

## THOUGHTS ON BEING PLAGIARIZED (SORT OF)

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*Richard Kostelanetz, whose book Dictionary of the Avant-Gardes was reviewed in the February 1994 Word Ways, has written poetry in many different forms, some of which incorporate strategies of letterplay in their structure. Kostelanetz has had experiences similar to the experiences of some wordplay writers--namely, in using wordplay forms, and letterplay forms in particular, to structure writing, it is possible that other writers may duplicate the forms or even the texts. In many cases, the duplication is purely a coincidence. For instance, several people separately wrote the palindrome DRAT SADDAM, A MAD DASTARD without knowing that others had also written it. However, the question sometimes arises as to whether such duplication is actually plagiarism. Did Writer A unwittingly make up this concept/text or intentionally "borrow" all or part of it from Writer B? Howard Bergerson noted this phenomenon in regards to the creation/evolution of palindromes. Kostelanetz discusses the topic from his own viewpoint as a contemporary poet whose work explores the aesthetic possibilities of words at the fringe of language, where wordplay and grammar can both play an important role in the structuring of new literary forms.*

I've always regarded my work as so extreme and idiosyncratic that, if only to define its integrity, it resisted plagiarism. In fact, little has proved my assumption wrong. Some 35 years ago, a Columbia professor doing an anthology of short fiction presented ideas that looked suspiciously familiar, even though mine hadn't yet been published. I thought the prof might have gotten them from a manuscript submitted to a magazine of which he was a junior editor. Since the prof was more than ten years my senior, while I was 25, I had a problem confronting him. I recall writing a polite letter that went unanswered. I remember asking a mutual acquaintance, a junior professor between us in age, to try my name on him, but I don't remember any results from his research. My assumption now is that the junior prof was doing what comes naturally to those in his academic classes—pilfering from their social inferiors without acknowledgement.

I remember hearing about a friend's ex-wife, a professor who was sued for plagiarism by a younger scholar. The accusation initially seemed unlikely to me, as this woman, whom I'd known as well, always struck me as someone who talked far better than she read—indeed, as someone who didn't read very well at all. She also seemed, not unlike other academics, so predisposed to flatter powerful people that I couldn't imagine her even reading a younger colleague. My hunches must have been wrong, however, as the last I heard was that the suit against her was settled out of court.

As a poet, I've worked with many unfamiliar forms, some of them my invention, and so have occupied a position on the edge of the poetry world. Not until now has anyone so blatantly appropriated me without acknowledgement.



One form I think I invented in the late 1970s I call a String. It consists of overlapping words printed in a continuous horizontal line. In String Two, for instance, the formal limitation was that each new word incorporate at least two letters from its predecessor. Thus it opens

Stringtwomenteroticystitislatenderoto...

For String Five, each new word incorporates at least three letters from its predecessor:

Stringfiveteranciderideafencerebrumblendivestablismentertaintegerund...

whose opening can be read as String Five: veteran rancid cider, deride deaf fencer cerebrum, rumble blend endive divest establishment, entertain integer gerund...

I've also written strings in French, German, and Swedish, all of which were published in literary magazines in those languages (flattering me, as my knowledge of those languages is limited). Some of these strings appeared in my *Wordworks: Poems Selected & New* (BOA, 1993); others were put into videotapes where they run continuously across the screen from right to left. Excerpts can also be found on my website ([www.richardkostelanetz.com](http://www.richardkostelanetz.com)) in the file titled "30 Years of Visible Writing". What a surprise it was for me to find the catalog of the recent exhibition, *Poetry Plastique* (Granary Books, 2001), some texts attributed to Charles Bernstein and the visual artist Richard Tuttle, who is incidentally married to the poet Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge. Titled "with strings", these horizontal lines include the following:

Cursortobedbug  
 Seillverveswhosandssameassavor  
 Fondlethebundryhoubungle  
 Frivolityfavorantedecedentgush&ruminant  
 ForIhavehoppedtoaccord&blemishmnestourust

To what extent these "with strings" resemble my Strings, I leave to others to judge, but one difference is that my Strings observe the formal constraint of overlapping words while these simply omit spaces. A second difference is that these appeared more than two decades after mine. Had Bernstein and Tuttle used the epithet "drools," say, their run-on wordage would not be so objectionable to me. My hunch is now that Bernstein has become a chaired professor blessed with emoluments and entitlements he is demonstrating that he can steal from a putative nonentity (such as myself) with impunity.

Soon after writing these angry paragraphs and circulating them to colleagues who in turn circulated them to their colleagues (which happens more easily and rapidly in this Internet age), I received separate letters from the heirs of the Russian writers Vasilisk (Vasili Ivanovich) Gnedov (1890-1978) and Igor Gerasimovich Terent'ev (1892-1937), both of them informing me that their respective ancestors developed string poetry (without overlapping) before World War I. Though neither Bernstein nor myself can read Russian, perhaps we inherited the idea from ancestors who can. That's the Avant-Garde Lit Biz, I guess.