

William Baer

The Plagiarist

A well-cultivated mind is, so to speak, made up of all the minds of proceeding ages; it is only one single mind which has been educated during all this time.

— Fontenelle

It was the dark, austere, but sacred refuge of our young lives—and we would move slowly within its rare sunlight and gnostic shadows, beneath the dark panelled mahogany walls and ceilings, down the endless exacting corridors of wooden shelves, and under the portentous, crushing, yet exhilarating erudition of the world's great volumes. Book after book; folio after folio; relentless, leather-bound, gilt-edged series after series—all the comprehensive self-reflection of the provocative minds of man waiting silently, in patience, that they may again reveal what they alone contained. The Church Fathers, the Athenians, the Germans, the Russian novelists, the British and Asian poets, *everything* seemed represented and had its appropriate place—with the somewhat eccentric exclusion of the French. (There was, it's true, a single copy of *Bovary*, but having read the first half, father had concluded with rare generalization and chauvinism that he saw no further reason to expend valuable shelf space on uninspired French exhibitionism.) And, most amazingly, virtually all of the countless pages had been cut, because our father, a sincere and never ostentatious man, spent his life slowly but relentlessly learning what he might of mankind's accomplishment, and spent his last, retired, solitary years virtually confined to the library wing of the house in relaxed but considered perusal of his extensive collection.

But I begin in the library not merely for its symbolic significance in the tragedy of my older brother, Andrew, but in order to recall a seemingly insignificant incident that now seems to indicate the true depth and extent of his problem. It was some dateless, distant, late autumn evening on the north shore, and, as our father entertained a few guests at the east end of the library, we children sought out our most favorite and darkest corner, that we might, in quiet seclusion, frighten each other with our most "horrible" stories. So we settled in that particular corner of the library where the best of the British authors seemed to converge—the striking handsome sets of Dryden, Pope, and Spenser; Shelley, Swift, and Goldsmith. And as we took our seats on the cool wooden floor in the dark quiet recess, Andrew, the oldest of the four of us—about twelve—noted with ominous effect that the Gothics were also shelved immediately above us: Walpole, Lewis, and Radcliffe; Poe and the Brontës. In such auspicious company, we soon began taking our turns, attempting to terrify the others, generally telling familiar stories of ghosts and demons and vampires. Finally, it was Andrew's turn, and we all waited with the greatest expectation since he was always the most effective—being already a voracious reader with a remarkable understanding of the eccentricities of Poe, Hawthorne, and Gogol.

We were not disappointed. He told the tale of a man named David Lang, a farmer near Nashville, who in the fall of 1880, in clear sight of his wife, his two children, his physician, and his friend, vanished from the face of the earth in the low-cut pasture that lay before his home. His wife screamed and grew hysterical, the children were traumatized, and the men rushed to the spot of the incident and found nothing. For days after, the neighbors searched the pasture but to no result, and, in time, although there was never a funeral, hope was gradually abandoned. Then one evening, nearly seven months later, Lang's two children were playing in the pasture near the place of his disappearance, when his eleven-year-old daughter, sensing a peculiar presence, suddenly called out to her missing father. To their frightful astonishment, the children then heard the distant voice of their father calling out for help, over and over, until it finally faded away, forever.

It is hard to relay the chilling impact that this story had on the rest of us (although the fact that I could still, many years later, recall its particulars so accurately might indicate the depth of its impression.) We

had all grown so fearful and uncomfortable at the conclusion of the story that we immediately returned to the east end of the library for the reassuring presence of the adults. Nonetheless, in time, we overcame our fears and became children again, and even discussed the story and its meanings at great length. Eventually, our young cousin, Kathleen, with the intention of praising Andrew's rendition, mentioned that the story seemed to have an especially terrifying effect because of its "familiarity." But this remark clearly stunned my brother who, with a certain animosity, looked challengingly at our young cousin who innocently responded, "But I've heard it before." I myself was of the same opinion, and likewise felt that it in no way denigrated my brother's performance. But he responded quite differently, turned on little Kathleen, and with a frightening coldness and finality replied, "That is impossible, as I've made it up."

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Nearly fifteen years later, I received a brief note from my brother relaying the exciting news that his first two efforts at short fiction had been taken for publication by one of the more prestigious of the literary journals. At the time, I was working long hours in New York as a resident at St. Michael's, specializing in cardiology, and even finding time for related research at Sloan-Kettering. I was living on the upper west side, working frantically but with a purpose, and, somehow, finding time for my understanding fiancée, Jennifer. As a result, I had seldom seen Andrew since his return from his year abroad in Europe and Asia Minor, spent mostly in Greece. As for Andrew, he was similarly preoccupied, having returned from Europe confident that the necessary groundwork for his literary endeavors had been completed. At the age of twenty-six, possessing a remarkable erudition, and with three literary degrees (the most recent from Cornell), he had returned to the old house in Huntington on the Island's north shore to begin his life's work. He immediately began devoting his entire days to that end, having been spared the harassment of financial concerns since the estate of our late parents had left us both financially independent.

Ever since those early days in the library, we had confidently assumed that it was Andrew's destiny to contribute significantly to the literary annals. His natural modesty did not belie his determination, and his entire

life had been one of preparation and dedication. He was disciplined, conscientious, even exacting, and his extraordinary breadth of knowledge was the result of a most serious scholarship. He had an admirable obsession with the absorption of knowledge, and was able to fractionate and dissect every idea and experience with the most comprehensive rigidity. As a result, he set the most exacting standards, and was, in essence, a perfectionist. It was an approach to one's vocation with which I sympathized, since, to a certain extent, we shared many of the same characteristics, and, despite our divergent intellectual pursuits, had always maintained a close, congenial, and supportive relationship. So I worked on in New York, and, during those first six months after his return from Europe, Andrew worked relentlessly at his fictions. After the acceptances, we met downtown for dinner, and took satisfied stock of ourselves at the advent of our young careers.

The problems began with the appearance of the subsequent issue following Andrew's publications. I first came upon it during a late-night break at the research centre, and was shocked to find the first ten pages of the issue dedicated to a special section of letters to the editor making the most vitriolic and condemnatory charges of plagiarism against Andrew's work. Reading the first few letters, I assumed their authors to be shallow pedants ignorantly mistaking homage or allusion for literary theft. But as I continued reading, each attack grew more harsh and convincing, and all the letters cited definite, but generally different, examples, including word for word borrowings from James, Poe, Hardy, Burke, Lawrence, Disraeli, Cooper, and countless others. The weight of the evidence was conclusive and damning. The special section ended with the editor's two-page response, in which he apologized to his readers for his oversights, and coolly disclaimed the author as a fraud.

The first of Andrew's pieces, "Stonehenge," told the story of a disillusioned, lonely American academic, Richard Ford, who receives a mysterious, scented, blank stationery note postmarked "Bristol Downs," and then recalls a vow he made to a young English girlfriend during his undergraduate days at Cambridge ten years before. Impulsively, he sets sail for England—determined to appear at Stonehenge, as they had planned, during the rare convergence of the winter solstice and the lunar eclipse. When he finally arrives, he discovers her abandoned and dead, stretched out across the ruins' famous "altar" stone. The story's subse-

quent and rapid conclusion reveals the cause of her death, Ford's inadvertent involvement, and several startling repercussions. Though somewhat traditional in tone, the story seemed to me absolutely fascinating at first reading, and Andrew's ability to effortlessly absorb so many divergent writings within the dominant mood and style of his fiction seemed to display a virtuoso command of the language. For example, in an appropriately stiff correspondence to his cousin, Ford describes the ruin:

an assemblage of upright and prostrate stones on Salisbury plain, generally supposed to be the remains of an ancient Druidical temple. Given its singularity, and the mystery attending its origins, it's always necessary to view the ruins with an artist's eye—and contemplated by an intellect stored with antiquarian and historical knowledge.

The passage, so characteristic of Ford's shallow pedantry, is lifted virtually word for word from a little-known article of Poe's, "Some Account of Stonehenge."

The second story, "The Watching," told of the bizarre case of a young attorney, who on the eve of his marriage vanishes, only to take up surreptitious lodgings in a nearby apartment from which he keeps his fiancée under constant surveillance. He continues to do so for over twenty years, even moving when the girl marries one of his former friends. When the friend is accidentally killed, the attorney finally and impulsively turns up at her door, consoles her, and is soon married. The obvious plot similarities to Hawthorne's "Wakefield" were minor compared to the varied borrowings from Emerson, Thackeray, Dostoyevsky, and even Thomas and Rilke. And again, Andrew's capacity for the absorption of disparate writings is absolutely confounding. At one point, the attorney attends a religious service to observe his former fiancée and her family. The sermon, making a military analogy, emphasizes responsibility and free will, and, with the exception of a word or two, was taken intact from Disraeli's panegyric on the death of Wellington:

for the general must not only think, but think with the rapidity of lightning; for on a moment more or less depends the fate of a most beautiful combination—and a moment more or less is a question of glory or shame. All this may be done in an ordinary life, but to do all this with integrity is sublime.

The next day, I left the hospital early and drove out to the old estate. The house itself was empty, but I found Andrew standing alone in the twilight looking out over the day's last refections and shadows as they slowly shifted across the surface of the Northwest Pond. As I approached, he made no acknowledgment, so we stood together in silence watching the geese slowly glide over the gradually darkening waters. I felt certain that he was suffering inside, but, as always, he was certainly in control of his emotions. Finally, he turned and looked with a certain aggression into my eyes.

"It's *not* true."

Naturally, having seen the irrefutable evidence, I was quite uncertain how to respond to such a brazen self-vindication, but Andrew continued, quite casually, "You know, Matthews once wrote that 'frequent charges of plagiarism are a sign of a defective education and defective intelligence.'"

Again, I made no response, and he turned away. Naturally, I wondered if such an esoteric citation was merely conjured up from his vast erudition, or whether it indicated a more recent interest in the subject. I also took careful notice of his attribution of the quotation to its source. As we slowly walked back to the house, I decided it best to confront the issue.

"Andrew, I want you to know that I've come to support you through all this, but I *have* read the charges." Andrew then stopped and faced me directly. His manner was firm and a bit condescending, but without any real malice. As he spoke, the sunset intermittently flashed into my eyes from over his shoulders.

"It's simply not true, and I have no intention of discussing it."

Since I had no intention of upsetting him further, there was another conspicuous silence. Then, as if to placate my concerns, he remarked rather off-handedly, "Besides, I'm taking precautions."

We then walked to the house, spent a pleasant evening together, and never again broached the subject. I did, of course, remain quite concerned about his odd behavior, but he had always been, like father, somewhat eccentric, and his comment about precautions seemed at once to acknowledge the problem and to make it clear that it wouldn't happen again. As I drove back over the island bridges into the soft blue Manhattan night lights, I felt a certain confidence about the problem

itself, but did wonder if the incident indicated something less than the capacity for literary genius which we had always assumed, without reservation, he possessed.

The next four months were among the most hectic of my life. Not only was our research reaching a culmination, but I undertook increased responsibility at the hospital, as well as the most elaborate wedding preparations. Andrew was equally distracted and had resumed writing with an obsessive detachment. He confined himself to the estate, broke off his relations with a long-standing girlfriend, and generally avoided any form of outside communication. During that time, I actually saw him only once, on the occasion of his twenty-seventh birthday, when I drove out to the island with a special birthday gift: a rare volume by Cooper which I was certain was not contained in the library.

Entering the house, I was disconcerted to notice that the library was padlocked, but when I finally found Andrew in his large study, I was encouraged to see him looking so well, and again marvelled at our similar abilities to tolerate sleeplessness and overwork. Andrew was quite pleased to see me, and admitted that the new work was going very well. But when I offered him his present, I noticed a certain hesitancy. Then he took the book, removed the wrapping with a certain unintended disinterest, read the title, and thanked me warmly.

"Do you have it?" I asked.

He looked at me for a moment, deliberated, and then chose to answer honestly. "I've given up reading. . . . I even reread only a very little." Seeing my disbelief, he added quite seriously, "It only causes me problems." After this direct but casual reference to the plagiarism trouble, his mood lightened, he held up the book, and said, "Maybe, someday."

Andrew and I always enjoyed each other's company, and that evening was no exception. He asked, with real interest, about Jennifer and our plans, and showed a great curiosity in the possible ramifications of my medical research. He even offered to discuss his work-in-progress, a short novella based on the real-life experiences of James Mellaart, Assistant Director of the British Institute of Archaeology in Ankara, whose personal tribulations began on a train from Istanbul, when he noticed a young girl in his compartment wearing a priceless solid gold bracelet of ancient origin. When he questioned the girl, she casually told him that it

was part of a larger collection found amid the ruins at Dorak during the Greek occupation after the First World War.

Impulsively altering his plans, Mellaart disembarked at Izmir and followed the young girl to her home where he found an astonishing collection of bronze-age relics that dated from 4,500 years old and rivalled Troy in consummate craftsmanship. Exhilarated, Mellaart immediately returned to the Institute and published his findings, but when challenged, he discovered that he was unable to relocate the young girl. She seemed to have disappeared, her address proved to be non-existent, and he was unable to retrace his steps through the winding streets of Izmir. As a result, his highly-regarded reputation was irrevocably destroyed, and speculation abounded—that he had simply perpetuated a fraud, that he had been deceived by jealous professional rivals, or that he had been duped by an international smuggling ring which had "set-up" Mellaart's article to increase black-market sales of contraband artifacts.

The story was fascinating, and I was hopeful. And especially so when Andrew made it clear that although the fiction was based on a factual incident, it was most "original." I left that evening feeling reassured, and two months later, when a note arrived mentioning that the book had been purchased by one of the prestigious university presses, I was elated.

Archaeologist appeared in the fall of that year under a pen name, and within weeks was the obsession of the literary journals. Andrew's literary theft had accelerated to such an inconceivable degree that the book was a virtual compendium of Western literary achievement. The critics outdid themselves citing the plagiaries, and the book probably would have attained best-seller status had not the publisher, displaying an unusual integrity, chosen to withdraw the book and destroy the first printing.

It would be ludicrous to cite all of the original sources, but the range was extraordinary: Ibsen, Mann, Turgenev, Dickens, Malory, Tertullian, C. S. Lewis, Brockden, Brown, Trollope, and countless others. It seemed that there was not a single line of the book that didn't have another literary source, but, again, Andrew's ability to absorb these disparate pieces into a stylistic continuity was uncanny, and even one of his most virulent detractors admitted that such "a dexterous plagiarist may do anything." One example will suffice—as the archaeologist sails northwest through the Saronic Gulf:

Returning out of Asia, I sailed from Aegina towards Megara, and began to consider the country around me. Aegina was behind me, Megara was before, Pyraeus on the right hand, Corinth on the left. All these ancient capitals now pathetically prostrate over the rolling earth. And I wondered to myself, how can a man grow so disconsolate over his own meagre trials, in the presence of such ravaged antiquity?

This use of *Tristram Shandy* recalls the most curious of all the book's plagiarisms, another from Sterne:

Shall we forever make new books, as apothecaries make new mixtures, by simply pouring out of one vessel into another—as the ancient Romans robbed all the cities of the world to set their own sterile plot?

Andrew's breakdown was immediate, and my own inability as a medical man, to properly foresee it, increased my own overwhelming feelings of guilt. The wedding was postponed; I took a leave of absence, and spent two months at the estate. Andrew had withdrawn totally, and refused any efforts at communication. He spent his days sitting in a chair on the veranda watching with seeming incomprehension as the wind fluttered with the last autumn leaves. In time, however, there was a marked improvement, although he still refused to discuss the problem or make admission, and refused all psychological therapy, most vehemently the Freudian type—a position with which I sympathized. Finally, we both agreed on an extended rest-vacation at a sanatorium in the Adirondacks. His progress in the mountains was quite rapid, and within two months he was back at the estate. We hired an elderly domestic to cater to his needs, and by the time of my wedding the following spring he was able to stand as best man—though he chose not to attend the reception.

Naturally, I undertook an immediate and concentrated study of the problem, but was disappointed to find only the most cursory acknowledgments of the illness in the medical journals. I did read all of the literary considerations: *Plagiarism* by Lindey, Paull's *Literary Ethics*, White's apologia for the Elizabethans, Edward's volume, and even Salzman's rather pedestrian discussion. It was all quite incredible for the layman, an admitted dilettante, to discover the truth of the notion that the history of plagiarism is indeed the history of literature, and of the accuracy of Byron's contention that "the most original writers are the greatest thieves." Rare is the writer who has not been charged with or caught at

plagiarism, and the list is so extensive as to be almost exclusive. The mighty names of Demosthenes, Virgil, Shakespeare, and Byron are a disconcerting and instructive sampling. It became clear, as I studied further, that every language and every era had its plagiarists, and that the French seemed to have had a particularly distinguished tradition: Molière, Montaigne, Chateaubriand, Dumas, Stendhal, etc. The Count de Maubec even had the audacity to enumerate "Seven Rules for the Concealment of Plagiarism," and the aptly-named Sieur de Richesource wrote a sixty-four page tract, *Le Masque des Orateurs*, adroitly detailing the art of "plagiarisme."

But the French are hardly unique; both Milton ("Borrowing without beautifying is a plagiary") and Emerson found it justified if the original was improved upon, and, of course, Eliot went so far as to conclude that "Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal." And I must admit that there was a time when I hopefully wondered if Andrew had simply developed a new literary form or style—that of using only what had already been written and then coalescing these disparate passages into a unique and superior original. Eight of the last lines of *The Waste Land* were "borrowed," but, of course, Eliot's purpose was different and the sources of his citations openly noted. I was soon forced to abandon this last unlikely hope of literary justification, and forced to face the obvious fact of Andrew's mental illness.

Since there could have been no prospect that his "parallel passages" could have gone undetected, it's clear that Andrew's thefts were somehow both unintentional and unconscious, and that his plagiary was obviously a deep-rooted and uncontrollable mental sickness. From the clinical point of view, I was well aware of the studies on compulsives, and, though I refused to regard the plight of my brother from the narrow vantage of just another case study, several subsequent behavioral oddities only reinforced such an assessment. From the initial breakdown, Andrew had adamantly refused to take up a pen for any purpose whatsoever—even that of signing his signature. I soon discovered that all writing implements had vanished from the house, and realizing that the very appearance of my own fountain pen was the cause of anxiety, I kept it concealed. Similarly, all reading materials were removed from the house at large and remained locked in the library; all subscriptions were terminated; and the mail was left unattended. His phobia of books

increased and eventually extended to libraries and bookstores, and, on those rare occasions when we took a drive through the countryside, I fastidiously avoided the sight of any such establishments. These problems accelerated to the point that Andrew removed the portrait of our father from the living room, because a small bookcase was vaguely visible in the distant background.

These extreme fears lasted for about four months during his initial convalescence, and given his unstable condition seemed not unreasonable. In time, Andrew gradually overcame these problems: the portrait reappeared, books were seen in his room, and, finally, a short note of gratitude arrived in the mail—apologizing for his "self-indulgence" and its "misfortunate consequence." Nevertheless, despite this forthright and encouraging admission of his problem, I eventually became suspicious that Andrew was reviving his dangerous interest in "writing," and when my concern finally surfaced, we discussed it quite candidly. He assured me that certain "unconscious impulses" had made a literary career impossible, and he seemed sincerely determined to spend the next few years adjusting to the situation, and in pursuit of another vocation, I was reassured but asked his kindly domestic, Mrs. Winter, to keep a watchful eye—and during the next eight months she observed only a voracious reading in the now unlocked library.

In the meantime, my own life had increased its pace: Jennifer delivered a marvellous son, we purchased a home in northern New Jersey, my private practice was established, and the continuing research began producing notable results and drawing professional attention. Given what was to become of Andrew, I continually look back at that time in my life and ask myself if it would have been possible to do more than I did. I suppose it is always possible to do more for those who are closest in our lives, but the extent of Andrew's relapse did not become clear to me until one significant visit about two years after the initial collapse.

Arriving unannounced, I found him alone in the study reading, surrounded by literally thousands of books all stacked in neat piles and set up on makeshift shelves. He looked worn and drawn, but his spirits were deceptively high. He answered my inquiries quite honestly, and I soon discovered that he had written another novel—an "apocalyptic" one—over a year ago. It was, he assured me, "entirely" original, and, besides, he was "making sure." It was at this point that I discovered what

still seems to me the most remarkable aspect of this entire series of events: in order to be certain that he had not "borrowed" a single line from another author, he had undertaken to reread *every* single book he had ever read! The audacity of this enterprise made me ill with concern, but Andrew felt it quite reasonable. He had gone into the library, removed every book which he had previously read, and then began a relentless rereading. He estimated the project at a year's duration (which seemed to me quite impossible), and now, being two months shy of completion—and on schedule—he was exhilarated to report that he had not come across one instance of "allusion" in his novel.

That was the first time in our adulthood that I could recall raising my voice in his presence. He, however, remained cordial and most appreciative of my concern, but assured me that his problems were over, that hard work had been the best and only therapy, and that his life was not back on its correct course. We parted amicably, but driving home I was tormented with perverse visions of his insane rereadings—sitting in that dark study, totally disconnected from any sense of reality, and surrounded by those thousands of sinister, provocative books. I was totally distraught, and felt utterly impotent. There seemed no satisfactory recourse. He had naturally and adamantly refused to discuss any possibility of abandoning the project, and any thought of attempting to have him committed was absolutely unacceptable and might even exacerbate the problem. I discussed all these terrible anxieties with my wife and my colleagues, but I found no solace or solution and braced for the worst.

The "novel" was accepted the following spring by a reputable publishing house, but while in galley proofs the truth surfaced and the project was scrapped. *The Camp of the Saints* turned out to be a word for word translation of Jean Raspail's extraordinary visionary novel of the same title. The reason that Andrew's deception reached galley proofs at all was that Raspail's novel, at that time, was still untranslated and only available in France in the French original. Andrew's version ended with Raspail's frightening conclusion:

At midnight tonight her borders will be opened. Already, for these last few days, they've been practically unguarded. And I'm sitting here now, slowly repeating, over and over, these melancholy words of the old Prince Bibesco: "The Fall of Constantinople is a personal misfortune that happened to all of us only last week.

I woke from the dark when the police called, and learned that Andrew had taken his life with sleeping pills. I drove alone from Jersey to the island, sick with grief and guilt and hopelessness. The house was in order, the terrified domestic sedated, and the library fully restocked. He lay slumped over his desk, and the police left the room that I might read his note in solitude before the questioning. No salutation:

I could not continue in this state, either in the light of duty or of reason. My difficulty was this: I had been deceived greatly once; how could I be sure that I was not deceived again?

I have not done that which is attributed to me. I have no knowledge of the individual Jean Raspail nor any facility with his language. These callous and relentless charges are unbearable. I feel certain I will go mad again. I feel I can't go through another of those terrible times. So, finally, I am doing what seems the best.

I must, however, despite it all again affirm that literature and the creative effort have given me my greatest possible happiness.

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My only solace in the subsequent months was that his pain and despair were over, and that whatever he had done, he had undertaken it without malice or intention. And I recall how all this was again reaffirmed with such force one pensive winter evening, many years later, which I passed in the quiet of the old library. As I browsed through a worn volume of Frank Edwards, I chanced upon the story of David Lang, and noticed in the margin a small, but telling, pencilled check mark in the unmistakable script of a child. And I recollected in the dark, the shadowy labyrinths of literary fame, and Edward Young's comment that, "So few are our originals, that if all other books were burnt, the lettered world would resemble some metropolis in flames, where a few incombustible buildings—a fortress, a temple, a tower—lift theirs heads in melancholy grandeur, amid the mighty ruin."