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Crimes of letters: the crow, the fox and me

Abstract:

All aesthetics of appropriation entail acts of transgression predicated on the art of citational writing, from allusion to punning, quotation, pastiche, parody, sampling, remix and homage. ‘Citational writing underscores the double movement of quotation,’ writes Della Pollock in a now famous paper on performativity (Pollock 1998: 94), affirming that ‘it stages its own citationality, re-sighting citation, displaying it in an accumulation of quotations or self quotations ... with the primary effect of reclaiming citation for *affiliation*’ (Pollock 1998: 94, my emphasis). As such, aesthetics of appropriation presuppose the existence of both Other and other and cannot be deemed nihilistic as has often been suggested, especially in the context of critiques of postmodernism. Notwithstanding their intent, aesthetics of appropriation tacitly attribute to language both an evocative and communicatory dimension. But what lies beyond the drive for ‘affiliation’ intimated by Pollock? ‘Crimes of letters: the crow, the fox and me’ explores the kinship between textuality and felony—real or imagined—within the authorised context of the reader-response contract, however misprisoned. The wager of this ‘creative artful fact,’ otherwise called artefact, is for ‘authorised theft’ to exceed what one might be reluctant to call ‘original’ material after Harold Bloom returned the course of philological forays into textual begetting back to anxieties of influence (Bloom 1973).

Biographical note:

Dominique Hecq has a background in literary studies, psychoanalysis and translation. *Towards a Poetics of Creative Writing* (2015) explores creative writing in the academy as an avenue for investigations of creativity while examining the relevance of psychoanalysis for the arts. She has published thirteen major creative works of which *Stretchmarks of Sun* (2014) is a companion piece to *Out of Bounds* (2009). *Hush* is coming out next year and *Swarm* is, along with other original works and translations, in preparation.

Keywords:

Aesthetics of appropriation – allusion – citation – sampling – parody

Crimes of letters: the crow, the fox and me

... voices are the same to-day as they were 2,000 years ago—Woolf

chè, per tornare alquanto a mia memoria
e per sonare un poco in questi versi,
più si conceperà di tua vittoria—Dante

Ἀμφὶ δὲ ψῦχρον κελάδει δι' ὕσδων
μαλίνων, αἰθυσσομένων δὲ φύλλων
κῶμα καταρρεῖ—Sappho

As we get older we do not get any younger.

Seasons return, and today I am fifty-five,

And this time last year I was fifty-four,

And this time next year I shall be sixty-two. [1]

So, yes, you've guessed. It's my birthday. The fifty-fifth one. It's I'm waiting for T. Fox to take me out for a drink. It's an old tradition, even though we haven't seen each other for twenty-one years. T. Fox, you see, is my brother, but we live, well ... worlds apart. T. Fox is a lawyer now. He specialises in Copyright Law. He lives in a city situated in the department of the Aisne, in the administrative region of Picardy, called Château-Thierry.

I've been in good company all day, answering emails, marking essays, ranking applications, reviewing papers, reading manuscripts. Annotating them in pencil (by hand) or in track changes (by what is spuriously called 'digital medium'). I've been footnoting them. Colour-coding them, knowing full well it's easy to forget or lose 'an occasional footnote.' [2] Knowing full well that memory is not what it used to be. Knowing full well that my words will be appropriated in endnotes, but that's my function. Good company, indeed. The evidence is all around me: piles of paper lining the desk. And strewn on the floor, too. I've got a PhD to examine, but I'm not in the right space for that kind of work. How about a story?

Just after May 68 in what is now known as Zombie Land, Foxybaby sat in her grandma's living room, bored stiff. [3] It had been a busy time, especially for the police—with the students' uprising, the lootings and the riots. But then the city was flat as a tack, and too young at **thirteen years of age** to make her mark in the real world, Foxy was looking for a thrill. It was in the air, of course—you might remember that Lacan, Barthes and Foucault had put their own spin on the word *jouissance* a couple years back—for as long as she'd been twisting and twisting again to the music she heard on the wireless. [4]

Foxybaby's gran, being a school mistress, had a rare collection of musty old books from Corneille to Rimbaud, whose *Saison en enfer / A season in hell* was covered in brown paper and thus unnamed and untitled and greatly appealing. But Rimbaud and his *bateau ivre / drunken boat* made no sense to Foxy who, though already practised in matters of discipline, was hankering after a new order. [5] Neither did Racine, Chateaubriand or Corneille. Racine was mortally rooted in Antiquity, Chateaubriand had long been buried beyond any hope of resuscitation with his *Mémoires d'outre-tombe / Memoirs from Beyond the Grave* and Corneille was just *cornu / cuckolded; un corniaud / fuckwit, et un cornichon / jerk*, which was worse than a *corps nu / naked body*. French literature was far from a bed of roses, as you can fathom from these putative autofictional fragments. One author, though, was more alluring: this was Jean de La Fontaine, with the promise of drink for thought filtering from his patronym.

Oh, no! Here comes Mr Fox half-way up my thirty-nine steps.* Bet you he won't knock.

Hey! Long time no see.

(Told you so)

Come in. Come in.**

You're not doing your tax, are you?

Hell, no. I was just getting in the mood for a story.

Ah! Must be a loooong one, T. says ogling the piles of paper littering the floor.

No, no, no. These are student essays.

Essays! Fancy that. Did you know I run an essay re-writing business in my spare time? Mostly at week-ends, of course.

You mean you re-write students' essays?

Any fricking essay.

I see. Must be quite an art.

Very lucrative.

Heck, I'd be rich!

Wow. Wow. Wow. No sweat.

No sweat? I do this for free, man. Day in day out. Night and day. Sunday. Christmas day. New year's day. Valentine's day. Dead heart's day. Shrove Thursday. Easter Monday. Pancake day. Anzac day. Reconciliation day. D day. Any eFFing day back to Birth Day.

Wow. Wow. Wow. Cool down.

It's quite funny, actually.

Meaning?

Well, you seem to sign documents you don't write and write documents you don't sign.

Ha ha . . . so it is.

Do you remember when I used to sign your reports?

Nope.

Really?

Oh! I do. I do. ~~I do. I do. I do.~~*** After that illiterate brick-laying chap got back to me.

Hmm?

He used to bury his crusts and cheese rinds in the same spot I'd bury my failed tests. And one day he presented the *pater familias* with one of my essays—four out of ten. After that you signed all the bad ones so I wouldn't be belted.

That signature was illegible.

But you were brilliant. You could have done a Dali.****

Hardly worth the praise. Hang on. What chap?

You know, the one we used to call *simplet*. A bit thick.

Why would he have wanted to get back to you?

Telling on him.

For?

For molesting me. Christ! Can't you remember? I do and I was only six. It's the other fellow, though, who told dad. Curly.

And so the plot thickens.

A historical crime.

Two.

Yours was hysterical.

A mythdemeanour.

Exactly. You were rewriting Greek tragedy.

But he was mean.

I know, *nihil humanum a me alienum*.

Let's go for a drink.

[Foxy and T. Fox enjoyed a few at 'Naked Satan,' a tapas bar in Brunswick Street, Fitzroy, but for obvious reasons, the conversation could neither be recorded nor remembered. Yellow roses in a tall red vase adorn the paper-crowded desk. Provenance unaccounted for.]

T Fox crashed on my floor. Truth is, given his current standards he's ensconced in the bedroom, so let's resume our story. But first, let me acquaint you with La Fontaine.

Jean de La Fontaine (1621-95): poet and fabulist born at Château-Thierry, Champagne, France, Europe, the world, where his father was director of *Eaux et Forêts*. [6] La Fontaine contemplated the priesthood, but studied law instead so that he could enjoy life thanks to the patronage of noble men and women. Self-described as ‘*papillon de Parnasse*’ / ‘Parnassus butterfly’ he touched (on) Plato, Plutarch and the Latin poets to Boccaccio and Ariosto, but most famously Aesop. He gathered the nectar of French Men of Letters from Marot to Malherbe and settled on Voiture, Baruch [7] and *L’Astrée* by d’Urfé before moving on and up, up, up into the republic of letters with these fluttering hands and flighty fingers of his.

Thus, Foxybaby in her grandma’s living room, bored, would copy out La Fontaine’s fables into a blue ledger with her Waterman fountain pen. Calligraphy was paramount. Illustrations optional. With each tale set blue on white, Foxybaby would then learn it by heart. And after dinner, the fable of the day would take root in her memory as she’d repeat each verse in cadence with the flow of blood from her heart to the signifier ‘rote’ after much deferral and difference. To this day only three fables stick in Foxy’s memory, ‘*Le chêne et le roseau*,’ ‘*La cigale et la fourmi*,’ and ‘*Le corbeau et le renard*’. Foxy discards the first because of the obvious autobiographical parable it has become with its tacit patricidal fantasy. She discards the second, too, because it derides the arts in favour of utilitarianism. ‘*Le corbeau et le renard*’ remains, which comes as no surprise. Always a favourite, it underwent a few transformations as Foxy learned the sad facts of life and spurious ways of literature. Here it is in translation:

The crow and the fox

Master Crow perched on a tree,
Was holding a cheese in his beak.
Master Fox attracted by the smell
Said something like:
‘Well, Hello Mister Crow!
How beautiful you are! how nice you seem to me!
Really, if your voice
Is like your plumage,
You are the phoenix of all the inhabitants of these woods.’
At these words, the Crow is overjoyed.
And in order to show off his beautiful voice,
He opens his beak wide and his prey falls.
The Fox grabs it, and says: ‘My good man,
Learn that every flatterer
Lives at the expense of the one who listens to him.
This lesson is well worth a cheese.’
The Crow, ashamed and embarrassed,
Swore, but a little late, that he would not be taken again. [8]

La Fontaine's fable '*Le corbeau et le renard*' is often attached to the name of Aesop, a Greek fabulist and slave whose works turn out to be a compendia of traditional and exotic tales and thus multi-authored. In translation, the fable's title is unstable, sometimes appearing as 'The raven and the fox,' sometimes as 'The crow and the fox,' to serve English prosody rules better, but more often than not as 'The fox and the crow' compounding the crime against the original by replacing the raven with a smaller bird (from a different species) and displacing the focus from bird to mammal in keeping with the patriarchal order. The fable's meaning is, of course, open to discussion, but one version endures thanks to pedagogical notes intended for francophone and Francophile essay writers from seven to seventy-seven years of age.***** The poem, a commentary on the animal proclivities of human beings, is usually considered as a cautionary tale against listening to flatterers. This concurs with Phaedrus' interpretation of Aesop's version he transmits in a Latin poem prefaced with "the warning that the one 'who takes delight in treacherous flattery usually pays the penalty by repentance and disgrace'." But this also eludes La Fontaine's social critique of class-structures in seventeenth century France and his ironic yet bitchy allusion to the art of his literary rival Pierre Corneille (1606-84). [9]

As far as Foxy is concerned, the fascination endured because of the irony at the heart of the fable: ravens and crows are reputed for their shady activities, and so are foxes. Ravens and crows are associated with death and dishonesty while foxes are renowned for repressing transgressions of the law, indeed, for covertly exploiting this. One thing leading to another, Foxy appropriated the tale for punning and parodic purposes. The *corbeau* and the *renard* morphed into the *cornard* and the *robeau*, who, following the lawless laws of the signifier soon evolved teleologically and technologically into the *robot* and the *connard* in a modern tale of the fall. As the Zombie critic Mark Raverobber put it in a nutshell:

The *robot* and the *connard*, to whom god had bequeathed a beautiful garden turned the earth air fire and water into some Oulipian playground and surreptitiously changed their names to Roubeau and Cornard. Cok! Cok! [10] Needless to say, in this garden, the apple tasted of letters. (Raverobber 2016: x)

More recently, incensed by some matter at work, Vixen wrote a loose version of the fable. It is still very much a work in progress, but its cathartic function now fulfilled, I reproduce it here—

[T. Fox interrupts]

Hell low, hello!

Geez, you look like death warmed up.

Do I?

Or at least you seem to reappear from some buried life. [11]

Not at all! I find the world ... wonderful and youthful. [12]

I was just about to...

You, on the other hand...

Shut up. Listen to this. I was just about to quote—for your enjoyment:

Between the crow and the fox

The crow, swivelling on her ergonomic
chair all day processed procedures.

Perdita, knowing she was being spied
on by multi-eyed creepy-crawlies asked

bOldly: what is it that you want from me? *****

The crow twiddled her thumbs, then answered:
you think you can hobby-horse all day, eat
your cake and have it too while we bust our arses
here to get a word right for your VERS option
failing your Impact Stella consumption. [sic]

Sighting P.0011 bobbing up from her field
of signs, Mr Fox approached her furtively
from behind. And, snap, gobbled her up whole.

Moraliy: to ensure the fair umpiring of impressionable subjects, best stick to your Chair. [13]

What's verse?

Oh, VERS is corporate speak for Voluntary Early Retirement Scheme eeeeeek...

Are you ok?

Don't you like it? Miscreation post everything?

Post everything?

Literature, Criticism. Theory. Blah blah blah. Composition, my friend, is the art of feigning.
You don't get it: 'Let's pretend!' That was Alice, by the way. I'm so dizzy. [14] Look, the
police with their crooked beaks are at the door. And so cocky! Or so they think. But nobody
can outdo Chauntecleer.

Not sure I follow...

Follow the word, my friend. The spectral paradigm of my lucubrations. No one owns words,
especially not in the duplicitous library of fiction. Hang on, is this a quote?

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You remind me of that chap who wrote a poem full of quotations to deride those who quote ad libitum. [15]

Presumably some perverse personality impersonator, or like me, an identity thief.

Wow Wow! *Arrête ton char!* You're not stealing anything. The moment we start speaking we start stealing. I mean when's the last time anybody came up with an original idea?

Ah. Good question. Who knows what's being rewritten here deliberately or inadvertently. [16]

I think you need help.

I'm a simulation faking not the autobiographical component of this text but rather its immediacy. I'm a transgeneric transchronotopic pseudo statement and you are a ghost.

You're insane.

And you are dead.

And now, 'You! hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère' [17], thank you for the roses, but I have a crow to pluck with you: I seem to have been erased quite dramatically. Your capricious *trompe l'oeil*?

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Notes, sources and errata

[†] Epigraphs work as epitaphs here. They are sourced as per Works Cited. Translations for the Italian verses runs as follows: 'since, if you return but briefly to my mind / and then resound but softly in these lines, / the better will your victory be conceived (Hollander & Hollander 2008: 913).' And for the Greek: 'And in it cold water makes a clear sound through / apple branches and with roses the whole place / is shadowed and down from radiant-shaking leaves / sleep comes dropping.' (Anne Carson 2000: 23). The original Greek verses are taken from <http://inamidst.com/stuff/sappho/>

[1] See Reed 1941: 533.

Very much inclined to self-irony, TS Eliot enjoyed Reed's famous parody of 'Four Quartets'. He writes: 'Most parodies of one's own work strike one as very poor. In fact one is apt to think one could parody oneself much better. (As a matter of fact some critics have said that I have done so.) But there is one which deserves the success it has had, Henry Reed's 'Chard Whitlow' (McDonald 1961: 219).

[2] The original sentence is: 'Blue acidulously echoes Oscar Wilde in this regard: "[W]e may regretfully accept the loss of an occasional footnote. More difficult to understand is how he could have lost all of them".' It comes from a communal blog where one case of academic plagiarism is discussed by philosophy students with reference to a review of the offending

book by a certain Daniel Bue. See <http://www.newappsblog.com/2011/11/what-julian-young-must-do.html> accessed 30.05.16

[3] Foxybaby is a character out of Elizabeth Jolley's eponymous work of fiction. See Jolley 1985.

[4] 'Twist again' was all over the air waves with Sylvie Vartan breaking onto the scene of popular music together with Johnny Halliday and France Gal and Serge Gainsbourg. I'm a live tissue of quotations and a dancing one at that. How texts are made to behave and misbehave! See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CV9le2Fj68I>

Sylvie Vartan clearly impersonates my younger self. In the background, you've rightly identified Georges Bataille. No forensic research, though, will pinpoint that in the foreground, the plump woman's hairdo belongs to my mother. The sunglasses sported by the sax player are a lend from Michel Foucault.

[5] *The Drunken Boat* (1871) and *A Season In Hell* (1873) are masterpieces by French poet Arthur Rimbaud. The first is a long narrative poem describing the drifting and sinking of a boat lost at sea in a fragmented first-person narrative. The second is a vividly surreal prose poem sequenced like a dream. Both have had a huge impact on all the arts in France and beyond

[6] a. The reader will no doubt recognise the homage to Stephen Daedalus' first attempt at articulating a poetics of place in James Joyce's *A Portrait Of The Artist As A Young Man* (1969 [1916]).

b. The author certainly enjoys the conjunction of names embedded in La Fontaine's birth place, combining as they do the signifiers for her late brother on the one hand and her favourite beverage on the other.

c. '*Eaux et Forêts*' literally means 'Waters and Woods' (trans).

[7] La Fontaine was so taken by a chance encounter with the prayer of the Jews in the book of Baruch that he asked to all and sundry: '*Avez-vous lu Baruch?*' / 'Have you read Baruch?' And so in French, 'Baruch' now refers to a sudden, striking discovery—an institutionalised act of literary larceny, as it were.

[8] From a strictly historical perspective, this act of treason is my last crime as regards the original poem in French available from the well-loved cheap paperback edition *Le livre de poche* (La Fontaine 1972: 20).

The anonymous English translation is untitled and quite literal and has therefore be titled to mirror the French and reproduced here with minor changes to improve style see <http://www.jdlf.com/lesfables/livre/lecorbeauetlerenard> accessed 23.05.16

[9] This I wouldn't know had I not listened to my teachers, as Foxy did, all these years ago, especially before I could check my facts on the internet and shamelessly source a quote by Phaedrus from Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Fox_and_the_Crow_\(Aesop\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Fox_and_the_Crow_(Aesop)) accessed 14.06.16

[10] 'Cok, cok,' Chauntecleer has seen the fox.' See Chaucer 'The nun's priest tale' in Hurt Fisher 1977: 3286. The fox, here too, is to deceive the bird through flattery, addressing him as 'gentle sire' as per the courtly tradition Chaucer is mocking.

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[11] The words ‘buried life’ are taken from line 53 of T.S. Eliot’s ‘Portrait of a Lady’, itself a veiled allusion to Matthew Arnold’s poem ‘Buried Life’. In Eliot’s poem the words refer to the loss of erotic life whereas in Arnold’s these merely point to the inward life. See Eliot 1963: 18-22 and Arnold 1903: 109.

[12] ‘I feel immeasurably at peace, and find the world / To be wonderful and youthful, after all’ are lines 54 and 55 from T.S. Eliot’s ‘Portrait Of A Lady’ (1963: 20).

[13] See Aka 2016: 13.

[14] See the beautifully illustrated *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-glass* (Carroll 1992: 173).

[15] The poem ‘On poetry’ (1733) lampoons writers who ‘quote quotation on quotation’ (Redfern 1989: 77).

[16] The phrase here heavily relies on Ken Ruthven’s ‘who knows what text was being rewritten here deliberately or inadvertently’ in regards to ‘fantasies of originality’ (Ruthven 2001: 144).

[17] Line 76 of Eliot’s 1922 poem ‘The Waste Land,’ which ends *Part I*: ‘*You! hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère*’ is--minus the interpellation ‘You!’-- sampled from Baudelaire’s ‘Au lecteur,’ the poem which prefaces *Les Fleurs du mal*, first published in 1857.

[18] One more thing as the child says at bed time (oh no! taking the words from the babe’s mouth now), you might like to change the title of this piece to ‘Crimes of litters,’ dear reader (be sure to acknowledge Mr Joyce), though the last interpretive act is yours, of course.

Omissions

At the time of going to print the present author realises that some obscure allusions or citations may have been omitted inadvertently. They are as follows, though there may be more—the thought of plagiarising ‘is calibrated to induce an indestructible anxiety about and towards *letters and their malign powers of repetition*’ (Clemens 2005: 101. Italics in the text):

* The Thirty-Nine Steps is a novel by the Scottish author John Buchan. The novel was adapted for the screen, notably by Alfred Hitchcock in 1935. Other versions were produced subsequently.

** ‘Come in, come in,’ is lifted from the British television series ‘Black Books,’ Season 1, Episode 1, ‘Cooking the books’ in which Bernard is struggling to cope with getting down to doing his Tax when a chance encounter with Jehovah witnesses turns out to be most welcome.

*** ‘I do. I do. I do. I do. I do,’ is an annoying earworm grown from a 1975 Abba song bearing that title.

**** Salvator Dali famously used to sign blank pieces of paper to enable printmakers to fabricate their own ‘Dalis.’

***** Hergé’s comics *Tintin* used to be advertised as being suitable for a readership ranging from seven to seventy-seven.

***** This is a reference to Jacques Lacan's Other as approached in 'Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious' through reference to 'Che vuoi?' In the Lacanian analytic experience, the analyst occupies the position of the Other, of whom the analysand presumably asks 'what do you want from me?' once the transference is established. This triggers the analysis proper. See Lacan's 'The subversion of the subject and the dialectic of desire in the Freudian unconscious' (2006 [1960]: 671-702.

Research Statement

Recent research in creative writing focuses on genetic criticism and attendant practices as developed in the field of philology, and, later literary studies in the Twentieth century and beyond. 'Crimes of letters: the crow, the fox and me' explores the kinship between textuality, origin, and originality. In particular, it teases out the link between authorised theft and its shady manifestations in the context of the reader-response contract predicated on the relationship between other and Other.

'Crimes of letters' informs us as to the ways in which texts are made, transmitted and received while uncovering both unconscious and social forces at work in this process. As such, it suggests that creative writing is beholden to institutions and their discourses, especially those of literature and the university. Yet by alluding to the unconscious transgression at the heart of texts, it also suggests that institutional foundations regulating creative writing are themselves inauthentic.

The significance of 'Crimes of letters' lies in the ways it probes the dialectic between transgression and the law, thereby questioning anew notions of authority, authorship and discourse. It is of special relevance at a time when the digital revolution is dramatically changing our relationship with signs, their provenance, designation and final destination.

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