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Responsibility and Imitation

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In my discipline there are typically two kinds of reviews. The first is sharply critical of the author's conclusions, argumentative techniques, and overall style. The second usually involves a brief summary of the author's points and then goes on to engage the project in a variety of ways: some critical, some conciliatory. I choose to adopt the latter form as it seems that Digby brings to the fore issues that should concern educators in Honors.

Digby's essay begins with a brief historical/literary narrative that provides a backdrop against which we can understand the issue she will discuss. We quickly realize that she worries imitation has become more important than creation in modern students. She argues that, as a result of this adherence to imitation, the very notions of truth, authorship, and creativity have become perhaps meaningless. If truth is what we take to be represented by the most prevalent information on the web, then certainly we ought to be worried. If authorship is a matter of who can cut and paste the most information into an easily digestible format, then the creativity seems to be more about marketing and consumption than developing new forms of expression. Perhaps I am stating her conclusions too strongly, but I think the tenor of her paper is not too far from this.

However, her main worry is not the attitude our age has about imitation but rather that this practice and exaltation of imitation constrains students, honors students in particular, from undertaking projects (senior theses) or engaging their course materials in new and possibly provocative ways. Imitation limits almost exactly what honors education seems to promote. If imitation is the main activity and even honors professors, the vanguard (perhaps) of high academic achievement, practice imitation in shaping pedagogical structures meant to involve the student in active and inspired academic projects, then certainly it is difficult to expect the student to do anything more than what we do. A cursory look at television will show how much we try to identify with a certain look or lifestyle. Imitation can offer success, as the valedictorian's speech exemplifies all too well.

I think that Digby offers us some interesting points to think about, but I think the pessimism, especially with regard to imitation, is overstated. I think we ought to look at one of her examples a bit more closely and, I think, see that the problem isn't so much imitation as responsibility. I want to talk briefly and somewhat loosely about responsibility and imitation and note that the practice of imitation need not lead to the limitations Digby laments. Responsibility in imitation can help students learn.

Digby laments that imitation has become so rampant, so deep in our popular culture, that popular music can be entirely driven through the use of "sampling."¹ However,

¹ Not to insult anyone's intelligence, but sampling is a practice where a musician samples a portion of another song (a drumbeat, bass-line, hook, etc.) and then places it into a new context as either the driving force of a new song or as an additional layer to a composition. The practice has been concomitant with the rise of hip-hop and rap music.

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sampling itself, an example we will explore a bit here, is not straightforwardly problematic. Rather the use to which sampling is put within the new work and the absence of suitable recognition might be problematic. There are plenty of examples of songs where sampling constitutes most, if not all, of the material used for the song, but even this is not so troubling when you think about it. Sampling, in modern music, is often used to reshape older tunes in new and interesting ways. Sampling in a piece does not necessarily make the song badly derivative. Often the new creation takes the sampled segment into exciting new areas that can be creative, interesting, and original.

This point cannot be stressed enough. The practice of sampling itself is not the problem. The problem occurs when the new tune is wholly derivative or there is neither something new brought onto the scene nor adequate recognition of the original author. Truly groundbreaking sampling uses bits and pieces of songs and takes the themes within those elements and spins them in new directions. This isn't so different from musicians turning to birdsong for inspiration or jazz musicians incorporating a segment of someone else's song in their own solo. If the sampling is noted in the liner notes of an album or due credit is given, then the practice is responsible. The sampling artist furthers creativity in taking the sampled portion in a new direction. Sampling itself can be a form of musical expression that is as creative as traditional compositional authorship.

The trick for us is how we teach our students to understand, be aware of, and cite their sources—to appreciate how much the work or exercises rely on copying the work or style of another. If the sampling or imitation is done in such a way that the students attempt to pass off the work as their own, then this is troubling and Digby has every reason to worry. But if these are exercises that introduce students to methods that might help them become more conversant in a certain discipline and if the mimetic nature of the activity is made known, then this seems quite reasonable. If we are training our students to be thoughtful, then we have a responsibility to make them aware, at some point and in some meaningful way, exactly what they are doing and to what end. If we don't make this clear, then we have failed, in part, to fully educate them.

Overall, I appreciate the issue that Digby has brought to our attention. Her use of literary history as analogue and backdrop is informative on a number of levels. Her worries, however, seem overstated. If we wish for our honors students to be original and creative, then maybe we ought to be up front about the mimetic exercises we use to help educate them. Being aware of the "point" of the class is often helpful in allowing the students to understand the material in a new light. It equips them with another view of which they can be aware. In as much as imitation ought to be responsibly done, we ought to be responsible in teaching our students as well.

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