

***The following is a contribution to the JREF's ongoing blog series on skepticism and education. If you are an educator and would like to contribute to this series, please contact [Bob Blaskiewicz](#) .***

The British poet Christian Ward became a controversial figure recently when his poem "The Deer at Exmoor," which won the Exmoor Society's Hope Bourne poetry prize, was [revealed by the \*Western Morning News\* to have been plagiarized](#) from Helen Mort's "Deer," which had itself won the Cafe Writers Open Poetry Competition in 2009.

Just how similar are the two poems? Well, you can read Mort's version [here](#) , and I've looked at Ward's. We're talking about an 18-line poem in which every line is perfectly identical with its counterpart in the original with the following exceptions:

- "mother" has been changed to "father" in lines 1 and 11, and consequently "she" to "he" throughout;
- "that" has been removed in line 6;
- "Ullapool" has been changed to "the River Exe" and "the kingfisher / that darned the river south of Rannoch Moor" has been changed to "the peregrine / falcon landing at Bossington Beach" in lines 7-8;
- "pines" has been changed to "trees" in line 14.

The rest is exactly the same, down to the punctuation.

I think you'll agree that, by any reasonable definition, it's the same poem.

Ward then apparently deleted his *Write Out Loud* profile (cached [here](#) ), removed his online poetry archive and wrote (presumably) a

[public letter](#)

which appeared in the *Western Morning News*

. After bizarrely referring to the revelations of what had occurred as "allegations of plagiarism," he apologized, stating, "This incident is all my fault and I fully accept the consequences of my actions. I apologise to the Exmoor Society, Helen Mort, the poetry community and to the readers of the WMN."

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Written by Marc David Barnhill  
Monday, 11 February 2013 10:00

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So far, so good. He continued: "Furthermore, I have begun to examine my published poems to make sure there are no similar mistakes. I want to be as honest as I can with the poetry community and I know it will take some time to regain their trust. Already I have discovered a 2009 poem called *The Neighbour* is very similar to Tim Dooley's. After Neruda and admit that a mistake has been made. I am still digging and want a fresh start."

Ward also complained about the hostility and violent language with which some have responded to the incident, a rhetorical tactic he repeated in a comment he made (first!) on [the Guardian's January 14 online coverage of the story](#), which Ward called a "shoddy piece of recycled journalism."

Now, Ward's reaction to his hyperbolic critics is perfectly valid, and [ad hominem](#) attacks and threats are unfortunate and inappropriate. They are also, however, simply [red herrings](#) when we're discussing the act of plagiarism itself, and the "recycled journalism" barb in the context of addressing his own plagiarism is a stunning, if perhaps unconscious, example of the [tu quoque](#) fallacy, or at least of irony.

So how did a published, aspiring poet with hundreds of poems of (again, presumably) his own come to commit such a blatant act of intellectual thievery? In his apology, Ward recalls, "I was working on a poem about my childhood experiences in Exmoor and was careless. I used Helen Mortis's poem as a model for my own but rushed and ended up submitting a draft that Mortis, wasn't entirely my own work....I had no intention of deliberately plagiarising her work. That is the truth."

This statement is breathtaking. "Careless"? "Wasn't entirely my own work"? In the spirit of charity during what must be an intensely unpleasant time for Ward, I can chalk those characterizations up to tragic understatement. But to claim that he "had no intention of deliberately plagiarising" is a bit difficult to swallow.

I catch college students plagiarizing on a regular, though infrequent, basis. (I can usually nip any such tendencies in the bud through a combination of discussing the import and

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consequences of plagiarism, creating opportunities for appropriately citing and documenting sources, demonstrating such pattern-detecting tools as [Turn It In](#) , and designing writing and research assignments that require unlikely connections and analyses and draw cumulatively on students' ongoing thinking about complex issues.) Even there, most students have the sense to attempt to disguise or alter the sources from which they've stolen -- not realizing that the strings of obviously substituted synonyms that usually result are themselves clear markers of what's really going on.

To be fair, student plagiarism [really is often unintentional](#) , either because students haven't adequately understood and internalized the practice of attribution (particularly when they hail from countries and cultures where the rules about this sort of thing are genuinely different) or because they've honestly mistaken unconsciously borrowed material for their own original content. It happens.

[Studies have shown](#) that cryptomnesia and implicit memory can lead not only to the false belief that one has independently generated an idea borrowed from elsewhere but to false memories of the circumstances in which one came up with the idea in the first place. Moreover, the act of reading a piece of writing may act as a kind of textual priming, leading us to come up with words and phrases with seeming spontaneity that were actually triggered by what we have read. In an [excerpt from his new book](#) , Oliver Sacks discusses Helen Keller's famous plagiaristic run-in with source confusion and describes the difficulty involved in "distinguishing a genuine memory or inspiration, felt as such, from those that have been borrowed or suggested, between what the psychoanalyst Donald Spence calls 'historical truth' and 'narrative truth.'"

But Ward's plagiarism isn't a case of unconsciously remembering and reproducing striking phrases in the context of one's own creation. It is literally the same piece of work, 90% identical to the source. And indeed I do see rare instances of students submitting paragraphs or even entire essays taken verbatim from an uncredited (usually online) source. More often than not in these cases, even when an apology is offered, the students will protest that the plagiarism was unintentional, that they had used the source as a launchpad for their own writing, and that in the rush of research they had unfortunately let someone else's work creep in. The defense seems laughable in its implausibility; it also perfectly mirrors Ward's.

You may be familiar with the urban legend of the student accused of plagiarism who insists to her professor that the work in question is really hers, at which the professor holds up an identical published article -- his own. As my little contribution to this legend, I'm here stating that a mentor of mine in graduate school claimed that this had actually happened with one of his own students. Regardless, one typically assumes at the climax of such a story that the busted student has no choice but to confess in the face of clear evidence. But often students will

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continue to insist that the plagiarism was unintentional. "I'm writing about the same topic," a student who ripped off two consecutive paragraphs verbatim once told me. "Obviously a lot of the sentences are going to come out the same." I'm less interested in the question of the student's sincerity than I am in the belief that such a possibility could be taken as plausible.

Still in the spirit of generosity, I recall a student in my poetry class who challenged my assertion that a poet had deliberately chosen the sonnet form for a particular work in order to draw upon the historical and thematic associations of that form. I encourage challenges to interpretive claims, but was surprised by this one. How did I know that the form had been "chosen"? How did I know that the poet had intended to write a sonnet? Wasn't it possible -- even likely -- that he just went ahead and wrote a poem, and by sheer coincidence it came out to 14 lines of iambic pentameter divided into a problem-posing octet and solution-suggesting sextet rhyming ABBAABBACDECDE?

And she was serious. She genuinely believed it was within the realm of plausible expectation that someone might accidentally write a Petrarchan sonnet. And several other students expressed similar views. The statements that filled the ensuing discussion seemed to me to be related to our difficulty in comprehending probability and large numbers -- closer to mathematicians' difficulty in grasping the [Monty Hall problem](#) than to a lack of literary awareness. (The students modified their perspective after struggling with the assigned task of writing their own Petrarchan sonnets.) Seen in the light of our inherent innumeracy, Ward's appeal to accident isn't quite as comically desperate as it may appear. He may even believe it.

In a cultural climate where writers from Jonah Lehrer to Bob Dylan have been outed for plagiarism, it's tempting to file this story away as just one more sad sign of the times. But it's got me thinking about how our cognitive biases play into the nuances of attributing authorship of language and ideas, and I'll undoubtedly be teaching about these issues differently as a result. You can quote me on that.

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