

Chapter 8

Tainted Texts: Plagiarism and Self-Exploitation in *Perlmann's Silence*

8.1 Introduction

As a novel addressing scientific misconduct, Pascal Mercier's *Perlmann's Silence* notably revolves around plagiarism (the P in FFP), but the broader normative and discursive ambiance of academic existence comes into view as well. Mercier's novel will be read as a collision between various modes of discourse, mutually exposed to one another, challenging and questioning one another. Four modes of discourse will be distinguished, in accordance with Jacques Lacan's theorem of the four discourses: the discourse of the Master, of the university, of the hysteric and of the analyst. Subsequently, it will be indicated how these four discourses navigate the discursive landscape determined by three "axes" or dimensions of inquiry, as distinguished by Lacan's contemporary Michel Foucault, namely *knowledge*, *power* and the *Self* (Foucault 1984; Zwart 2008c, 2016c). In university discourse, the focus is on knowledge (the *epistemological* dimension): on the ways in which plagiarism reflects transformations in the knowledge production process. The discourses of the Master and the hysteric revolve around inter-generational and global inequalities in academic research (the *power* dimension). And the discourse of the analyst focusses on the *ethical* dimension of the Self: the ways in which academics manage or fail to constitute themselves as responsible subjects vis-à-vis integrity challenges emerging in contemporary research practices.

Concerning the ethical dimension I will argue that Mercier's novel addresses, on an individual level (micro-level), a recognisable problem theme in contemporary research, namely the vicissitudes of mid-life academics who (notwithstanding their academic status) have lost interest in and/or contact with their area of research. Subsequently, I will explain how Perlmann as a prominent academic tries to 'solve' his problem through power abuse, by committing (and subsequently concealing) plagiarism at the expense of a marginalised Russian colleague, deprived of access to Western academic networks. His plagiarism occurs in a situation where, from the point of view of mainstream research ethics, more optimal solutions (more

acceptable scenarios) would have been available. Yet, a psychoanalytic rereading reveals that Perlmann is actually facing a more devastating form of crisis, for which the available guidelines for proper research conduct fail to provide a fix. Indeed, *both* the challenge (loss of motivation and inspiration) *and* the solution (plagiarism) are symptomatic of a more structural problematic pervading the current research system, which I will thematise as *self-exploitation*, resulting in the eradication or obliteration of a former, more prolific Self. This experience is articulated in *Perlmann's Silence* in psychoanalytic (Freudian-Lacanian) terms, namely as an experience of *Spaltung* (splitting). Thus, plagiarism is enacted as a desperate (but faltering) attempt to restore a situation of integrity (or wholeness) which already eroded long before the plagiarism was actually committed. But I will start with a short resume of the novel.

8.2 The Narrative: A Resume

Philipp Perlmann, a prominent German professor of language studies, is invited by a high-ranking representative of *Olivetti* (an Italian firm famous for producing word-processing machinery) to organise a small-scale international expert workshop in a hotel on the Italian Riviera. He is suffering from a mid-life crisis, however, due to the death of his wife (a photographer who died in a car accident), but aggravated by a paralysing loss of interest in his research field. As the host of the workshop, he is expected to present a high quality paper, but unfortunately he can think of nothing whatsoever to say. Instead of working on a paper of his own, he squanders his precious time translating a manuscript written by an unknown Russian colleague named Leskov (whom he had invited to the workshop, but who failed to secure a travel permit), just to learn Russian. In despair, and in order to conceal his intellectual impotence, Perlmann at a certain point decides to present his English translation of Leskov's manuscript as his own work.

But then catastrophe sets in. While the text is being distributed, he receives news that Leskov will be able to attend the meeting after all and Perlmann designs a series of desperate attempts to conceal his perpetration. This includes the destruction of a second manuscript by Leskov, which the latter had wanted to present and discuss during the meeting. But then Perlmann discovers that, due to a series of misunderstandings, a loose collection of impromptu notes has been distributed among the colleagues, instead of the translation. Although nothing untoward has actually happened (besides the pointless destruction of Leskov's second manuscript, which he manages to partly reconstruct), Perlmann is unable to recover from his moral trauma, which he experiences as the disastrous end of his career.

8.3 University Discourse: The Knowledge Dimension

Compared to big natural science research, the humanities seem much less infected by the dynamics of commercialisation, privatisation, and the increase of pace, scale and competition which are so often seen as causal factors in the current misconduct epidemic. In *Perlmann's Silence*, even mid-life scholars tend to act as single authors and are still regarded as producers of their own work. And although there are rumours about elderly colleagues who increasingly fail to publish new results (p. 214), this allegedly does not apply to the academics brought together in the context of the Mediterranean workshop. They are all expected to present and discuss original materials which they have written themselves.

Still, some of the tensions pervading the big natural sciences can be discerned in *Perlmann's Silence* as well. The workshop is funded by a multinational company who definitely has expectations concerning the outcomes of the work. And in view of his mid-life prominence, Perlmann is regularly invited to give lectures as key speaker before prestigious international gatherings. Such activities, in combination with teaching responsibilities, distract him from his intellectual work, thereby aggravating his basic problem, namely loss of inspiration, feeling increasingly inhibited to commit himself to desk research again.¹

Moreover, linguistics is becoming increasingly interdisciplinary and applied. During the expert workshop, the more established academic approaches (represented by experts like Brian Millar from New York) are challenged by new contributions coming from various adjacent fields, such as psychotherapy, ethology and introspection (phenomenology). But because of his loss of intellectual commitment and fatigue, Perlmann (unlike others) is unable to seize the opportunities offered by this paradigm shift. He is unable to really try something new. His efforts in this direction remain sketchy impromptu improvisations, relying on a kind of automatic writing, switching off his self-censorship in order to subdue his epistemic inhibitions, but discarding the results as un-academic "kitsch". As a language studies expert, he is unable to reset his research agenda and to reinvent himself.

8.4 Master's Discourse: The Power Dimension

Building on the epistemological dimension, the power dimension notably reflects the institutional and interpersonal inequalities at work, such as the power divide between early-stage or geographically marginalised researchers on the one hand and mid-life elite academics on the other. As outlined in the Chap. 2, the political dimension reflects the dynamics of the Master-Servant relationship. The Master is initially

¹ "Es war ihm der Glaube an die Wichtigkeit der wissenschaftlichen Tätigkeit abhandengekommen... Er fand einfach nicht mehr in die Konzentration zurück, in das Gefühl der Ausschließlichkeit, aus dem heraus seine wissenschaftlichen Arbeiten bisher entstanden waren... Er fand den Weg zum Schreibtisch immer seltener... (Mercier 1995/1997, p. 17).

in control and appropriates the servant's practical, empirical, hands-on knowledge, transforming it into abstract, academic knowledge (ἐπιστήμη, θεωρία). Subsequently, the Master purports to give this knowledge back to the servant, in the form of supervision and education (Lacan 1969–1970/1991, p. 22). But in the end, the newly gained knowledge of the servants is bound to prove more powerful, effective and revealing than the theoretical contemplations of the Master. Thus, the supremacy of the Master becomes subverted by the *real* knowledge of the servant, so that in the end servants will occupy (usurp) the position of the agent themselves.

In the beginning of the novel, Perlmann poses as a Master: a prominent scholar requested by a multinational company to organise an elite gathering of academics in a coastal resort, combining theoretical discussions with abundant otium (leisure time). But it is clear from the very outset that Perlmann has serious difficulties living up to this role and the expectations it entails. He used to be an ambitious young researcher (an academic “servant”) himself, but now he looks back in astonishment on his earlier career, painfully realising that, as a promising young academic, exclusively committed to research, he hardly lived at all. He had always existed out of contact with his present.² While glancing through a cheap, second-hand, popular, illustrated book about high publicity post-war events, he feels like a convict who has just been released from prison and who is now discovering the world outside, reading about all the things that had passed him by. He now realises that, at the time of their occurrence, all these events had hardly been allowed to enter his insulated, workaholic existence, which had been completely dedicated to academic research, sacrificing everything else in order to achieve his current state of prominence.

Notwithstanding computerisation and word-processing equipment, provided by companies like *Olivetti*, linguistics is still a single-author field. In the arena of international scholarship, the United States (represented by Millar) are definitely the leading super-power. This entails first of all a power of language: all conversations during the workshop are in English, although Millar is the only native speaker, while some other participants, such as an Italian psychiatrist, are hampered by their lack of verbal fluency. But Germany also plays a prominent role. Perlmann himself, for instance, just received an invitation for a professorship in Princeton, the prototypical safe haven, where academics are no longer expected to do any real work. It is clear that this is an elite gathering.

Also the *appropriation* of intellectual labour by the Master is clearly present in the novel. In Perlmann's case, the victim of plagiarism is an obscure Russian colleague who still writes single-copy manuscripts, either by hand or with the help of an old-fashioned typewriter, and who has somehow managed to survive outside the international networks of mainstream discourse, far removed from the world of prominent professorships and conferences. He shared his manuscript with Perlmann in the hope that international recognition would help him to a fixed position and a salary. Strictly speaking, his approach (introspective phenomenological psychology) is quite old-fashioned but, in view of the epistemological transitions outlined

²This is already indicated by the opening sentence of the novel: “Philipp Perlmann war es gewohnt, dass die Dinge keine Gegenwart für ihn hatten” (p. 9).

above (i.e. the erosion of traditional methodological standards of mainstream academic performance), even introspective phenomenology can now be rehabilitated and presented as something potentially acceptable and innovative. So once again, plagiarism is a symptom of power relationships: a prominent scientist (a Master), no longer able to live up to international academic expectations, commits fraud at the expense of an outsider, someone who, in terms of power and prestige, can be regarded as insignificant (plagiarism without too many risks). Perlmann's invitation was a gesture of noblesse: an act of kindness on the part of an enlightened scholarly gentleman, and Leskov is the servant who has to atone for this act of kindness through hard labour, producing two manuscripts, which are subsequently appropriated by Perlmann-the-Master.

But precisely at that point, the stability of the situation (the distribution of roles) becomes subverted. Leskov is in fact the Master, while Perlmann (by acting as his translator and interpreter) is actually settling for the role of servant. Leskov articulates the truth, and Perlmann commits himself to author studies as it were, reading and commenting on the text of Leskov-the-Master. Perlmann *effaces* himself as author. Only the words and the ideas of Leskov-the-absent-Other are worthwhile, and his own texts are discarded as rubbish ("Schutt" in German). The crisis sets in when this absent voice (allegedly kept at a safe distance by Soviet bureaucracy) all of a sudden makes his appearance, confronting Perlmann with his impotence ($-\phi$), his loss of originality and productivity, but also as a tangible accusation, functioning as the embodiment of his scientific conscience or superego as it were.

8.5 The Discourse of the Analyst: The Ethical Dimension

As mentioned in Chap. 1, case histories, notably the five extended case histories published by Freud himself, are often compared to novels. Steven Marcus regards the case of Dora a literary "masterpiece" and a "great work of literature" (1985, p. 57). And Freud himself, after having pointed out that he was actually trained as a neurologist, almost makes apologies to his readers for the fact that his case histories read like novellas.³ But the reverse is also true in the sense that a novel such as *Perlmann's Silence* actually reads like a case history, involving a neurotic patient inhibited by an obsession with plagiarism, – comparable to the case of the plagiarist published by Kris (1951/1975) and commented by Lacan (discussed below). Rather than presenting his own views on the topic, moreover, the novelist gives the floor to the tormented subject (the protagonist: $\$$) himself, prompted to become more keenly aware of what is actually spurring him on, and to share with his readers the story of his inhibitions, anxieties and desires. The novel's key symptom (Perlmann's silence)

³"Ich bin nicht immer Psychotherapeut gewesen, sondern bin bei Lokaldiagnosen und Elektroprognostik erzogen worden wie andere Neuropathologen, und es berührt mich selbst noch eigentümlich, daß die Krankengeschichten, die ich schreibe, wie Novellen zu lesen sind, und daß sie sozusagen des ernstesten Gepräges der Wissenschaftlichkeit entbehren" (1895/1952, p. 227).

results from a deeply felt aversion against the kind of texts he himself had been producing. And this inhibition can only be lifted through translating (that is: working-through) the textual materials produced by Leskov the absent Other.

The novel can be regarded as a stage, a battlefield of multiple voices and discourses, and Perlmann plays multiple roles. First of all, he is the magnanimous Master (S_1) who kindly invites Leskov (a plodding marginalised nobody) to attend the elite assembly. But subsequently, as we have seen, Perlmann shifts to the role of "servant" (S_2), translating and explaining the commanding words of the Other (Leskov, now in the role of the authoritative voice: the Master who has discerned the truth). But Perlmann also plays the hysteric's role ($\$$), for instance when he experiences vehement waves of hatred against his colleagues, notably Millar: the most prominent and prestigious colleague in the group. But the hysteric's discourse especially flares up in Perlmann's hatred of texts, in his impulsive-aggressive efforts to destroy huge amounts of textual "litter", in his bouts of "*logo-clasm*", to which I will come back later. As a dramatic stage or battlefield of discourses, the novel as a whole concurs with the discourse of the analyst, allowing Perlmann and other subjects to take the floor in various positions (S_1 , S_2 , $\$$), in order to act-out and articulate their anxieties and desires vis-à-vis an impossible, inexorable object (a).

Perlmann commits plagiarism out of sheer despair. He suffers from burn-out, partly caused by the death of his wife, but the idea of straightforwardly confessing (before the assembly of elite colleagues) that he failed to prepare a proper manuscript simply because he could not think of something interesting to say, is out of the question. Frantically, he considers alternative solutions and the option of plagiarism only enforces itself upon him when all the other alternatives have evaporated. In other words, in Perlmann's case, plagiarism is not presented as a positive choice, but rather as the only remaining route to take (besides suicide, which is also seriously considered, although one could argue that, for a scholar, an *author* like Perlmann, plagiarism is actually a suicidal act). It is not a conscious and voluntary decision, but rather a process which unfolds more or less automatically, an act which commits *itself* as it were: a course of 'action' which deeply shocks and paralyzes its perpetrator. And as soon as he (erroneously believes that he) has committed the dreadful act, a pervasive sense of guilt torments him. The terrible word "plagiarism", uttered by his highly sensitive conscience, becomes a chronic and relentless self-accusation. Again, it demonstrates the supremacy of the signifier (the word "plagiarism") over the signified (the plagiarism which he never committed, but which, under the sway of the signifier, becomes an *idée fixe* that dominates his psyche), – a relationship which in Lacanian algebra is referred to as (S/s).

From a third-person perspective, an intermediate, more acceptable solution – a moral compromise as it were – could have been considered, namely: co-authorship. Perlmann could have contacted Leskov to obtain his consent, could have presented their work as the collaborative effort of two academics working on similar themes. He could even have settled for the role of translator and interpreter, as part of his responsibilities as the workshop's chair and host. And indeed, at a certain point, Leskov, impressed by the way in which Perlmann verbally elucidates and defends his ideas, suggests that they should write something together. It would perhaps have

been an insult to Perlmann's academic narcissism to accept a subordinate role in the ensuing partnership, but it would have offered an acceptable way out, in terms of research ethics.

But this solution presupposes that plagiarism is a moral infringement which is consciously committed and can be consciously evaded. The situation is more complicated than that. The very *concept* of plagiarism is thoroughly problematized in Mercier's novel, so that the guidelines, policies and best practices of established research ethics are challenged rather than supported by the dilemmas and experiences of the main protagonist. Moreover, plagiarism cannot be reduced to a purely individual dilemma (which could have been solved or averted). Rather, it is embedded in the long-term dynamics of the academic system as such.

8.6 What Is Plagiarism?

Perlmann's Silence not only *stages*, but at the same time *problematizes* the concept of plagiarism. The question "What is plagiarism?" is explicitly addressed, on various occasions, while concepts such as authorship and intellectual property are questioned in various ways. At a certain point, for instance, while reading through copies of his previous publications (with all their painfully accurate academic references), Perlmann finds it extremely difficult to believe that he, Perlmann, had actually authored all this.⁴ He now reads his own work as if written by another person and feels completely estranged from his oeuvre. How can he still be meaningfully credited for it? He no longer recognises it as his output, no longer values it at all. He is no longer able to read it "from within". In contrast, while reading Leskov's manuscript, he has the opposite experience. He realises with astonishment how he had these same thoughts, or at least parallel ones. Precisely these very ideas, articulated and typed down by Leskov, had gone through his own mind. He had not written them down the way Leskov had done, but he *could* have done so. He is struck by the astonishing proximity between their viewpoints, and Leskov himself likewise recognises in Perlmann a kindred spirit, the only one who really understands him. Someone who, at a certain point, even seems to understand him better than Leskov understood himself and who has really internalised his ideas and words. For that very reason, Leskov at a certain point suggests that they should start writing papers together, as co-authors. In other words, Leskov's text seems much closer to Perlmann's own authentic ideas than his formal academic output had ever been.

But for Perlmann, co-authorship is no longer an option, because it still would suggest that authorship and co-authorship are meaningful concepts, while in fact he has become completely allergic to terms such as "author", "original", "copy", and

⁴"Er war erstaunt über das, was er las. Maßlos erstaunt. Nicht nur darüber, was er einmal alles gewußt, gedacht, diskutiert hatte. Auch seine Sprache überraschte ihn, sein Stil, der ihm einmal gefiel und dann wieder gar nicht, und der ihm sonderbar fremd vorkam." (Mercier 1995/1997, p. 220).

the like. For Perlmann, all forms of academic discourse, all textual materials have become “garbage” and “trash”; – the German word *Schutt* (‘trash’) is used as a standard term to refer to written materials throughout the novel. Academic discourse is something to be thrown away, something to be disposed of as quickly and irreversibly as possible. Throughout the novel, Perlmann is destroying and desperately trying to get rid of huge amounts of texts. For him, academic literature has become textual *litter* in a literal sense⁵: waste, trash, garbage, rubbish, kitsch, debris; – basically because, from now on, he sees all forms of academic discourse as infected and tainted by plagiarism.⁶ His most important activity, in a novel which otherwise stresses his utter *lack* of activity, is the deliberate, systematic destruction of manuscripts, books, diskettes and other carriers of textual content, consistently referred to as a discursive “mess”: as litter, filth, dirt, etc.⁷ That is the existential paradox in *Perlmann's Silence*. On the one hand, plagiarism is experienced as a catastrophic trauma which literally *cleaves* his personality, while at the same time discursivity, authorship, originality and everything connected with it have become completely meaningless to him. He commits plagiarism because he does not *want* to be an author anymore, because the very idea of academic authorship, of academic writing *nauseates* him (and this includes co-authorship).

Precisely where authorship and plagiarism are concerned, an important lesson can be learned from Lacanian psychoanalysis. Both in his *Écrits* and in his Seminars, Lacan discusses a case study of a plagiarist published by Ernst Kris (1951/1975) which parallels Perlmann's story in various ways. The case involves an academic patient whose career is seriously thwarted by an obsession with plagiarism (Lacan 1966, 393 ff.; Lacan 1966–1967, 119–120). An inexplicable compulsion to steal other peoples' ideas gives rise to a chronic inhibition: an inability to publish his research. At a certain point, when he has finally managed to finish a manuscript, he discovers a book in the library that allegedly already contains all his ideas. Kris asks for the book, reads it, ascertains that there is not much originality in it, and kindly informs the patient that his self-accusation proves unjustified. The plagiarism is “self-fabricated” as it were. Moreover, it turns out that a close colleague has repeatedly stolen and published the patient's ideas without acknowledgment, so that, when it comes to plagiarism, he is a victim rather than a perpetrator. According to Kris, what is troubling the patient is the conviction that only ideas conceived by others can be truly interesting. In response to this interpretation, the patient makes an awkward confession: his favourite dish happens to be fresh brains.

⁵The Joycean association between literature and *litter* is a crucial theme in Lacan's later seminars (1975–1976/2005; 1970–1971/2007, p. 113 ff.; cf. Zwart 2016a).

⁶When speaking about texts, Perlmann, the professor of linguistics, consistently uses phrases like “Bergen von Schutt” (mountains of trash), “einen dicken Stoß Kitsch” (a thick thrust of kitsch, p. 332), “Papierwust” (a mess of paper, p. 363); “Stoß Blätter” (a thrust of pages, p. 364), etc.

⁷The novel is reminiscent of the famous story about Thomas Aquinas, an extremely prolific medieval author who (towards the end of his life) experienced a spiritual revelation which so affected him that his opus magnum the *Summa Theologiae* was left unfinished. To his secretary (Brother Reginald) he confessed that he had come to regard everything which he had written as so much straw (Weisheipl 1975).

In his comments on this clinical vignette, Lacan argues that the patient's culinary confession actually shows us that we should not too easily assure someone that there is no reason to feel guilty. In fact, according to Lacan, the question whether or not plagiarism has actually been committed is irrelevant. The guilt stems for the unconscious *desire* to copy others, fuelled by the paralysing conviction that only the thoughts of others are worth publishing. Only ideas taken from others have substance, and the patient discards his own ideas as worthless. This is also the meaning of the favourite menu: the desire (i.e. "brain-picking") is still there, but has found a new target (a psychic mechanism known as displacement): a regressed, oral form of *incorporation* of brain content has been adopted to act-out the secret wish.

Lacan considers plagiarism an impossible concept moreover. According to him, no such thing as intellectual property exists (cf. Borch-Jacobsen 1990, p. 14). We cannot "own" ideas, for they are always already there. We would not be able to think or write at all in the absence of a discourse already established, a stream of ideas and signifiers already thriving, and to which we can only marginally contribute. Originality is a cherished but untenable prejudice and the awareness of our dependence on established discourse entails a painful narcissistic offence. Not *I* speak, but *it* speaks ("ça parle"). We are born parasites, and originality is something marginal at best, occurring in the folds and margins of a λόγος that always already pervades and pre-structures our world (1958–1959/2013, p. 568). And Lacan himself produced texts in accordance with this conviction. As Borch-Jacobsen (1990) phrases it, he absorbed words and ideas continuously and his discourse bulges with allusive references, so that almost every sentence which flew from his mouth or pen contained one or more (usually hidden) quotes. Borch-Jacobsen calls him a "honest", "deliberate" plagiarist, someone who wilfully immersed himself in the discourse of multiple others, although in real life Lacan (as an author who experienced strong inhibitions when it came to publishing his writings) tended to be quite sensitive whenever he felt plagiarised by others, for instance by Ricoeur or Derrida (or some of their followers).

Lacan confesses to feeling quite uneasy about citations (1969–1970/1991, p. 40). Through citations we seek support in the words of a credible other for ideas and arguments that would be too fragile to be put forward without it. Citations indicate that we participate in a pre-structured discourse that is already there. We use it to legitimise our ideas, so that they may enter academic discursivity. And if, in a quote attributed to author X, the author name is replaced by author name Y (if one would attribute a certain quotation to Ricoeur or Derrida, for instance, rather than to Lacan), this would definitely affect the meaning of the phrase. In other words, citations may have various functions besides acknowledgement of intellectual property, which remains a questionable concept in the end.

Derrida reasons along similar lines, by the way, for instance when he argues that the dynamics of "intellectual theft" and parasitism is deeply embedded in language as such (Riley 1997), while both Lacan and Derrida not only build on linguistic theories (developed by De Saussure, Jakobson and others) concerning the anonymity and chronic dependence of speaking subjects on language, but also on Heidegger who relentlessly emphasises the thralldom and subjugation of humans vis-à-vis

language; – as indicated by one of his most famous phrase, put forward on several occasions: *Die Sprache spricht* (“language speaks”).

Lacan’s downplaying of intellectual property may sound radical but, similar to *Perlmann's Silence*, he does challenge us to explicitly consider a concept which is too easily taken for granted in mainstream integrity discourse (which increasingly revolves around a neoliberal framing of the scientist as a textual entrepreneur, scoring citations on the discursive stock market of citation indexes, known as academic publishing).

Lacan challenges us to question the P of FFP. In dialectical terms, we initially start from an understanding of intellectual property and plagiarism which seems self-evident (M_1). If I am the first person to publish about something (a concept, a formula, an equation, a discovery, a syndrome, a technical innovation, a personality test, etc.), I may rightfully claim it to be ‘mine’, so that others should at least cite me as the owner. But further reflection will convince us that we always stand on the shoulders of others, and that every novelty presupposes terms, approaches, techniques, etc., developed by others, so that it seems artificial to consider my contribution as something which belongs exclusively to me, as my ‘property’ even. In other words, the initial concept of intellectual property is challenged or even negated when the original concept is exposed to actual research practices, as fleshed out in science novels for instance (M_2). This is an important experience, for it reveals that mainstream understandings of intellectual property actually build on questionable (neoliberal) framings of scientific productivity, staging scientists as a textual entrepreneurs, scoring citations on the discursive stock market of citation indexes, which allegedly has become the basic objective of academic publishing (which, according to this neoliberal logic, is neither about making discoveries not about working for the benefit of humankind, but about harvesting citations and boosting one’s h-score). The various instances of plagiarism presented in novels (as literary case histories) expose this symptomatic misunderstanding and the subsequent subversion of neoliberal interpretations of intellectual property in misconduct novels forces us to critically reconsider the original concept and to actively *work through* the experiences which these novels describe. I will come back to this discussion in the final section, and also in Chap. 10.

8.7 Writing as Self-Constitution and as Self-Exploitation (Between *Splitting* and *Conflation*)

Perlmann has lost contact with his field and experiences a discursive vacuum, a paralysing deficiency or lack, an experience of “splitting” (p. 170; in Lacanian algebra: \$). The challenge facing him is to restore his integrity (which literally means: wholeness) or, to use the Foucauldian phrase: to reconstitute himself as a moral

subject. But the optimal route to achieve this, namely via academic writing *as a practice of the Self*, is no longer accessible. Perlmann is an extremely conscientious and sensitive person, morally speaking, and plagiarism is an internal, introspective, existential affair. No accusation is raised against him and although he is tormented by the prospect that his misdemeanour may be discovered, this evolves into a neurotic projection, a private obsession. Like in the case of Kris's patient, the paralysing experience of guilt is directed towards his illicit *intentions*. His basic activity in the novel, besides systematic text destruction, is excessive and relentless self-critique, a vehement rejection of his own published works and views, culminating in an "orgy of self-criticism" (p. 91) during one of the sessions: an at best cathartic, but actually quite destructive (rather than reconstructive) practice of the Self.

As a humanities professor, writing had been Perlmann's sole vocation, but now he experiences chronic ambivalence, or worse. At a certain point, Leskov explains how, as a political prisoner in Soviet Russia, writing became a practice of the Self for him, allowing him to restore his integrity. For Perlmann, however, discursivity *as such* now means imprisonment. Academic discourse (the necessity to publish) equals lack of freedom. He realises that, throughout the years, his academic career has insulated him; that he never really developed a rapport with the present; that he had been keeping reality at bay. Locked-in in his academic existence (and in his expensive Italian hotel), he realises that he has become anhedonic: insensitive to the pleasures of life.⁸

He could perhaps have re-constituted himself by developing a different style of writing: less academic, but it seems too late for that now. Discourse as such has become "trash", as we have seen. There are some noticeable exceptions: examples of more positive relationships with texts, but these examples consistently concern *texts written by others*. His work on the translation, for instance, seems like a craft, because it involves hardly any creative input from his side.⁹ For a "man without views", to become an interpreter seems the ideal profession (p. 163), or even therapy. Another exception is his painfully dedicated effort to restore Leskov's second single-copy manuscript, which he initially tried to destroy (by throwing it out of a rental car on a highway, fearing that it would reveal the plagiarism which he did not really commit). When he discovers that the act of plagiarism has been thwarted (due to sloppiness and misunderstandings on the part of personnel from the hotel), and realising that Leskov's career prospects depend on it, he tries to atone for his mistake by retrieving the document (collecting as many pages as he can find in the grass and shrubbery alongside the highway, drenched, muddy and incomplete) and carefully restoring it, as if it were "a highly valuable archaeological find" (p. 473). This activity not only allows him to partially restore the text, but also to temporarily regain some sense of integrity, subduing his paralysing sense of "cleavage" or

⁸Perlmann is a contemporary version of Faust in his study, realising that, now that he has finally become an acknowledged authority, the unworldliness and lack of relevance of his activities are more obvious than ever.

⁹Note that Perlmann's careful translation of Leskov's text plays a similar role in Mercier's novel as the "slow deciphering" (p. 331) of the Aldous file in *Solar*.

“splitting” (p. 170). Translating and restoring texts written *by others* works as a form of therapy or healing.

Life in academia entails an ascetic life-style, an ethos of self-renunciation. In order to succeed, Perlmann had to relinquish life, living only for his work, at the expense of everything else. He never experienced any special talent for languages and had achieved everything through hard work, desperately trying to ban the prospect of failure by investing in a future competence. But now that this state of competence and prominence is finally reached, he feels like a prisoner, hopelessly unable to enter and interact with the real world. Now that, due to his status, he should have felt invulnerable, he experiences a paralysing inner “splitting” (*Spaltung*), which disables him to regain a sense of integrity.

Besides translating Leskov’s Russian manuscript as a kind of practical therapy, Perlmann is fascinated by its thematic content. This manuscript, written in prison, actually addresses the very symptoms and concerns that are now tormenting Perlmann. Leskov’s basic theorem is that the active process of producing a convincing and coherent autobiography is basically a form of “integrity work” (p. 170). It is through the creative appropriation of one’s past that the paralysing sense of fission or *splitting* (*Spaltung* in German), which Leskov *had* been experiencing, and which Perlmann currently *is* experiencing (p. 66, p. 112, p. 170), can be overcome, so that the subject’s integrity can be sutured. Only an active, therapeutic process of verbalisation of one’s own reminiscences may avert psychic disintegration. This theorem captures quite convincingly the existential crisis Perlmann is experiencing: the feeling that his personality is about to “cleave” (p. 179); that he is about to “split” himself.¹⁰

The German word *Spaltung* (‘splitting’) is not coincidentally a psychoanalytic, Freudian-Lacanian term (Lacan 1966, p. 842). The term *Ichspaltung* (‘splitting of the ego’) was briefly introduced by Sigmund Freud in one of his final unpublished, fragmentary notes (1938/1941, p. 60). Jacques Lacan even considers the term *Ichspaltung* Freud’s “final word” (Lacan 1958–1959/2013, p. 544) and forges it into a key concept in his own oeuvre. As Lacan points out (1960–1961/2001, p. 81), the word splitting or *Spaltung* (διεσχίσθημεν) makes its appearance in Aristophanes’ famous parable in Plato’s *Symposium*, about how human integrity was once deliberately demolished by Zeus, namely by splitting or slicing early humans in two, so that we (their descendants) are still frantically searching for our lost “other half”: the lost part of what we once were (Plato 1925/1996, 189E–191C). Plagiarism proves a toxic strategy, for it obfuscates rather than solves the ultimate human problem, the basic experience of *Spaltung*. For Perlmann, the experience of cleavage notably refers to the disruptive loss of the connection with his former (prolific) self.

Perlmann alternates between two mutually exclusive positions: he at the same time *is* and he *is not* a plagiarist. He did not really commit plagiarism, but he intended to do so. Instead of *being* a plagiarist, he *thinks* he is. He already produced the insights which Leskov painstakingly describes, and yet he has to translate and

¹⁰“Es beschlich ihm das unheimliche Gefühl, daß er dabei war, sich von sich selbst abzuspalten” (p. 112).

appropriate them. Likewise, he both *is* and he *is not* the author of his previous publications, he both *is* and he *is not* identical with his former prolific Self, from whom he has become so radically estranged. This basic uncertainty, this discontinuity, this radical eccentricity, this inability of the subject to coincide with his own position, his own Self, is (according to Lacan) the experience of *Spaltung* par excellence (Lacan 1969–1970/1991, p. 119).

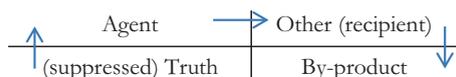
Via plagiarism, Perlmann desperately (but unsuccessfully) tries to overcome the paralysing sense of splitting (*Spaltung*); he tries to *conflate* his present position (of unproductive prominence) with his lost half, his lost former Self (as a prolific author). But committing plagiarism means falling into a moral trap. After the act, the very term, – indeed: the dreadful “signifier” *Plagiarism* –, begins to haunt him, to torment him, to persecute him: literally *cleaving* him. He both *is* and he *is not* a plagiarist, as we have seen, occupying two apparently incompatible discursive positions at the same time. And this acute experience of cleavage reveals a more fundamental inner *Spaltung*: a dramatic process of psychic cleaving¹¹ which already began long ago: the estrangement from his own authorship, from his being-an-author, from his own oeuvre; a form of paralysis which perhaps *could* have been overcome (but which he *fails* to overcome) through developing a new writing practice (as a self-edifying academic practice of the Self). But the traumatic experience of being *and* not being a plagiarist (both at the same time), definitely taints and ruins his authorship, not merely as a profession, but as a meaningful way of being-in-the-world. From now on, all instances of academic discourse are tainted, are turned into kitsch or trash.

Perlmann’s plagiarism is not a calculated act of egoism, but a desperate effort to conceal the loss of his vocation, of his *voice* as an author (the experience that he has nothing to say). Although various possible causes are discussed in the novel (from failure anxiety up to mourning), the basic causal factor seems sheer exhaustion. For decades, he exhausted his intellectual resources. As a plagiarist he exploited a Russian colleague, but the real and ultimate damage is done to himself, via relentlessly and chronic self-exploitation, in order to live up to the expectations of the academic system. Now that he should have reached his “plateau” (Bateson 1973, p. 85), he experiences hollowness and emptiness: the once productive other half seems forever lost, annihilated through self-exploitation. In his frantic efforts to succeed, or at least not to fail, Perlmann has burnt himself out, has emptied himself; and this relentless self-exhaustion now fires back at him in the form of discursive nausea.

¹¹“Er hatte vergessen, wann genau es angefangen hatte... Der Beginn lag in einer Zeit als er, von außen betrachtet, auf der Höhe seiner Produktivität war” (Mercier 1995/1997, p. 18).

8.8 The Four Discourses

On the basis of these interpretations, we can now clarify the basic dynamics of the novel with the help of Lacan's theorem of the four discourses, introduced in Chap. 2. Lacan distinguished four positions, as we have seen. The upper-left position (above the bar) is occupied by the speaking *agent*, while the *recipient* of the message (the Other) is situated in the upper-right position. Beneath the bar, we find the (disavowed) truth on the left side and the (unintended) by-product of the discourse on the right:



In these four positions, four key symbols can be inserted (S_1 , S_2 , $\$$ and a), referring either to the subject pole, – namely the Master (S_1), the Servant (S_2) or the tormented subject ($\$$) – or to the object pole of the knowledge relationship (the intractable, inexorable, alluring object of desire, of our will to know: the object a). These four basic symbols may be inserted as “variables” into these four positions, resulting in a rotating, revolving, quadruped scheme.

In the case of the Master's discourse, this procedure results in the following scheme:



This mode of discourse places Perlmann in the role of prominent authority of international renown (S_1 as agent) who organises a prestigious workshop, putting his signature under the invitation, thereby setting the assembled academics (S_2) to work. In order to play this role, however, the anxieties and doubts which are actually tormenting him must be disavowed and repressed ($\$$ must be pushed beneath the bar). Yet, from the very outset, Perlmann's role as Master is frustrated precisely by his inability to do this. His functionality as Master is hampered by a disruptive truth: his discursive impotence, the disconcerting awareness that he can no longer think of anything worthwhile to write or say. His team of colleagues is eagerly waiting for words, for ground-breaking insights, but Perlmann dramatically fails to produce them.

As a consequence, he desperately starts to look for words and insights somewhere else, and the scheme begins to revolve, to shift. Brain-picking basically means that the “brain” of the other (i.e. the site where, allegedly, these absent truths, these valuable insights can still be found) has become the plagiarist's object of desire: the object a . Thus, an inevitable turn unfolds. For Perlmann, Leskov now becomes the Master (S_1), someone who apparently managed to overcome his obstacles and doubts ($\$$), and Perlmann de facto becomes his Servant (S_2), the *recipient*

(literally) of Leskov's unique manuscripts (one copy only), containing the genuine core ideas which Perlmann was unable to articulate himself (*a*).

This type of discourse is challenged, however, by university discourse, representing normal, established science, voiced by academics such as Millar. Genealogically speaking, such experts are the former academic servants who have emancipated themselves. They no longer rely on authoritative voices (S_1 , now pushed back into the lower-left position). Rather, they build on their own acquired expertise (S_2 as agent), reaping the fruits of their academic labour, and apparently being in control of the situation. This type of discourse, however, becomes untenable as soon as the target (the object of attention: *a*) begins to fail the scientific expert, for instance because the linguistic phenomena under study prove too challenging and intractable to capture, so that the expert's tools and concepts are unable to grasp them and come to terms with them. Gradually, such experts become aware of the futility of their efforts, and this gives rise to discontent and doubt, or even to symptoms such as exhaustion, burn-out and depression, as unintended by-products of research ($\$$ in the lower-right position):

| | |
|-------|----------|
| S_2 | <i>a</i> |
| S_1 | $\$$ |

Thus, Lacan's schemes provide the core structure of the narrative in short-hand. Whereas colleagues such as Millar seem perfectly able to uphold the structure of university discourse, in the case of Perlmann this discursive mode becomes increasingly untenable. Eventually, it dramatically collapses, so that university discourse gives way to the discourse of the hysteric. Now, the tormented subject ($\$$) takes the floor, assuming the position of the *agent*, fulminating (albeit in silence) against Millar and the other spokespersons of university discourse, but eventually railing against discursivity *as such*: literally destroying huge amounts of texts as litter, railing against the forbidding supremacy and authority of $\lambda\acute{o}\gamma\omicron\varsigma$ as such (S_1), against the imperative to continue to produce more text. Only the ideas put forward by Leskov have value because he is an author who works in the folds and margins of established discourse and can impossibly be identified with the establishment. When Perlmann produces these same ideas himself, he discards them as un-academic and trivial, but when Leskov puts these same ideas on paper, Perlmann is able to recognise the value and validity of this disavowed truth. Thus, the ideas (the "brain") of the Other become the object (*a*), something which Perlmann seems almost *forced* to pick, although technically speaking he perhaps could have produced (or co-produced) these ideas himself. By translating Leskov's text, a new type of discourse is produced, a new subgenre within the field of linguistics, as an unintended by-product; perhaps even the beginning of a new paradigm (S_2 in the lower-right position).

| | |
|----------|-------|
| $\$$ | S_1 |
| <i>a</i> | S_2 |

But the hysterical mode of discourse proves a deadlock as well; and eventually is bound to give way to a final shift. The scheme takes a final quarter turn into the discourse of the analyst, which basically poses a question to Perlmann as a tormented subject: What is it that you desire? Why is it that you find the words and the insights of Leskov (the absent Other) so valuable? What makes this object *a* (i.e. Leskov's intellectual property, the products of his "brain") so threatening, but also so alluring, that Perlmann puts his reputation and his career at risk to either appropriate them or to eliminate them (or both)? And why is Perlmann unable to produce these ideas himself, discarding his own notes (which actually move very much in the same direction) as kitsch, while regarded Leskov's ideas as truth? It becomes clear that the ideas of the other (*a*) function as an active agent (in the upper-left position), addressing and provoking Perlmann as tormented subject ($\$$ in the upper-right position), and almost *forcing* him into plagiarism:

| | |
|----------|-------|
| <i>a</i> | $\$$ |
| S_2 | S_1 |

The object *a* (the brain-picked property of the other) proves a toxic lure, however. Instead of saving his career, this desire ($\$ \diamond a$) actually ruins his academic existence.

The position of S_2 in the lower-left position (below the bar) implies that to *understand* Perlmann (to really *listen* to him), our accepted ideas and convictions concerning plagiarism must be suspended. In order for the discourse of the analyst to work, we must become aware that we *do not really know* what authorship (what originality, what plagiarism, what integrity) really *is*. Rather, the novel stages a collision between multiple possible views, with the analyst-novelist assuming the role of a rhetorician in the Lacanian sense: an expert in the dynamics and modes of discourse (Lundberg 2012; Lacan 1977–1978, p. 4).

As a concept, "plagiarism" is still there, and the signifier "plagiarism" (uppercase *S*) is powerful and functioning, and determining Perlmann's ideas about his works (the signified, lower-case *s*), in accordance with the (*S/s*) formula mentioned above. Indeed, for Perlmann, as soon as he (thinks he) has committed the act, the dreadful signifier "plagiarism" haunts him, as if uttered by the silent voice of a merciless superego. But the meaning, the signifier (lower-case *s*) associated with this signifier (*S*) may shift, may become displaced. Indeed, the novel forces us to acknowledge that we do not really know what the dreadful signifier "plagiarism" stands for. And it is only on the basis of this admission that we can hope to develop a workable normativity, an ethos of academic authorship which allows individuals to address emerging integrity challenges: S_1 in the lower-right position, as by-product of the current crisis.

8.9 Conclusion: What Is Plagiarism?

Authors evidently build on and respond to previous authors. As was already indicated above, we all dwell in a profoundly literate and discursive ambiance, so that all our writing is replete with influences, fragments, allusions, appropriations and borrowings (consciously as well as unconsciously) and profoundly dependent upon a world of collectively shared languages (Larochelle 1999, Sadler 2012). We *work* with and on ideas, but cannot meaningfully claim to *own* them. Indeed, given the chronic dependence of humans in general and of academic authors in particular upon discursivity, which is always already there, the concept of intellectual property seems difficult to uphold. We are continuously paraphrasing, repeating, glossing, recombining or parodying the words of others. Research, I would therefore argue, is not about intellectual property, but about intellectual *labour* (Zwart 1999). Or to put it in psychoanalytic terms: academic discursivity is about *Durcharbeiten*: about “working through”, a precarious process which unfolds between input and output. Citations and references acknowledge labour (effort) rather than property, for we do not really *own* our concepts, but we do work on them and contribute to them.

In *Perlmann's Silence*, it is precisely this process of working-through that becomes disrupted. The suffering (or even crisis) results from the “death” (the obliteration) of *the former self as author*. Due to a basic experience of rupture (splitting, *Spaltung*), a prominent academic has lost contact with his former prolific self and is therefore no longer able to appropriate and build on his own intellectual labour of the past (a life of effort, resulting in erudition). The prestige is still there, but he has lost his former ability to work-through. He no longer takes to writing as a practice of the Self, an activity which would have enabled him to suture the paralysing deficiency ($-\phi$). And precisely *because* he can no longer connect with his former Self, he resorts to a parasitical relationship with Leskov as a compensatory Other. His perpetration builds on the conviction that only the unpublished ideas of the (absent) Other are worthwhile to look into and propagate. Indeed, it is only as a translator and curator of Leskov's manuscripts that Perlmann is able to work. The absent Other (Leskov, marooned in Russia) functions as a replacement of an obliterated former Self. Plagiarism is literally brain-picking and the “brain” of the prolific other (Leskov) has become the perpetrator's object *a* as we have seen: an enigmatic entity which is both life-saving and devastating, both alluring and toxic, both familiar and foreign.¹² While intellectual labour (working-through as a practice of the Self) would have resulted in self-edification and self-repair, this option is no longer available to him. Due to the experience of splitting, the subject becomes “kenotic” (empty), falling victim to discursive erosion. Only the appropriation of the ideas of the other can stem this entropic disruptive process and compensate the loss.

¹²Cf. Lacan (1966–1967, p. 119) who argues, in his commentary on the plagiarising patient, that the brain of the other (the target of brain picking, but also the plagiarist's favourite dish) has become the impalpable object of desire: the plagiarist's *object a*.

To some extent the novel can be said to individualise the problem, addressing plagiarism in the form of a case history, but the systemic ambiance is addressed as well. It is in the contemporary academic arena that individuals are spurred into self-exhaustion, and Perlmann's crisis can be seen as symptomatic of transformations within the scientific production system as such. In other words, Mercier's novel amounts to a diagnostics: not only of individual deviance, but also of the current academic crisis. At the same time it is clear that, as an academic individual, the protagonist dramatically fails to live up to the challenge of re-establishing himself as author within a certain discursive constellation, although in principle he *could* have done so, for instance by actively taking up the role of steward of an absent voice. Perlmann's position is captured by a term already discussed in Chap. 4, namely *kenosis* (κένωσις,¹³ i.e. "emptying") in the sense that he suffers (like Sebastian Bloch) from an experience of emptiness, reflecting a profound *crisis* of academic authorship (perhaps even of authorship as such). But dialectically speaking, precisely such an experience of crisis and self-contradiction (M_2) is valuable, because it may give rise to new discursive practices of the Self, to a shift in discursive position, for instance in the direction of productive collaboration (consciously giving the floor to the voice of the absent Other and acknowledging this other's priority) as an alternative scenario for plagiarism (i.e. appropriating the voice and picking the brain of the other as a misguided strategy to fill the gap, as misconduct).

Science novels contribute to the research integrity debate neither by condoning nor by denouncing plagiarism (or other forms of misconduct) on the basis of established but perhaps questionable or outdated conventions (S_2), but rather by forcing us to reconsider some basic conceptions and challenges of academic authorship from multiple (epistemological, political and normative) perspectives. Via this oblique detour we may explore feasible scenarios that may help us to address (as individuals and as research communities) the current crisis of academic authorship ($\$$), perhaps resulting in the establishment of a new plateau of normativity ($\rightarrow M_3$).

¹³ Saint Paul, *Letter to the Philippians* 2:7.

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