Books*).<sup>4</sup> Reflecting on

2 See: J. Finné, *Des mystifications littéraires*, Corti, Paris 2010.

3 Oulipo: *A Primer of Potential Literature*, ed. Warren F. Motte, Dalkey Archive Press, 1998, p. 31.

4 M. Bénabou, *Why I Have not Written Any of My Books*, trans. D. Kornacker, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln 1996.

his writer's block, Bénabou explains it by the fact that all the books he intended to write had, unfortunately, already been written by others, whom he naturally refers to as plagiarists by anticipation. Finally, Jacques Roubaud leaves no illusions as to Oulipo's place in literary history: "World literature, it must be reminded at every turn, is full of plagiarists by anticipation in relation to Oulipo. However, their works, too often produced in more or less blatant ignorance of Oulipian principles, contain serious imperfections".<sup>5</sup>

In recent years, the idea of plagiarism by anticipation has been taken up by the French psychoanalyst and literary theorist Pierre Bayard, author of the famous essay *How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read*. As an enthusiast of applying logical paradoxes to literature, Bayard first described how in some works writers succeeded in predicting their own future.<sup>6</sup> Then, he tried to present the history of literature as if some authors were inspired by what they might have read had they lived longer. In this book, titled simply *Le Plagiat par anticipation*,<sup>7</sup> plagiarism by anticipation is considered an existing piece of work that plagiarises a text not yet written, as well as a text plagiarised by a previous text. According to Bayard, this phenomenon is marked by the evident similarity of the texts, the incongruence between the plagiarised passage and the rest of the work and other works of the period, the secrecy of the procedure, and, of course, the temporal inversion. Classic examples of such a relation based on plagiarism include, among others, Sophocles and Freud, Voltaire and Conan Doyle, and, in the field of visual arts—Fra Angelico and Jackson Pollock, in whose work Bayard identified similarities thanks to Georges Didi-Huberman's description.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps the most telling example, however, is this quote: "He tried to find what caused this upsurge of his old life that he had felt and noticed several times already, though less often than today. There was always a reason for these sudden evocations, a simple and material cause, an odor perhaps, often a fragrance. How many times had a woman's dress flung upon him in passing, with the evaporated breath of some essence, the full recollection of forgotten incidents. At the bottom of old scent flasks he had also recovered fragments of his existence; and all the vagrant odors of the streets, of the fields, of the houses, of the furniture, sweet and unwelcome, the warm odors of summer evenings, the sudden chills of winter nights, always revived remote memories, as if such scents, like the aromatics that preserve mummies, retained and embalmed all these extinct events."<sup>9</sup> In

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5 J. Roubaud, "Vers une oulipisation consécutive de la littérature", *La Bibliothèque Oulipienne*, vol. 3, Paris 1990, p. 87.

6 P. Bayard, *Demain est écrit*, Minuit, Paris 2005.

7 Idem, *Le Plagiat par anticipation*, Minuit, Paris 2009.

8 G. Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images. Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, trans. J. Goodman, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park 2005, pp. 16–17.

9 G. de Maupassant, *Like Death*, trans. R. Howard, New York Review Books, New York 2017, pp. 73–74.

this passage, everything—the sudden activation of the memory mechanism, the series of associations, and even the sentence rhythm—brings to mind Proust's madeleine scene. Except that the author of this text is Guy de Maupassant, and it predates *Swann's Way* by well over a quarter of a century. What does this mean? According to common sense, and in line with the suggestion at the beginning of this article, one would have to say that Proust plagiarised Maupassant's work. Pierre Bayard, however, disputes the seeming obviousness of this conclusion by pointing out, for example, that Maupassant was not among the writers most often read by Proust, and it is to be doubted that the author of *The Search* was familiar with one of the lesser-known works of the master of naturalism. And even if he had read it and indeed committed a kind of plagiarism—whether consciously or involuntarily—this in no way alters the fact that it is the second text, the madeleine, that, as it were, triggers in the first text, the Maupassant, a kind of third text: materially identical to the first one and at the same time different, since what we hear in it primarily is Proust's madeleine, which, in the chronological order of events, will come into the world much later. In other words: Maupassant's text would not exist without Proust's text. From this perspective it is thus difficult to claim that Maupassant is really the author of the text.

One might, of course—as Hélène Maurel-Indart does<sup>10</sup>—regard the concept of plagiarism by anticipation as a multiplication of entities beyond measure and consider it a fancy form of precursor. We should recall that the latter issue was sketched out by Jorge Louis Borges in the essay “Kafka and His Precursors”, with the claim that every writer creates his own precursors and that his works modify our perception of the past as well as the future of literature. As evidence of just such a course of history, he cites a few of what he claims is an infinite number of Kafka's precursors and Kafkaesque episodes in literature.<sup>11</sup> But reducing plagiarism by anticipation to precursorship downplays the importance of memory or even removes it altogether from the field of literary history and theory. And yet, this history and theory cannot ignore the reader along with his readings and experiences. This reader is understood in two ways: firstly, as a real reader, and secondly, as a certain historical-literary category, the sum total of the books read by a given reading community, the reception counterpart of Riffaterre's archi-reader.<sup>12</sup> Such a literary history would be peculiarly paranoid, similar to that madman who accused Voltaire of plagiarism, since he used the

10 H. Maurel-Indart, “Le précurseur dépossédé”, *Acta fabula* 2009, no. 2, <https://www.fabula.org/revue/document4889.php> [access: 17.06.2024].

11 J. L. Borges, “Kafka and His Precursors”, trans. R. L. C. Simms, University of Texas Press, Austin 1975, pp. 106–108.

12 M. Riffaterre, “Criteria for Style Analysis”, *Word* 1959, vol. 15, pp. 154–174.

same expression.<sup>13</sup> A literary historian who does not acknowledge plagiarism by anticipation would read Sophocles and pretend there was no Freud, whereas, as Bayard points out, it is after all thanks to Freud that Oedipus becomes Oedipal.

Indeed, it is nothing less than intertextuality, although perhaps “interreadability” would be a more appropriate term here, since it is more about the relationship between readings than between the texts themselves. For, as one critic notes in a discussion of Bayard’s book, we never read just one text, reading always implies prior readings.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the notion of the text is expanded; it must begin to also include earlier and later texts, as well as their interpretations. Alternatively, taking this logic to an extreme, we could repeat after Jacques Petit: “the text does not exist”.<sup>15</sup> The authorial instance must also be modified, as Michel Schneider aptly puts it: “A writer is someone who plagiarises, parodies, creates pastiches and from this material composes books that do not resemble other ones, and give the impression that the models are copies, and that future books will have to be similar to them”.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, literature as a whole becomes not a collection of chronologically ordered texts, but rather a space, a network, a library (Babel) in which all texts are interconnected and mutually transforming. All of them: both those already existing and those yet to be written. As Laurent Zimmermann points out, referring to the theory of possible worlds, writers remember by anticipation: the difference between the actual library and the virtual one disappears, since possible texts exist on a logical level. The writer finds himself facing the work he is currently creating and, at the same time, in front of other works, potential works, of which he chooses and realises only one without invalidating the others.<sup>17</sup>

## The Copy

In the context of possible worlds theory, it would be appropriate to add the related vision of time as a map or time as space. With regard to literature, Barbara Zielińska discusses this in the volume *Szybko i Szybciej* [*Fast and Faster*]. Drawing on contemporary physics, she highlights, among other things, that “the past and future exist as real entities, independent of any flow”, “past and future events exist

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<sup>13</sup> As in: J. Finné, op. cit., p. 53.

<sup>14</sup> F. Pennanech, “L’histoire n’existe pas”, *Acta fabula* 2009, no. 2, <https://www.fabula.org/acta/document4925.php> [access: 17.06.2024].

<sup>15</sup> L. Hay, “‘Le texte n’existe pas’. Réflexions sur la critique génétique”, *Poétique* 1985, no. 62, pp. 146–158.

<sup>16</sup> M. Schneider, *Voleurs de mots. Essai sur le plagiat, la psychanalyse et la pensée*, Gallimard, Paris 1985, p. 72.

<sup>17</sup> L. Zimmermann, “Précurseur ou plagiaire par anticipation?”, *Acta fabula* 2009, no. 2, <https://www.fabula.org/acta/document4892.php> [access: 18.06.2024].

simultaneously”, while the feeling of the passage of time “is a neurophysiological phenomenon, not a physical one”.<sup>18</sup> In other words, the linear vision of time is, according to physics, a construct of the human mind, a simplification that allows us to sensibly function within a space that simply straddles the known and the unknown.

The phenomenon of plagiarism by anticipation naturally calls for this falsification to be undermined or, in any case, made problematic. Here, perhaps an even more telling example than that of Maupassant writing in Proustian is what took place in 2016 at the Museum of Art in Łódź. As Łukasz Zaremba wrote in a booklet accompanying the event: “The sudden appearance of Gertrude Stein’s pre-war Parisian studio in Łódź may be surprising at first—particularly for the viewers and critics who have become attached to classical geography, the linear concept of time and the notion of the unequivocal value of the original.”<sup>19</sup> Gertrude Stein’s salon from the writer’s Parisian apartment at 27 rue de Fleurus, where, for the first time in history, paintings by Cézanne, Picasso and Matisse hung side by side, appeared “anew for the first time” in 1992 in New York. This is no longer the real lounge with its original furniture and original artwork. But neither do the copies pretend to be originals nor aim to create the illusion that we are dealing with Stein’s actual salon. The paintings hanging in Łódź were clearly dated: 2015. It is evident that the goal was not merely a reconstruction, a cheap replica of the mythical space for those unable to visit the one in Paris.

The exhibition, titled *Salon de Fleurus*, was more of a meta-exhibition, presenting the problem of the exhibition as such, but also the museum institution, collections and collecting, as well as—the reason for its mention here—the original and the copy, their status and mutual relationship. In the exhibition booklet, the curators also included texts by Walter Benjamin. Except that the texts in question are from the volume *Recent Writings*, published in 2013, that contains essays written by the German philosopher (reminder: who died in 1940) at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries... In one of these essays, entitled “On Copy”, pseudo-Benjamin argues: “A copy could short-circuit the history of art. Instead of being chronological, implying both development and progress, art history could become a loop if two formally identical paintings (the original and the copy) appeared at two different points on the historical timeline.”<sup>20</sup> As in the case of plagiarism by anticipation, this would lead to a kind of reversal of the temporal

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18 B. Zielińska, “Czas jako mapa. Zastyganie czasu w literaturze”, in: *Szybko i szybciej. Eseje o pośpiechu w kulturze*, ed. D. Siwicka, M. Bieńczyk, A. Nawarecki, Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, Warszawa 1996, pp. 171–172.

19 Ł. Zaremba, “Salon-Fiction, czyli idolatria na opak”, in: *Salon de Fleurus*, Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, 2016, p. 1.

20 W. Benjamin, “On Copy”, in: *What is Modern Art? (Group Show)*, vol. 1, ed. I. Arns, W. Benjamin, Re-volver – Archiv für aktuelle Kunst, Frankfurt am Main 2006.

order, the only difference being that the relationship between the artworks is not based on similarity, but on replicating. It is not entirely the same thing.

Yet this situation makes it possible to imagine something like a “copy by anticipation”. The curator of the Łódź exhibition takes us in that direction: “The copy does not have an author, although it usually contributes to shaping both the figure of the author and the aura of the original work. The salon is thus first and foremost a reminder that the canonisation and musealisation of modern art is founded as much on the fetishisation of originals as on the circulation of copies. Hence—Benjamin from 2002 somewhat complements Benjamin from 1936, the author of *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*—it is precisely the countless reproductions (primarily technical ones) that constitute the grounds for the existence of originals as unique, singular, proper and desirable objects. They also draw attention to the fact that modern criticism, and especially art history, is based on copies, and that knowledge of modern art history—not only of modern art—is mostly a knowledge of reproductions.”<sup>21</sup> Zaremba does not say so explicitly, but, drawing on Benjamin’s ideas from his classic text, we could add—again somewhat refining the initial (original) claim—handling and observation, is the reproduction (the copy). For the common viewer, the original, being unavailable, is of little importance, as is the case with writers’ manuscripts, conveniently hidden in the confines of a museum repository because they have been successfully replaced by printed and electronic versions on show. Just as Benjamin wrote: a work of art is created with the intention of being reproduced or copied, since it is the copy that creates the original—without it, the original is merely an empty, unactualised potentiality.

This paradox is explored in literature by Georges Perec’s *The Winter Journey*. The protagonist of this very short story—endlessly expanded by other members of Oulipo<sup>22</sup>—comes across a small volume by a certain Hugo Vernier in his friends’ library, in which he recognises entire passages of later poems by French masters from the late 19th century. It turns out that the poetic masterpieces of period are the fruit of plagiarism committed on a long-lost, forgotten author. However, the idea of plagiarism or copying by anticipation makes it possible to clear Rimbaud, Verlaine and Mallarmé of accusations of plagiarism. The exact opposite is true—it was Hugo Vernier who copied their yet-to-be-written poems. They themselves must have been aware of what it means to be an author. Perhaps this is how we recognise great writers. Writers like Borges, like Pierre Menard, who “did not want to compose *another* Quixote, which surely is easy enough—he wanted to compose *the* Quixote. Nor, surely, need one be obliged

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<sup>21</sup> Ł. Zaremba, op. cit., p. 2.

<sup>22</sup> G. Perec, the Oulipo, *Winter Journeys*, trans. H. Matthews, J. Sturrock, London 2013.



to note that his goal was never a mechanical transcription of the original; he had no intention of *copying* it. His admirable ambition was to produce a number of pages which coincided—word for word and line for line—with those of Miguel de Cervantes”.<sup>23</sup> Borges and Perec suggest that to copy someone else’s text is to become the true author, thereby relegating the predecessor to a fabricator of copies by anticipation. Their protagonists’ fates are not aligned: Pierre Menard does not finish his work; his voice, somewhat like in Harold Bloom’s theory, was not strong enough to drown out Cervantes’s voice and make his *Don Quixote* a copy by anticipation. On the other hand, Perec’s Hugo Vernier perishes on the ash heap of history

Both writers repeatedly approached the problem of the copy and its paradoxes. In *Portrait of a Man Known as Il Condottiere*, Perec portrays the existence of the copyist in *doloroso* style, casting Gaspard Winckler as a melancholy figure of modernity, closely akin to the residents of the apartment block described in *Life: A User’s Manual*.<sup>24</sup> Borges, in the aforementioned “Library of Babel” (which provides a constant backdrop to these reflections), illustrates the consequences of combinatorics for the functioning of literature. The library he describes, if considered a virtual entity, is essentially the copy by anticipation of all books that come into existence in reality. The essence of this phenomenon is articulated in Borges’s customary fashion by means of a footnote: “In order for a book to exist, it is sufficient that it be *possible*. Only the impossible is excluded. For example, no book is also a staircase, though there are no doubt books that discuss and deny and prove that possibility, and others whose structure corresponds to that of a staircase.”<sup>25</sup> Borges’s very concept can also be considered a copy by anticipation of an algorithmic machine, capable of creating a gigantic, but nevertheless limited, finite number of texts. A miniature version of such a machine has, of course, already been manufactured by the Oulipians in the person of Raymond Queneau as the author of *A Hundred Thousand Billion Poems*—since that is how many can be generated by the poetic mechanism based on ten isomorphic sonnets. What is the original here, and what is copy?

I ponder all of this while gazing at the portrait of a man in a black hat, created in 2016 as part of The Next Rembrandt project.<sup>26</sup> The portrait was “painted” by a computer programme that analysed all existing canvases by the Leiden master over many months, ultimately generating a work that matched his style in every

<sup>23</sup> J. L. Borges, “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*”, trans. A. Hurley, in: idem, *Collected Fictions*, Penguin Books, 1999, p. 91.

<sup>24</sup> G. Perec, *Portrait of a Man Known as Il Condottiere*, trans. D. Bellos, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2016.

<sup>25</sup> J. L. Borges, “The Library of Babel”, trans. A. Hurley, in: idem, *Collected Fictions...*, op. cit., p. 117.

<sup>26</sup> See: [www.nextrembrandt.com](http://www.nextrembrandt.com).



aspect—thematic, chromatic and compositional—without being a copy of any known work. In light of this achievement, the concept of a copy by anticipation takes on a whole new meaning. Perhaps all great artists will soon turn out to be copies of machines and AI programmes capable of producing masterpieces on demand. Who will resist the temptation of reading Proust's new novel? Who will turn down the long-sought *Messiah*? Let us fear not, for thanks to technological advancement we won't have to wait as long as several months, as people did for Rembrandt.

*Translated from Polish by Natalia Dore and Kamil Walczak*