Plagiarism, Honor and Meritocracy in Tobias Wolff’s *Old School*

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*Caveat:* Although I’m not an expert in American literature generally or in Wolff’s novels more specifically, I’m aware that attempting to glean moral lessons from any work of fiction risks doing a great injustice to the work. *Old School* is a very rich novel, with many wonderful insights and turns of phrase, most of which I’ll have to ignore here.

1) The character Susan Friedman writes to the narrator, “Plagiarism, not imitation, is the sincerest form of flattery” (157):

I winced when I first read that sentence, because plagiarism almost always involves an intentional theft of someone else’s ideas. So it’s hard for me to see plagiarism as flattery, let alone sincere flattery, since that implies giving the recipient a genuine compliment in a way that they will know they’ve been complimented. Plagiarism seems much more like a secret, cowardly, even lazy theft, something that the perpetrator wants to hide from everyone else, especially the source of the words they’ve stolen.

But it later struck me that in the particular case of “Summer Dance” in the novel, the narrator’s plagiarism does resemble a kind of sincere flattery, because he genuinely admires Susan Friedman’s writing style and psychological insights, and so completely identifies with her story that he doesn’t seem to recognize that he’s plagiarizing; he worries more that he’s disclosing too much about *himself*. He seems to steal without being aware that he’s stealing, and continues in that self-deception even after Hemingway praises the story as written “from his conscience” (135), until his illusion is shattered when he’s accused in the Headmaster’s office (142-144).

As Bill Giduz (College Communications) pointed out to me in conversation, the narrator’s belief that the plagiarized story was genuinely his seems unrealistic; it’s one of the only elements of the novel that I found unconvincing as well. But it also reminded me that students whom I’ve caught plagiarizing have almost always deceived themselves in some way, e.g., believing either that what they did wasn’t really stealing or dishonest, or that I wouldn’t be able to catch them. In some cases they also procrastinated for so long (like the novel’s narrator) that they had little or nothing of their own work to turn in when the paper’s deadline arrived, and in effect resorted to plagiarism out of laziness.

The narrator’s plagiarism can also be clearly distinguished from incidents of *imitation* elsewhere in the novel, e.g., when another student wins an award for a poem that he intended to be an *homage* to Robert Frost, even though Frost mistakenly interpreted it as caricature or light satire rather than an attempt to honor his poetic style (40-41, 48-50). I think we can draw a pretty clear line between intentionally overt imitation (whether flattering or insulting) and plagiarism, which is almost by definition covert. A student learning to understand and practice different prose or poetic styles might well be assigned to imitate any number of esteemed authors/poets, as the boys in the novel may have been encouraged and expected to do. (Recall the narrator’s typing out whole Hemingway stories.) Imitation need not be plagiarism.
Question: If the character Susan Friedman doesn’t care that the narrator plagiarized her story (161-162), does that make it okay? Nope. If he’d obtained her permission before rewriting her story as his, he wouldn’t strictly speaking have stolen it (making it unlike most cases of plagiarism); but his rewrite would still deserve the moral taint of plagiarism because it would be assumed by his readers to be an original work, hence deceptive and dishonest if submitted as it was for an essay competition, under his name and not hers. (Allowing one of your friends to submit a paper that you wrote commits the same foul.)

2) Mr. Ramsey’s disdain for the honor code (149):

Why would Mr. Ramsey think that it’s good to set strict rules for boys at the school and expel them if they break them, yet oppose calling a collection of such rules an “honor code”? “Strange word, honor—can’t be spoken aloud, turns immediately to bilge…. It’s disgusting, how we forever throw it about.” Perhaps he meant that honor is real, but that it’s a mysterious, even sacred thing that you either understand and value intuitively or you don’t, and that there’s no way to explain what it is to someone who doesn’t. But is that correct? Can’t we talk sensibly about honor, what it means and what it entails, without debasing the value/meaning of the concept itself? (I think we can.)

“Make good rules and hold the boys to them. No need to be pawing at their souls. Honor Code? Pretentious nonsense.” This is puzzling and startling, but very intriguing. Maybe Ramsey is suggesting that the boys are too young to understand or hold dear something as weighty as honor, and that all they should be expected to do is learn and live by good rules. I think there’s something to that, at least regarding the ages of the boys in the novel. Aristotle once said that we learn to be just by doing just acts, i.e., that learning to be moral as a child is more about imitation and habit than complex rational deduction; he was pessimistic about the value of teaching moral philosophy to adolescents. So maybe Aristotle would agree with Mr. Ramsey that a young person can’t be expected to fully understand or value a concept like honor, and so should not be made to feel deeply ashamed (“pawing at their souls”?) for doing something that in the adult world is considered dishonorable. Perhaps that is also why Ramsey is reluctant to expel the narrator, and so eager in later life to bring him back to campus as an honored writer.

One of the things that fascinates me about Davidson College’s honor system is that the first three words of the pledge are “On my honor…” In other words, the word “honor” in the pledge does not define what must be done or not done (cheating, dishonesty, stealing); that’s spelled out later and elsewhere. The pledge rather assumes that students already know what honor is, and value it so much that they offer it up as a kind of collateral, something very valuable that they nonetheless agree to relinquish if they violate the code, as a sign of their seriousness. Compare “Cross my heart and hope to die, if I’m not telling you the truth”: the speaker implies that he could justly be struck dead if he’s proven to be a liar; he’s offering up his own life as collateral. Davidson College students are similarly implying in their pledge that their own honor may be fairly taken from them if they cheat.

The idea of honor as collateral implied in “On my honor” is very old, going back at least as far as ancient Greece, when the most valuable thing someone could possess was the esteem of his fellow citizens. It’s an aristocratic idea in the original Greek sense of the best, most excellent, most admired people (aristoi). To cease to be admired by one’s peers was to lose everything of real value. Perhaps the author of Old School intends to evoke that in mentioning the narrator having won a prize (108) for an essay on Shakespeare’s sonnet, “When in disgrace
with Fortune and men’s eyes”—ironically prefiguring the narrator’s subsequent humiliation and expulsion.

(According to the late Arthur Adkins in *Merit and Responsibility*, the ancient philosopher Socrates tried to question some of those values, seeking to persuade his fellow Greeks that moral integrity or excellence of soul should not be seen to depend on social approval. Perhaps we ultimately owe to Socrates the fact that honor for us today is at least as much a matter of personal conscience as social esteem, that we feel guilty about doing something dishonorable even if we don’t get caught. But perhaps I digress.)

Now, it’s an interesting question as to whether all incoming Davidson freshmen can identify with the ancient, aristocratic sense of honor. I think that they can, in ways that might not be expected of younger people like the boys in the novel. But at least Davidson students might well find the word “honor” like Ramsey to be something that feels “pretentious” to talk about, perhaps holier-than-thou to claim as one’s possession. I think that’s actually a very healthy intuition. But I would then challenge Davidson students to reflect on ways in which something like honor might *come to mean* something to them that it hasn’t necessarily meant before. They might thus be encouraged to take personal ownership of the concept of honor, to work out how they might so identify with it that it would seem deeply “unnatural” for them to violate it.

Perhaps also, in good Aristotelian fashion, pledging on their honor (over and over again throughout their tenure at Davidson) may help to mold all of our students into genuinely honorable citizens, even if the concept of honor isn’t initially clear to them. I’d wager that Davidson alumni would almost unanimously testify to the formative power of that pledge.

3) Meritocracy:

If the word “honor” is somewhat contentious, both to us today and to Wolff’s characters, we can nonetheless readily identify with the importance that *Old School* students placed on meritocracy, “a system of honors [rewards, accolades] that valued nothing you hadn’t earned yourself,” an idea “so deeply held it was never spoken” (4). We and they strongly desire both to pursue excellence and to see it (and only it) rewarded. Any deviation from an impartial, consistent system of earned merits and demerits is *prima facie* unfair, unjust. We easily resonate with George Kellogg’s rhetorical question, “Would you actually accept an honor you didn’t win?” (55) Obviously (to us and them), no person of real integrity would do so. In fact, that reminds us of one of the reasons why plagiarizing papers and cheating on exams is unethical: their perpetrators seek rewards (in the form of high grades) that they haven’t earned.

However, the kind of meritocracy embraced by the novel’s characters (like the one endorsed or implied at Davidson College) is also tempered by an affirmation of *equal human dignity and worth*, and by *sympathy and compassion*. In those respects our ethical system is opposed to the contemptuous, arrogant and cruel sort of meritocracy advocated by Ayn Rand (91-96). Our code of honor at Davidson, unlike hers, is joined at the hip with mercy and forgiveness.