

REFLECTIONS

Robert Silverberg

ROBERT A. HEINLEIN, AUTHOR OF *THE MARTIAN CHRONICLES*

Science fiction publishing in the United States was young when it was hit with its first gaudy plagiarism scandal. The August-September 1933 issue of *Amazing Stories*, one of the three major SF magazines of the day, carried a story called “Across the Ages,” by Allen Glasser. Glasser was one of the best-known figures of early science fiction fandom: he corresponded with everybody who mattered, he was the editor of *The Planet*, official organ of the first science fiction club, and now he was beginning to sell stories to the professional magazines. Imagine the shock and horror that swept through the little world of SF fandom when a knowledgeable reader revealed, a few months later, that Glasser’s story was a word-for-word plagiarism of “The Heat Wave” by Marion Ryan and Robert Ord, published in *Munsey’s Magazine* in 1929. Glasser abruptly vanished from the science fiction scene in which he had been so prominent.

Over the years other unscrupulous writers have tried to pass off plagiarized work as their own, but most editors, who had been science fiction readers and writers themselves, were familiar enough with the existing literature so that they recognized these fakes when they saw them. Eventually that became harder as new editors came in for whom editing was just a job rather than the culmination of lifelong dedication to science fiction. One such was Ejler Jakobsson, a long-time magazine editor whose areas of expertise did not happen to extend to SF when he took over the important magazines *Galaxy* and *If* in 1969. And so it was that when the October 1971 issue of *If* offered a short story by one Irwin Ross, “To Kill a Venusian,” readers quickly saw what Jakobsson had not: it was a straight steal of an Anthony Boucher story first published in 1952 and reprinted several times thereafter.

Ross had made a few meaningless changes—the ill-fated wife of the story was now “Marcia Runyon” instead of “Hester Pringle,” and he had fiddled with the dialogue here and there. But he was so little interested in concealing his theft that he used Boucher’s opening sentence verbatim, even though it identified the villain of the piece by his nickname of “Nine-Finger Jack,” which also was the name of Boucher’s well-known story. Irwin Ross did not appear thereafter in the science fiction magazines.

Science fiction writers borrow ideas from each other all the time, sometimes as a deliberate act of homage, sometimes as an accident of memory. (It is hard to remember everything that one’s read, and it’s all too easy to come up with a story idea that one thinks is original, only to realize later that Heinlein or Asimov had used that idea years ago. In my own early and very prolific years that happened to me now and then, resulting in a couple of unintentional rewrites of celebrated stories, and I’m not the only one to have stumbled into such a *contretemps*.) And in Hollywood the studios borrow ideas from published stories all the time, something that keeps lawyers very busy. (Ask Harlan Ellison about that, for example.)

But outright word-for-word plagiarism of the Glasser or Ross kind is not all that common, and when it does happen there is almost always an eagle-eyed reader ready to expose the miscreant. There is, however, a subtler and more profound as-

pect to the concept of taking another writer's work as one's own, as Jorge Luis Borges showed in his 1939 story, "Pierre Menard, Author of *Don Quixote*."

Borges begins his piece by providing a bibliography of Menard's published works: a handful of sonnets and some critical essays and translations. But then he tells us of his most important work, "which is subterranean, interminably heroic, and unequalled"—the text of the ninth and thirty-eighth chapters of *Don Quixote* and a fragment of the twenty-second chapter.

Menard's unpublished fragment is not any sort of variation on the Cervantes original: in fact it is identical, "word for word and line by line." But Menard, Borges tells us, did not simply produce a mechanical transcription of the text, which would have been a pointless exercise. No, his "admirable ambition" was to achieve a mental state through which he would be capable of writing a novel called *Don Quixote*, identical in every respect to Cervantes' book but at the same time unmistakably the work of the twentieth-century author Pierre Menard. He would do it not from memory but through an act of spontaneous creation, which, if he had achieved the proper spiritual discipline, would bring forth the same book, three hundred years after Cervantes, imbued with a modern sensibility even though it varied not by a single comma from the existing text. It was a monumental task, Borges says, demanding the utmost in subtlety and psychological insight, and of course Menard did not live to complete it. Borges provides a quotation from Cervantes' ninth chapter and Menard's—identical in wording, of course—to illustrate the infinite richness of the new version, as well as the contrast in styles. ("The archaic style of Menard—in the last analysis, a foreigner—suffers from a certain affectation. Not so that of his predecessor, who handles easily the ordinary Spanish of his time.") We are told that Menard's labors were immense, that he tore up thousands of manuscript pages in the course of his struggle to bring forth *Don Quixote* anew from the recesses of his own soul.

Borges concludes his playful little fantasy by suggesting that Menard "has enriched, by means of a new technique, the hesitant and rudimentary art of reading." Which leads me to wonder what would have emerged if some of the modern masters of science fiction had dedicated themselves to a similar discipline. Take Robert A. Heinlein, for example, that tough-minded exponent of plausible extrapolation, a former naval officer with a background in engineering. What if he had devoted himself to creating his own version of Ray Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles*, identical in wording but infused in every syllable with his own no-nonsense practical view of the universe? How different it would be from the work of the poetic Bradbury, an artful visionary picture of a Mars that could never have existed, peopled by wistful Martians utterly incapable of withstanding the incursion of the crass, thoughtless spacemen from Earth who desecrate their planet with their every move!

Consider the opening lines of Bradbury's first chapter:

They had a house of crystal pillars on the planet Mars by the edge of an empty sea, and every morning you could see Mrs. K eating the garden fruits that grew from the crystal walls, or cleaning the house with handfuls of magnetic dust which, taking all dirt with it, blew away on the hot wind. Afternoons, when the fossil sea was warm and motionless, and the wine trees stood stiff in the yard, and the little distant Martian bone town was all enclosed, and no one drifted out their doors, you could see Mr. K himself in his room, reading from a metal book with raised hieroglyphs over which he brushed his hand as one might play a harp. . . .

And now read it as filtered through Heinlein's pragmatic consciousness, informed as it is by the stern knowledge that Mars is nothing like this and that Mr. and Mrs. K are impossible creatures:

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Do you see the difference? Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles* and Heinlein's are a galaxy apart in concept, though their wording is the same. Bradbury's vision is deeply imaginative, delicate, lovely, the work of a poet in prose. Heinlein's text reflects his knowledge of things-as-they-are, and so he writes at one remove from Bradbury's airy fantasizing, creating a deeply ironic commentary on the masterpiece of a writer whose work he admired and respected, but with which he had almost nothing in common.

We can imagine other significant writers taking on similar projects of Borgesian re-creation: let us suppose that Ursula K. Le Guin was willing to tackle Robert E. Howard's Conan novel, *The Hour of the Dragon*, for instance. Le Guin is the most sensitive of writers, aware of the finest nuances of human interaction, whereas Howard was a ferocious storyteller, sending his barbarian hero through many a wild and gory adventure. So when Howard has Conan exclaim: "*Dogs!*" he said without passion and without mercy. "*Do Nemedian jackals set themselves up as executioners and hang my subjects at will? First you must take the head of their king. Here I stand, awaiting your lordly pleasure!*" he captures the savage ethos of the virile Cimmerian warlord and his utter fearlessness, whereas Le Guin, in the very same words, renders for us the bitter isolation of the lonely king as he faces his royal responsibilities, the stark anguish of Conan in a world of moral absolutes.

So many other possibilities present themselves! Harlan Ellison, say, that master of flamboyant prose and fascinatingly alienated characters, taking on E.E. Smith's *Gray Lensman*, which portrays the square-jawed hero Kimball Kinnison stolidly righting wrongs in a galaxy free of ambiguity, where black and white are plainly delineated. Or Joanna Russ, whose work was informed by a passionate feminist sensibility, training herself to re-create John Norman's *Tarnsman of Gor*, with women as mere objects, led about on chains and whipped at the whim of their masters. Or imagine, if you will, that brilliant stylist Jack Vance dealing with Edgar Rice Burroughs' *A Princess of Mars*, trotting forth Burroughs' thoats and zitidars, his green-skinned swordsmen, his jeddaks and his hormads, while at the same time writing an implicit, invisible, ironic commentary on Burroughs' clunky, galumphing century-old pulp prose!

I can even think of one possibility that Borges himself overlooked. More than thirty years ago, when I was in my mid-forties, vigorous and still relatively young, I wrote a big picaresque novel called *Lord Valentine's Castle*, setting the adventures of a disinherited monarch against the vast backdrop of the galaxy's largest habitable world. What if I, now—almost eighty years old—were to set out to write Robert Silverberg's *Lord Valentine's Castle*, that same rollicking adventure, using the same words from start to finish—but this time the product of a very senior citizen who can no longer summon the vitality of early middle age but whose remembered skills, after a long lifetime of writing, are still equal to the task of creating the color and movement of that big book.

What would it be like? Eh, there, Jorge Luis Borges? What, indeed?