# Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age

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**Why Appropriation?**   The greatest book of uncreative writing has already been written. From 1927 to 1940, Walter Benjamin synthesized many ideas he'd been working with throughout his career into a singular work that came to be called *The Arcades Project.* Many have argued that it's nothing more than hundreds of pages of notes for an unrealized work of coherent thought, merely a pile of shards and sketches. But others have claimed it to be a groundbreaking one-thousand-page work of appropriation and citation, so radical in its undigested form that it's impossible to think of another work in the history of literature that takes such an approach. It's a massive effort: most of what is in the book was not written by Benjamin, rather he simply copied texts written by others from stack of library books, with some passages spanning several pages. Yet conventions remain: each entry is properly cited, and Benjamin's own "voice" inserts itself with brilliant gloss and commentary on what's being copied.

With all of the twentieth century's twisting and pulverizing of language and the hundreds of new forms proposed for fiction and poetry, it never occurred to anybody to grab somebody else's words and present them as their own. Borges proposed it in the form of Pierre Menard, but even Menard didn't copy—he just happened to write the same book that Cervantes did without any prior knowledge of it. It was sheer coincidence, a fantastic stroke of genius combined with a tragically bad sense of timing.  Benjamin's gesture raises many questions about the nature of authorship and ways of constructing literature: isn't all cultural material shared, with new works built upon

preexisting ones, whether acknowledged or not? Haven't writers been appropriating from time eternal? What about those well-digested strategies of collage and pastiche? Hasn't it all been done before? And, if so, is it necessary to do it again? What is the difference between appropriation and collage?

A good place to start looking for answers is in the visual arts, where appropriative practices have been tested and digested for the past century, particularly in the approaches of Duchamp and Picasso, both of whom were reacting to the previous century's shifts in industrial production and its subsequent technologies, particularly the camera. A useful analogy is Picasso as a candle and Duchamp as a mirror. The light of the candle draws us to its warm glow, holding us spellbound by its beauty. The cool reflectivity of the mirror pushes us away from the object, throwing us back on ourselves.  Picasso's *Still Life with Chair Caning* (1911–12) incorporates an industrially produced piece of oilcloth printed with an image of chair caning into its composition, and an actual rope is wrapped around the painting, framing the picture. Other elements include the letters *J, O, U*, presumably referencing the word *journal*. These elements intermingle with various painted human and still life forms in the painting, all done in the typical browns, grays, and whites of the cubist style. Picasso's painting is an example of what a painter generally does: like a bird constructing a nest, discreet elements are gathered and stitched together to create a harmonious whole. The fact that the collaged elements are not rendered by hand does not serve to disrupt the composition in any way; rather they reinforce the strength of it. Picasso struts his mastery over several mediums and methods, and we are justifiably impressed by his skill. Like a candle, *Still Life with Chair Caning* is a picture that draws you into its composition; clearly, you could spend a lot of time absorbed in this picture and basking in its warm glow.

Conversely, Duchamp's *Fountain* form, of just a few years later, 1917, is a urinal turned on its side, signed and put on a pedestal. Here, as opposed to Picasso, Duchamp appropriated an entire object, thus defamiliarizing and rendering this industrially produced fountain functionless. Unlike Picasso's constructive method, Duchamp didn't use collage to create a harmonious, compelling composition, rather he eschewed "the retinal" qualities to create an object that doesn't require a *viewership* as much as it does a *thinkership*; no one has ever stood wide-eyed before Duchamp's urinal admiring the quality and application of the glaze. Instead, Duchamp invokes the mirror, creating a repellent and reflective object, one that forces us to turn away in other directions. Where it sends us has been exhaustively documented. Broadly speaking, we could say that Duchamp's action is generative— spawning worlds of ideas—while Picasso's is absorptive, holding us close to the object and close to our own thoughts.  In literature, a similar comparison can be made in the constructive methodology of Ezra Pound's *Cantos* and the scrivenerlike process of Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Projects*.

The assemblage and collage quality of *The Cantos* stitches together thousands of lines, drawn from a number other sources, literary and nonliterary, all held in place with the glue of Pound's own language to create a unified whole. Like

a gleaner of history, he collects heaps of ephemera from the ages and sorts through it looking for the gems out of which he will construct his epic; sound, sight, and meaning coalesce, frozen in shimmering verse. Everything seems to have come from somewhere else, but it has been chosen with distinctive and carefully cultivated taste; his genius is in synthesizing found material into a cohesive whole. The flotsam includes offhanded notes, price lists, shards of language, erratic typography and odd spacing, chunks of correspondence, arcane legalese, slabs of dialogue, a dozen languages, and numerous unreferenced footnotes, to name a few, all bound together in a life's work. Written according to neither system or constraint, this rambling mess is remarkably sensuous. The result is an exquisitely built construction cobbled together by a master craftsman. We could say that, like Picasso, Pound's practice is synthetic, one that draws us in to tease out its puzzles and bask in the light of its sheer beauty. Pound does have clear ambitions and ideas— social and political, not to mention aesthetic—yet all these are so finely distilled and synthesized through his own filters that they become inseparable from his exquisite creation.  Benjamin, on the other hand, taking his cues from cinema, creates a work of literary montage, a disjunctive, rapid-fire juxtaposition of "small fleeting pictures." With some 850 sources crashed up against each other, Benjamin makes no attempt at unification, other than loosely organizing his citations by category. The scholar Richard Sieburth tells us that "of a quarter of a million words that comprise [this] edition, at least 75 percent are direct transcriptions of texts." As opposed to Pound, there is no attempt to blend the shards into a whole; instead there is an accumulation of language, most of it not belonging to Benjamin. Instead of admiring the author's synthetic skills, we are made to think about the exquisite quality of Benjamin's choices, his taste. It's what he selects to copy that makes this work successful. Benjamin's insistent use of fragmentary wholes does not make the text the final destination, rather, like Duchamp, we are thrown away from the object by the power of the mirror.

Both Pound's and Benjamin's writing methods are largely based on appropriating shards of language that they themselves didn't generate, yet they demonstrate two different approaches to constructing an appropriated text. Pound's is a more intuitive and improvisatory method of weaving textual fragments into a unified whole. Oftentimes it takes a great deal of Pound's intervening—finessing, massaging, and editing those found words—to make them all fit together just so. Benjamin's approach is more preordained: the machine that makes the work is set up in advance, and it's just a matter of filling up those categories with the right words, in the order in which they're found, for the work to be successful. You get the feeling that Benjamin didn't spent much time shifting around the fragments after he collected them for better effect, and there's even less of a feeling of improvisation or finessing. While it's impossible to determine Benjamin's exact methodology, the general consensus among scholars is that Arcades was sheaves of notes for a great, unrealized project that he planned to call *Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century*. And, although there are chapters and sketches for such a book, which boil the notes down into a well-argued, logical essay, such a reading of the final work denies that possibility. As Benjamin scholar Susan Buck-Morss says: "Every attempt to capture the *Passagen-Werk* within one narrative frame must lead to failure. The fragments plunge the interpreter into an abyss

of meanings, threatening her or him with an epistemological despair that rivals the melancholy of the Baroque allegoricists. . . . To say that the *Pasagen-Werk* has no necessary narrative structure so that the fragments can be grouped freely, is not at all to suggest that it has no conceptual structure, as if the meaning of the book were itself totally up to the capriciousness of the reader. As Benjamin said, a presentation of confusion need not be the same as a confused presentation." The book can be read (or misread, depending upon how you wish to frame it) as a stand-alone work. It is a book made up of refuse and detritus, writing history by paying attention to the margins and the peripheries rather than the center: bits of newspaper articles, arcane passages of forgotten histories, ephemeral sensations, weather conditions, political tracts, advertisements, literary quips, stray verse, accounts of dreams, descriptions of architecture, arcane theories of knowledge, and hundreds of other offbeat topics.  The book was constructed by reading through the corpus of literature about Paris in the nineteenth century. Benjamin simply copied down the passages that caught his attention on cards, which were then organized into general categories. Anticipating the instability of language in the later part of the twentieth century, the book had no fixed form. Benjamin would endlessly shuffle his note cards, transferring them from one folder to another. In the end, realizing that no passage could live forever in one category, he cross-referenced many entries, and those notations have traveled with the printed edition, making *The Arcades Project* an enormous proto-hypertextual work. With the inevitable printing of the book, the words were forced to settle down, as an editor pinned them to fixed entities on the page forever. What Benjamin intended as a final version was never made clear; instead, posterity has nailed his words down for him in the form of a one-thousand-page tome. Yet it's that mystery—was this the form he intended for his life's work?—that gives the book so much energy, so much life and play, some sixty years after it was written. In the ensuing half-century, all sorts of experiments in unfixed pages have occurred. Today, in places like Printed Matter and book arts exhibitions, it's not uncommon to find books comprised entirely of unbound sheets that purchasers may arrange according to their will. The catalogue to John Cage's retrospective *Rolywholyover* was one such book, with nearly fifty pieces of printed ephemera laid in, with no hierarchical order. The book embodies Cage's chance operations, a book without fixity or finality, a work in progress.

Even in its final form, *The Arcades Project* is a great to book bounce around in, flitting from page to page, like window-shopping, pausing briefly to admire a display that catches your eye without feeling the need to go into the store.  In "convolute G: Exhibitions, Advertising, Grandville," for example, opening the chapter at random, you stumble upon a quote from Marx about price tags and commodities, then, a few pages later, there's a description of a hashish vision in a casino; jump two pages ahead and you're confronted with the Blanqui's quote, "A rich death is a closed abyss." Quickly you move on to the next window. Because the book is ostensibly about the Parisian arcades—an early incarnation of the shopping mall—Benjamin encourages the reader to be a consumer of language the way we would allow ourselves to be seduced by any other commodity. Even in a bound form, far from the thousands of index cards that formed the basis for the work, the book's mystery remains intact. It's the sense of sheer bulk and abundance that makes it impossible to ever

finish; it's so rich and so dense that trying to read it induces amnesia—you're not sure whether you've already read this or that passage. It's really a text without end. What holds the work together—while at the same time ensuring that you remain lost—is the fact that many fragment entries are cross-referenced, seemingly to other chapters, but often lead to dead ends. For example, a citation about advertising and Jugendstil is appended with a cross-reference to "Dream Consciousness," a chapter that doesn't exist. Losing your way, or drifting, is part and parcel of the reading experience as its come to us in its finalized form, regardless of whether or not Benjamin's book is "unfinished." Instead, if you wanted to follow Benjamin's "hyperlink," you would have to choose between two chapters with the word *dream* in them: *Convolute K—Dream City and Dream House, Dreams of the Future, Anthroplogical Nihilism, Jung* or *Convolute L—Dream House, Museum, Spa.* Once you flipped forward to either of those chapters, you'd be hard-pressed to find any direct reference to advertising and Jugendstil. Instead, you'd most likely find yourself lost like a flaneur, drifting through those seemingly endless fascinating and engrossing chapters. In many ways, the way we read *The Arcades Project* points toward the way we have learned to use the Web: hypertexting from one place to another, navigating our way through the immensity of it; how we've become virtual flaneurs, casually surfing from one place to another; how we've learned to manage and harvest information, not feeling the need to read the Web linearly, and so forth. By having *The Arcades* published in book form as opposed to sheaves of loose note cards, Benjamin's work is frozen in a way that permits us to study it, a condition he called a constellation: "It's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present casts its light on what is past; rather what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation." Following Benjamin's death in 1940, his friend Georges Bataille, who was an archivist and librarian at the Bibliothèque Nationale, stashed Benjamin's unpublished sheaves of note cards deep in an archive where it remained safely hidden until after the war. It wasn't until the 1980s that a manuscript was constructed, after years of piecing it together into a solid form or constellation. The Web can be seen as having a similar constellation-like construction. Let's say that you're reading a newspaper online. When you load the page, it's pulling from a myriad of servers across the Web to form the constellation of that page: ad servers, image servers, RSS feeds, databases, style sheets, templates, and so forth. All those component servers, too, are connected to a myriad of other servers across the Web, which feed them updated content. Chances are that the newspaper you're reading online has an AP news feed integrated into that page, which is dynamically updated by various servers to deliver you the breaking headlines. If one or more of those servers goes down, a chunk of the page you're trying to access won't load. It's a miracle that it works at all. Any given Web page is a constellation, coming together in a flash—and potentially disappearing as fast. Refresh the front page of, say, the *New York Times* site and it won't look the same as it did just seconds ago.

That Web page, in constellation-like form, is what Benjamin calls a "dialectical image," a place where past and present momentarily fuse together temporarily create an image (in this case the image of the Web page). He also posits that "the place where one encounters [the dialectical image] is language." When we write a book, we construct it in dialectical manner, not too different from a

Web page, by pulling together strands of knowledge (personal, historical, speculative, etc.) into a constellation that finds its fixed form as a book. And since the Web is comprised of alphanumeric code, we can posit the Web—with its digital text, image, video, and sound—as one massive Benjaminian dialectical image.  In Benjamin's *Arcades Project* we have a literary roadmap for appropriation, one that is picked up across the twentieth century by writers as such as Brion Gysin, William Burroughs, and Kathy Acker, to name but a few, and one that points toward the more radically appropriative texts being produced today. Yet, contrary to Benjamin's groundbreaking forays into appropriation, the twentieth century embraced and ran with the fragmentary, not the whole, playing itself out into smaller and smaller bits of shattered language. *The Arcades* still deals in fragments—although large ones, sometimes running for several pages at a time—rather than in wholes: Benjamin never copied the entirety of someone else's book and claimed it as his own. And, for all his professed love of copying, there is still a great deal of authorial intervention and "original genius" in the book. It makes me wonder, then, if his book could really be termed appropriation, or if it wasn't just another variant on fragmented modernism.  Things get tricky when we try to nail down exactly what literary appropriation is. We could try to use my own appropriated work *Day* (2003) as a test case. I wanted to see if I could create a work of literature using the most minimal amount of intervention possible, by recasting the text from one entity into another (from a newspaper into a book). When reset as a book, would the newspaper have literary properties that we're not able to see during our daily reading of it?

The recipe for my appropriation seems direct and simple enough: "On Friday, September 1, 2000, I began retyping the day's *New York Times*, word for word, letter for letter, from the upper left hand corner to the lower right hand corner, page by page." My goal was to be as uncreative as possible, one of the hardest constraints an artist can muster, particularly on a project of this scale; with every keystroke comes the temptation to fudge, cut and paste, and skew the mundane language. But to do so would be to foil the exercise. Instead, I simply made my way through the entire newspaper, typing exactly what I saw. Every place where there was an alphanumeric word or letter, I retyped it: advertising, movie timetables, the numbers of a license plate on a car ad, the classifieds, and so forth. The stock quotes alone ran for more than two hundred pages.  Sounds simple, right? Yet, in order for me to simply "appropriate" the newspaper and turn it into a work of literature, it involved dozens of authorial decisions. First came lifting the text off the page of the newspaper and getting it into my computer. But what to do with the font, font sizes, and formatting? If I remove the images (while grabbing the texts embedded in the images, such as the numbers on the license plate in a car ad), I still must keep the captions. Where do the line breaks occur? Do I remain faithful to the slim columns or do I flow each article into one long paragraph? What about the pull quotes: where do those lines break? And how do I make my way around a page? I know I have a rough rule to move from the upper left corner to the lower right, but where do I go when I reach the end of a column and it says "continued on page 26"? Do I go to page 26 and finish the article or do I jump to the adjacent column and start another article? And, when I make those jumps, do I add another line break or do I flow the text continuously? How do I treat the advertisements, which often have playful text elements of

varying fonts and styles? Where do line breaks occur in an ad where words float about a page? And what about the movie timetables, the sports statistics, the classified ads? In order to proceed, I have to build a machine. I have to answer each question and set up a number of rules that I must then strictly follow.  And once the text is entered into my computer, what font do I choose to reset the piece in, and what statement will that make about my book's relationship to the *New York Times*? The obvious decision would be to use the font called "Times New Roman"? But, by doing that, I might lend the original publication more credibility than I wish to give it, making my book appear more like a replica of the newspaper than a simulacrum. Perhaps it would be better if I skirted the issue entirely by using a sans serif font like Verdana. But, if I use Verdana, a font designed specifically for the screen and licensed by Microsoft, will that push my book too much toward paper/screen battle? And why would I want to give Microsoft any more support than they already have? (I ended up giving it a serif font, Garamond, which alluded to the *Times*, but was not Times New Roman.)  Then there are there are dozens of paratextual decisions: what size is the book going to be and how will that impact the reception of the book? I know that I want it to be big, to reflect the massive size of the day's newspaper, but if I make it coffee table sized, I risk getting close to the paper's original format, which would run contrary to my wanting to represent the newspaper as a literary object. Conversely, if I made it too small, say, the size of Chairman Mao's *Little Red Book*, it would be cute and perhaps be seen as a novelty you might pick up next to the cash register at your local Barnes and Noble. (I ended up making it the exact size and bulk of the paperbound Harvard edition of *The Arcades Project*.)  What paper stock will the book be printed on? If I print it on too fine a stock, it runs the risk of being seen as a deluxe artist's book, something that only a few people can afford. And since the project was based on the reinterpretation and redistribution of a mass media product, I felt that as many people should have the book as wanted it for an affordable price. Yet, if I printed it on newsprint, it would allude too closely to the actual paper, thus running the risk of being a facsimile edition. (In the end, I just went with a generic plain white stock.)  What will the cover look like? Should I use an image from the day's paper? Or replicate the day's front page? No. That would be too literal and illustrative. I wanted something that would signify the paper, not replicate the paper. (I went with no image, just a dark blue cover with the word "Day" in a white sans serif font and my name below it in a serif font printed in sky blue.)  How much should be book sell for? Limited edition artist's books sell for thousands of dollars. I knew that I didn't want to go down that road. Ultimately, I decided that it should be published as an 836-page book in an edition of 750, selling for $20.

Once those formal decisions are made, there are ethical issues to consider. If I truly "appropriate" this work, then I must faithfully copy/write every word of the newspaper. No matter how tempted I might be to alter the words of a disagreeable politician or film critic, I cannot do so without undermining the strict "wholes" that appropriation trucks in. My aim was to be as uncreative as possible; this was the hardest part of the task, for with every keystroke came the "creative" urge to fudge, skew, intervene. So, for a simple appropriation, it's not so simple. There were as many decisions, moral quandaries, linguistic preferences, and philosophical dilemmas as there are in an original or

collaged work.  And yet I still trumpet the work's "valuelessness," its "nutritionlessness," its lack of creativity and originality when clearly the opposite is true. In truth, I'm not doing much more than trying to catch literature up with appropriative fads the art world moved past decades ago. There may, in fact, be a lot of truth when my detractors claim that I'm not that radical, that my name is still on these objects, and all those decisions are so much in the service of upholding notions of my own genius. For an egoless project, there sure is a lot of investment in me here. One prominent blogger acutely commented, "Kenny Goldsmith's actual art project is the projection of Kenny Goldsmith."  But, during the twentieth century, the art world was full of such gestures, artists like Elaine Sturtevant, Louise Lawler, Mike Bidlo, or Richard Pettibon who, for the past several decades, have recreated the works of other artists, claiming them as their own, and they have long been absorbed into a legitimized practice. How can younger writers proceed in an entirely new way, using current technologies and modes of distribution? Perhaps a glimmer into the battlegrounds of the future was perceived when three young, anonymous writers edited the now infamous *Issue 1*, a 3,785-page unauthorized and unpermissioned anthology, "written" by 3,164 poets whose poems were actually authored not by the poets to whom they were attributed. Instead, the poems were generated by computer, which randomly synced each author with a poem. Stylistically, it made no sense: a well-known traditional poet was paired with a radically disjunctive poem penned by a computer and vice versa. The intention of *Issue 1*'s creators was to provoke, along many fronts. Could the largest anthology of poetry ever written be pieced together without anyone's knowledge and distributed worldwide overnight? Could this gesture cause an instant literary scandal? Does it matter if poets write their own poems anymore or is it good enough for a computer to pen them for them? Why where those specific 3,164 poets chosen and not the thousands of other poets writing in the English language today? What did it mean to be included? What did it mean to be excluded? And who was behind this? Why were they doing it? With its conceptually based agenda and denial of the traditional methods of creation, distribution, and authorship, *Issue 1* shares many of the touchstones of uncreative writing.  Yet it wasn't so much the stylistics that raised eyebrows, it was the mechanics of it—the distribution and the notification—which riled the "contributors." The work was stitched into a massive PDF, which was placed on a media server late one evening. Many people found about their inclusion the first thing in the morning, when finding that the Google Alert they had set for their name had notified them that they were included in a major new anthology. Clicking on the link brought them to the anthology, whereupon, downloading it, they found their name attached to a poem they didn't write. Like wildfire, reaction spread through the community: Why was I in it? Why wasn't I in it? Why was my name matched with that poem? Who was responsible for this act? Half the "contributors" was delighted to be included and the other half was wildly angered. Several of the poets included said that they would include the poem ascribed to them in their next collection. Speaking on behalf of the disgruntled authors whose reputations for genius and authenticity were sullied was blogger and poet Ron Silliman, who said, "*Issue 1* is what I would call an act of anarcho-flarf vandalism. . . . Play with other people's reps at your own risk."

He went on to cite a lawsuit in which he and a group of authors won a great

sum of money for copyright infringement back in the seventies, suggesting that such a gesture might be a good idea for those scammed by *Issue 1*. Addressing the creators of *Issue 1*, Silliman strikes an ominous tone, stating, "As I certainly did not write the text associated with my name on page 1849 . . . I don't think you wrote your work either." And yet, does Silliman really write his own work? Like many poets, the answer is both yes and no. Over the past forty years, one of the main goals in Silliman's practice has been to challenge the notion of a stable, authentic authorial voice. His poems are comprised of shards of language, stray sentences and observations that keep the reader guessing at their origins. Silliman often uses "I," but it's not clear that it's really him speaking. An early poem, "Berkeley," explicitly challenges authorial singularity. In a 1985 interview, he says: "In 'Berkeley,' where every line is a statement beginning with the word 'I,' something very similar occurs. Most of the lines are found materials, very few of which are from any one source, and they're ordered so as to avoid as much as possible any sense of narrative or normative exposition. Yet by sheer juxtaposition these reiterated 'I's form into a character, a felt presence which is really no more than an abstraction of a grammatical feature. . . . And this presence, in turn, impacts significantly on how a given line is read or understood, which can be vastly different from its meaning within its original context." Bob Perlman, writing about "Berkeley," reiterates Silliman's claims, "An early poem such as 'Berkeley' . . . seems specifically to destroy any reading which would produce a unified subject. The poems consists of a hundred or so first-person sentences whose mechanical aspect—each starts with 'I'—makes them impossible to unite: 'I want to redeem myself / I can shoot you / I've no idea really / I should say it is not a mask / I must remember another time / I don't want to know you / I'm not dressed / I had to take the risk / I did look / I don't care what you make of it / I am outside the sun / I still had what was mine / I will stay here and die / I was reinforced in this opinion / I flushed it down the toilet / I collapsed in my chair / I forgot the place, sir.'" For a poet who has spent much of his time dismantling a stable authorship, Sillman's response to *Issue 1* is indeed puzzling. Doesn't *Issue 1* extend Silliman's ethos to logical ends? As there really wasn't much to discuss about the poems—in regard to everything else going on about this gesture, they seemed pretty irrelevant—we were forced to consider the conceptual apparatus that the anonymous authors had set into motion. With one gesture, they had swapped the focus *from content to context*, showing us what it might mean to be a poet in the digital age. Being a poet in any age—digital or analog—places one's practice outside normative economies, theoretically enabling the genre to take risks that more lucrative ventures wouldn't. Just as we've seen some of the most adventurous linguistic experimentation in the past century in poetry, its now poised to do the same when it comes to notions of authorship, publishing, and distribution as proved by the *Issue 1*'s provocations. At the center of it all is appropriation. The twentieth century's fuss over authorial authenticity seems tame compared to what is going on here. Not only are the texts themselves appropriated, but that is compounded by the appropriation of names and reputations, randomly synced with poems that were not written by the authors so linked. It's the largest anthology of poetry ever compiled and it was distributed to thousands one weekend from a blog and then commented upon endlessly on other blogs and subsequently in the comments streams of those blogs. The candle has blown out, and we're left with a hall of mirrors. In fact, the Web has become a

mirror for the ego of an absent but very present author. If Benjamin made writing safe for appropriation, and my own analog works have extended his project by borrowing in book-length form, then projects like *Issue 1* move the discourse into the digital age, greatly broadening appropriative possibilities in scale and scope, dealing a knockout blow to notions of traditional authorship. To dismiss this as simply an "act of anarcho-flarf vandalism" is to miss the wakeup call of this gesture, that the digital environment has completely changed the literary playing field, in terms of both content and authorship. In a time when the amount of language is rising exponentially, combined with greater access to the tools with which to manage, manipulate, and massage those words, appropriation is bound to become just another tool in the writers' toolbox, an acceptable—and accepted—way of constructing a work of literature, even for more traditionally oriented writers. When accused of "plagiarism" in his latest novel, which was called a "work of genius" by the newspaper *Libération*, the best-selling French author Michel Houellebecq claimed it as such: "If these people really think that [this is plagiarism], they haven't got the first notion of what literature is. . . . This is part of my method. . . . This approach, muddling real documents and fiction, has been used by many authors. I have been influenced especially by [Georges] Perec and [Jorge Luis] Borges. . . . I hope that this contributes to the beauty of my books, using this kind of material."

**Related Subjects**

- Literary Criticism and Theory
- Literary Studies
- Poetry

**About the Author**

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