

In others' words

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David Henige, in *Journal of Scholarly Publishing*, has stressed the importance of accuracy in quotation, to avoid alteration by 'the repeated use of common editorial modifications'.¹ I have described the abominable difficulties and delays of obtaining permission to quote, which I called 'the most frustrating of all the editor's and writer's chores'.² Another aspect of quotation that is open to vagary is the question of attribution (recognize the term?).³

The original authorship of quoted passages is most obvious when set out within quotation marks or displayed, with the author's name appended, as at the head of chapters in some books. Dorothy Sayers, for instance, sets a quoted passage at the head of each chapter of *Gaudy Night*, properly attributed to Philip Sidney, Robert Burton, Michael Drayton, etcetera. Next most evidently there may be clear acknowledgement in the narrative, as when Belinda in Barbara Pym's *Some Tame Gazelle* observes, on hearing that a friend is installing a fish pond in his garden: 'Leigh Hunt writes rather charmingly about a fish – "Legless, unloving, infamously chaste";⁴ or Basil in Pym's *An Unsuitable Attachment* describes a wedding couple 'Imparadised in one another's arms, as Milton put it'.⁵

There are quotations legitimately to be regarded as too obvious to need citation - "'What's in a name?", she wondered', would not require specification of the source; the writer could surely rely on their readership to recognize such near-common parlance. Then there may be deliberate withholding of the identity of the true begetter of the words: 'buried quotation', to be identified or not according to the knowledgeability of the reader. In a talk to the Authors Club in 1996, Jane Dorner listed terms that might be taken as synonyms implying plagiarism: *artistic licence, coincidence, commercial misappropriation, cultural tradition, downloading into the unconscious, forgery, homage, iconoclasm, intertextuality, parody, postmodernism, transcription*.⁶

In the field of literature, Angela Thirkell was a prime quoter who veiled, disguised, distorted or otherwise withheld her sources in her more than thirty novels of social comedy. They are profuse with quotations; she uses 252 or more from Dickens. She assumes her readers' knowledge of her favourite works; does not condescend to explain or expatiate. A Rectory is described as 'not unlike "Bolton Abbey in the Olden Time"; Thirkell continues, 'if there are readers who do not know this picture ... we can, like Miss Fanny Squeers, only pity their ignorance and despise them.' (That's Fanny from Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby*.)

It may be by no means apparent that a quotation is lurking in Thirkell's prose; borrowed passages are woven seamlessly into her narrative. Eric Swan tells Justinia and Lady Lufton that 'Like Hervé Riel, he had a good whole holiday with leave to go ashore—a reference which was entirely lost on both ladies'—as probably also on the majority of Thirkell's readers! (M. Riel is the eponymous hero of a poem by Robert Browning.) 'It *was* the azalea's breath and she *was* dead,' murmurs a widower, reminded in his garden again of the death of his much-mourned wife, as was Coventry Patmore in his poem, 'The Azalea'. Jack Middleton, she tells her readers, 'can speak like Prince Giglio for three days and nights without stopping' (a feat the Prince achieved in Thackeray's *The Rose and the Ring*). 'Never had Miss Bunting in her long career had a pupil who had tasted honeydew with such vehemence, or drunk the milk of Paradise with such deep breaths and loud

gulps' (Coleridge, 'Kubla Khan', basically). David Leslie 'had an impression that [Anne] had lived beside the springs of Dove' (like Wordsworth's Lucy Gray). "'Feeder has the rows, not me,'" said Mr Traill, as heedless of grammar as the Monks and Friars of Rheims'—of whom the uncredited poet Richard Barham tells us that, on seeing the wasted form of the Jackdaw of Rheims, 'Heedless of grammar, they all cried, "THAT'S HIM!"'.

Philip Winter observes of delayed war shock that science 'cannot raze out the written troubles of the brain with any sweet oblivious antidote'—as Macbeth requested before him. Small boys in Thirkell country are often described as 'pleasing anxious beings': that phrase comes (unattributed) from Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*.

Thirkell well knows her Bible, and quotes it freely and deftly - and obscurely. A vicar's wife at a meeting defiantly 'said, Ha-ha! inside herself'. This comes from the Book of Job, where a horse 'saith among the trumpets, Ha, ha; and he smelleth the battle afar off'. Perhaps not many people know that. Dominance is often described like that of the women's voluntary service leader 'to whom the buying and checking of goods to be sold from the hospital trolleys were her washpot and over the pricing and selling of them did she cast out her shoe': the surely obscure reference is to Psalm number 60.

Angela Thirkell's quotations may be not only unattributed but also deftly adapted for her purposes. 'Dawdle, the very word was like a knell,' to a schoolgirl, rather than 'Forlorn!', a very word said to be like a bell in Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale'. 'The gods are just and of our pleasant vices do occasionally make something quite amusing' (in King Lear those gods instead 'make instruments to plague us'). Charles Belton is told, 'Your brother was full of ancestral voices prophesying woe' rather than war, like those in 'Kubla Khan'. Quotations may even be mixed: 'The long winter of everyone's discontent like a very unpleasant snake dragged its slow length along' (Richard III meets Alexander Pope).

Quotations from the literature of other languages are thrown in by Thirkell with equal negligence. A couple walk in the 'white unfamiliar' winter landscape. She murmurs, 'It is all very solitaire et glacé'. He responds, 'If we are spectres évoquer-ing le passé, it is a very nice past'. They are quoting Paul Verlaine's poem, 'Colloque sentimental' - but not giving him the credit. For Latin: when a Canon hears Rose Fairweather prattle and laugh, 'an old tag from his schooldays came back to his mind', and he says, 'Lalage' - no more. The line invoked comes from Horace: 'Dulce ridentem Lalagen amabo, dulce loquentem'. To translate (taken from the Oxford dictionary of quotations): 'Still shall I love Lalage and her sweet laughter, Lalage and her sweet prattle'. Fittingly, the characters in these novels themselves indulge in conscious quoting and seeking of quotations, and many are keen crossword puzzle solvers!

We can surely absolve Thirkell of any intent to deceive, to appropriate all these quotations to appear as her own composition. Margaret Drabble raises these issues on the narrative of her latest novel, *The Seven Sisters*. In this, the narrator of Part III writes of the first part, supposedly her mother's diary:⁷

There's plagiarism in that document. When she says her tears were 'as hot as tea', that's plagiarism. She lifted that phrase out of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure island*. ... there may well be other bits of Goethe and Virgil hidden away, unacknowledged. I suppose they are well out of copyright, so in theory she has a right to do what she likes with them. It

makes me feel a bit uneasy, though.

A. S. Byatt is a writer who allows readers the opportunity for the exquisite pleasures of unaided discovery of sources, echoes, parallels. In Byatt's novel, *Possession*, Blanche Glover writes in her diary, in 1853, when the woman friend with whom she shares her house and life is receiving love-letters and being, she suspects, courted:⁸

So now we have a Prowler. Something is ranging and snuffing round our small retreat, trying the shutters and huffing and puffing inside the door. ... I shall nail some [ash berries and horseshoes] up now, to prevent passage, if I may. Dog Tray is nervous of prowlers. His hackles go up on his shoulders ... He gnashes the empty air.' And later: 'The Wolf is Gone from the Door. Dog Tray's hearth is his own.'

How wonderful to recall something similar, and turn to Virginia Woolf's *Flush*, the purported biography of Elizabeth Barrett's dog, to find, when Elizabeth is receiving letters from Robert Browning, this:⁹

Flush, as Miss Barrett read the little blotted sheet, heard a bell rousing him from his sleep; warning him of some danger; menacing his safety and bidding him sleep no more. ... Yet, he argued, what was there to be afraid of, so long as there was no change in Miss Barrett's life? ... So he would quieten himself, and try to believe ... that the enemy had gone. A man in a cloak, he imagined, a cowed and hooded figure, had passed, like a burglar, rattling the door, and finding it guarded, had slunk away defeated. The danger, Flush tried to make himself believe, had gone. The man had gone.

Moreover, Flush is actually supposed to be the puppy of Tray, Dr Mitford's dog - the name of Blanche Glover's dog likewise.

Even more deliciously, in Byatt's novel, *Babel Tower*, we find its heroine, Frederica, walking with her lover, when their great problem is his twin brother who also wants to make love to her.⁷ 'The rhythm of the striding, the warmth of her lively skin, bring poems into Frederica's mind.' Nine lines of one are quoted, with no source given. Diligent research, though, can discover them to be from a poem by Thomas Lovell Beddoes with the almost incredibly apt title, 'The Second Brother'!

The pleasure of such a literary discovery is intense. Does it outweigh the moral rights of authors to attribution of their work, all credit where credit is due?

References

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5. Barbara Pym, *An Unsuitable Attachment*, Dutton 1982, 252
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7. Margaret Drabble, *The Seven Sisters*, Viking, 2002
8. A. S. Byatt, *Possession*, Chatto & Windus 1990, 46-7
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– from *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* Vol. 34.4 pp 208-13, 2003