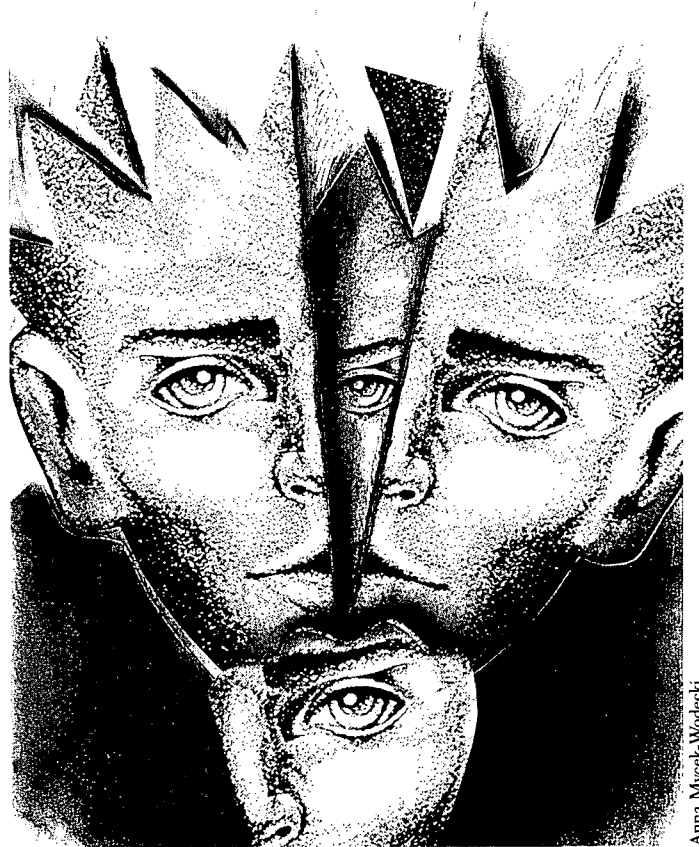


A Doctor in Spite of Himself

The Strange Career of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Dissertation

by Theodore Pappas



On December 3, 1989, the London *Telegraph* included a piece of academic news from the United States: "Researchers in his native Georgia must soon decide whether to reveal that the late Dr. Martin Luther King, murdered in 1968, was—in addition to his other human failings—a plagiarist. There is now much doubt as to whether his Ph.D. thesis was really his own work." This story had been making the rounds in academic circles for quite some time, but, as the *Telegraph* correctly added, "The story has not yet been published in the United States."

King received a Boston University Ph.D. in theology with a 1955 dissertation entitled "A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman." According to the rumor, King's discussion of Tillich was based on a dissertation by one Jack Stewart Boozer entitled "The Place of Reason in Paul Tillich's Concept of God," for which Boozer was awarded a Ph.D. in theology from Boston University in 1952. Boozer, who later became a professor of theology at Emory University, died in 1989. Dr. Clayborne Carson of Stanford University, chief editor of the King papers, quickly denied that there was any validity to the rumor, telling the

Telegraph, "It's really not true [that the dissertation was plagiarized]." When pressed whether the charge against King was entirely without substance, he reportedly replied: "It's hard to give a categorical answer. . . . What we're talking about is the question of whether there was adequate citation of all sources."

Dr. Ralph Luker of Emory University, the associate editor of the King papers, told the *Telegraph* that a research team was considering the possibility of plagiarism. "We're in the process of conducting our research, and will be able to report on that research within the next nine months." "It would be very foolish for us to attempt any kind of statement at this point," he added, "because our research is not complete. When we think we know what the situation is, then we will be prepared to report it." "Our reputations as historians are on the line."

Despite the serious nature of the charge, more than nine months have passed and no scholarly article has appeared and no discussion of the charges has occurred in our nation's press. The question is, are we dealing with a substantial case of plagiarism or merely an instance of careless documentation? To begin with, it is worth noting that King's dissertation deals with many of the same topics found in Boozer's dissertation, and that King reaches virtually every conclusion

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that Boozer does concerning Tillich's conception of God—that Tillich's thought is often paradoxical if not contradictory, that Tillich sees God as "being-itself," that Tillich in the end affirms a monistic system of theology not entirely unlike Plotinus's and Hegel's, etc. Even so, it is possible to borrow a man's ideas, arguments, and evidence but paraphrase his actual language in a way that manages to stop short of plagiarism.

But, as Samuel Johnson made clear, when "there is a concurrence of more resemblances than can be imagined to have happened by chance; as where the same ideas are conjoined without any natural series or necessary coherence, or where not only the thought but the words are copied," plagiarism is surely present. This remains to date the best definition of plagiarism, and if we apply it to this case we must reach the inescapable conclusion that Mr. King committed plagiarism repeatedly in the course of his dissertation.

It is not merely that King's argument, language, and choice of words run parallel with Boozer's, but that whole phrases, sentences, and even paragraphs are lifted verbatim from Boozer's text. Dr. Luker of Emory is correct in pointing out that King acknowledges, on page five, that a "fine" dissertation was done on Tillich in 1952. And King does say on page seven that "the present inquiry will utilize from these valuable secondary sources any results which bear directly on the problem, and will indicate such use by appropriate footnotes." King, however, does not do this. In fact, among the dozens of sections he lifts from Boozer, he footnotes Boozer only twice, on pages 123 and 161—and then he gets both footnotes wrong (the first quote is found on page 193 of Boozer's text, not page 209; and the second on page 63, not page 62).

A wrong footnote here or an incorrect page number there would not warrant a discussion of plagiarism. But such slips are symptoms and signs of a much more serious offense. There is virtually no section of King's discussion of Tillich that cannot be found in Boozer's text, and often the parallels are not simply similarities but downright duplications. In other words, contrary to Dr. Carson's claim, what is involved here is by no means a mere matter of inadequate citation, as the following examples will make clear. The cumbersome footnotes King and Boozer make to Tillich's original texts have been excluded. In none of the following passages does King footnote Boozer. On the subject of the Trinity:

King:

For Tillich the trinity is not the illogical and irrational assertion that three are one and one is three. It is a qualitative rather than a quantitative characterization of God. It is an attempt to express the richness and complexity of the divine life. . . . It is the abysmal character of God, the

Boozer:

The doctrine of the trinity is not the illogical assertion that three are one. Rather it is a qualitative characterization of God. It is an effort to express the richness of the divine life. . . . It is the abysmal character of God, the element of power, which is the basis of the

element of power which is the basis of the Godhead, "which makes God God." (pp. 152-153)

On dualism:

King:

[Dualism] is aware of the two poles of reality, but dualism conceives these in a static complementary relationship. Tillich maintains that these poles are related in dynamic interaction, that one pole never exists out of relation to the other pole. Herein is one of Tillich's basic criticisms of Hegel. Hegel, according to Tillich, transcends the tension of existential involvement in the concept of a synthesis. (p. 25)

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Boozer:

Dualism is aware of the two poles of reality, but dualism conceives these in a static complementary relationship. Tillich maintains that they are related in a dynamic interaction, that one pole never exists out of relation to the other pole. One feels here again that it is upon this issue that Tillich criticizes Hegel. For, according to Tillich, Hegel transcends the tension of existential involvement in the concept of a synthesis. (p. 268)

On God's manifestation in history:

King:

In a real sense, then, God manifests himself in history. This manifestation is never complete because God as abyss is inexhaustible. But God as *logos* is manifest in history and is in real interdependence with man. (p. 27)

Boozer:

In a real sense, then, God enters history, God manifests himself in history. This manifestation is never complete because God as abyss is inexhaustible. But God as *logos* is manifest in history and is in real interdependence with man and man's *logos*. (p. 270)

On correlation:

King:

Correlation means correspondence of data in the sense of a correspondence between religious symbols and that which is symbolized by them. It is upon the assumption of this correspondence that all utterances about God's nature are made. This correspondence is actual in the *logos* nature of

Boozer:

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God and the *logos* nature of man. (p. 21)

God and the *logos*-nature of man. (p. 265)

religious symbol is discovered one can be sure that here is an implicit indication of the nature of God. (pp. 22-24)

symbolize. Once a true religious symbol has been discovered one can be sure that here is an implicit indication of the nature of God. (p. 267)

On another meaning of correlation:

King:

A second meaning of correlation is the logical interdependence of concepts. It is polar relationships that fall chiefly under this meaning of correlation. . . . The world does not stand by itself. Particular being is in correlation with being-itself. In this second meaning of correlation, then, Tillich moves beyond epistemological considerations to ontological considerations. (p. 24)

Boozar:

A second meaning of correlation is the logical interdependence of concepts. Tillich regards polar relationships as falling under this meaning of correlation. . . . The world does not stand by itself. Particular being is in correlation with being-itself. In the second meaning of correlation, then, Tillich moves beyond an epistemological consideration to an ontological consideration. (pp. 267-268)

This last example is particularly revealing, because it shows not only the extent of King's plagiarism (every word on page 23 of King's text is lifted from Boozar), but also King's tactic of pasting together disparate sections of Boozar's text, in this case sections that are more than one hundred pages apart. The smooth and impressive manner in which King conjoined, word for word, different sections of Boozar's dissertation could not have been done without great circumspection and forethought.

The citations of such parallels could go on for many pages. King on freedom, page 312, is taken from pages 62 and 63 of Boozar. King on the "real interdependence of things and events," pages 25 and 26, is taken from page 269 of Boozar. King on the omnipresence of God, page 292, is taken from page 197 of Boozar. King on naturalism, or "humanism," page 18, is taken from pages 262 and 263 of Boozar. Et cetera.

On symbol and sign:

King:

A symbol possesses a necessary character. It cannot be exchanged. A sign, on the contrary, is impotent and can be exchanged at will. A religious symbol is not the creation of a subjective desire or work. If the symbol loses its ontological grounding, it declines and becomes a mere "thing," a sign impotent in itself. "Genuine symbols are not interchangeable at all, and real symbols provide no objective knowledge, but yet a true awareness." The criterion of a symbol is that through it the unconditioned is clearly grasped in its unconditionedness.

Correlation as the correspondence of data means in this particular case that there is correspondence between religious symbols and that reality which these symbolize. Once a true

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As any devotee of detective stories well knows, it is the slight slips and blunders that most often carry the gravest consequence for the perpetrator of the crime. It is the dropped cuff link or forgotten matchbook that often reveals the perpetrator's identity and seals his fate, and King and his dissertation are no exceptions. King's forgotten matchbook and dropped cuff link are a comma and a typo.

Amid a discussion of Tillich's conception of "creation," we find the following parallel.

King:

But Tillich does not mean by creation an event which took place "once upon a time." Creation does not refer to an event, it rather indicates a condition, a relationship between God and the world. "It is the correlate to the analysis of man's finitude, it answers the question implied in man's finitude and infinitude [sic] generally." Man asks a question which, in existence, he cannot answer. But the question is answered by man's essential nature, his unity with God. Creation is the word given to the process which actualizes man in existence. To indicate the gap between his essential

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nature and his existential
nature man speaks of
creation. (p. 125)

nature and his existential
nature man speaks of
“creation.” (pp. 45-46)

King has not only lifted this entire passage from Boozer’s text, but he has even copied an error in punctuation. The grammatically incorrect comma between the two words I have italicized in both paragraphs does not appear in the text of Tillich, who correctly punctuated with a period. Boozer, in quoting these lines from page 252 of volume one of Tillich’s *Systematic Theology*, mistakenly copied the period as a comma, and King simply copied Boozer’s mistake.

More problems arise in the pages concluding King’s section on Tillich. On page 159 King states that both he and the reader have now come to a question that has been “cropping up throughout our discussion of Tillich’s God-concept, viz., the question of whether Tillich holds to an absolute quantitative monism.” The reader can feel the build up to King’s exposition of his thesis, the pivotal point to which his previous one hundred and fifty pages have been leading. Not surprisingly, this just happens to be one of the crucial questions to which Boozer also builds. As Boozer states on page 60, “We come now to a crucial issue for an understanding of Tillich. Is man a part of God in an absolute quantitative monism?” Virtually every line of King’s concluding remarks on pages 159 and 160 can be found on pages 60 through 63 of Boozer’s dissertation.

King:

Perhaps Tillich’s most explicit statement of monism is his contention that “man’s love of God is the love with which God loves himself. . . . The divine life is the divine self-love.” . . . Passages such as these cited indicate an absolute monism. . . . Tillich affirms that there would be no history unless man were to some degree free; that is, to some extent, independent from God. . . . He [man] is to some extent “outside” the divine life. This means that he stands “in actualized freedom, in an existence which is no longer united with essence.” (p. 160)

Boozer:

But perhaps the most convincing statement of monism is in terms of love, that “man’s love of God is the love with which God loves himself. . . . The divine life is the divine self-love.” . . . Passages such as these certainly indicate an absolute monism. . . . There would be no history unless man were to some degree free; that is, to some degree independent from God. . . . He [man] is to some extent “outside” the divine life. “To be outside the divine life means to stand in actualized freedom, in an existence which is no longer united with essence.” (pp. 62-63)

King couldn’t even resist Boozer’s concluding comparisons. Boozer, page 61: “The similarity of Tillich’s theology with Hegel’s philosophy of spirit and Plotinus’ philosophy of the One inclines one to interpret Tillich as an absolute monist.” King, pages 159-160: “The similarity of Tillich’s view at this point to Hegel’s philosophy of spirit and Plotinus’ philoso-

phy of the One inclines one to interpret Tillich as an absolute monist.”

It is amid these concluding remarks that King commits another error. King quotes the following from Tillich on page 159 of his thesis: “God is infinite because he has the finite within himself united with his infinity.” Boozer uses this same quotation on page 61 of his thesis. Boozer, however, mistakenly credits it to page 282 of volume one of Tillich’s *Systematic Theology*, whereas the correct page number is 252. King again copies Boozer’s mistake and also types page 282 for his footnote to this quote. Interestingly enough, Boozer’s next line in this paragraph is another quotation from page 252 of Tillich’s text—“The divine life is creative, actualizing itself in inexhaustible abundance.” Not surprisingly, King follows with the same quote. This time, however, Boozer correctly cites page 252 in his footnote. King, still following Boozer’s previous mistake, continues incorrectly to cite page 282.

No further evidence is needed to conclude that King plagiarized his doctoral dissertation. But many questions remain, such as how Professor L. Harold DeWolf, the first reader of both Boozer’s and King’s dissertations, could have overlooked—intentionally or unintentionally—the similarities between the two theses. And what are we to make of the disingenuous statements made by the editors of the King papers, whose reputations—by their own admission—are on the line? The idea that they needed nine months to review the evidence is absurd. A few hours with each text is all that is necessary.


The story of King’s plagiarism has been suppressed for one simple reason: fear—fear of the massive retaliation that will be visited upon anyone who attempts to set the historical record straight, not just on King and his dissertation but on any historical incident on which the powers that be have declared an official position. Perhaps the editors of this magazine would have been wiser had they ignored this entire matter. But evidence of a cover-up made up our minds. We have learned, for example, that high-level administrators at several major universities have attempted to suppress this story and that at least one scholar has been bullied into silence. We also wonder why the National Endowment for the Humanities, which funds the King papers project and is well aware of the charge of plagiarism, has yet to take any action.

But other academic issues are also at stake. If one can believe the stories, plagiarism is on the rise in American universities. The most noted victim of plagiarism, Stephen Nissenbaum, has remarked (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 28, 1990) both upon the frequency of the crime and upon the academy’s refusal to do anything about it for fear of getting involved or appearing to pass judgment. As he concludes, “To be willing to pass judgment is to protect everybody—not only those who are victimized by plagiarism, but also those who are falsely accused of it.”

Then there is the reproof administered by the “ad interim” president of Boston University (see the Polemics & Exchanges section of this issue). Mr. Westling insists that scholars have “scrupulously examined and re-examined” King’s dissertation without being able to identify “a single instance of plagiarism”—no “misattributed quotations,” no “misleading paraphrases,” and no “thoughts borrowed with-

out due scholarly reference." He concludes his letter with this challenge: "If you or anyone else have evidence to the contrary, it should be presented." We issue a similar challenge to Mr. Westling, the editors of the King papers, and all other interested scholars: if you have any genuine evidence that might exonerate King, it should be presented.

A final comment. In their introduction to *We Shall Overcome: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Black Freedom Struggle*, editors Peter Albert and Ronald Hoffman argue that King's legend has actually impeded the progress of civil

rights in the United States. By lionizing the man, the movement has lost sight of the actual grass roots work on which success depends. This, of course, is nothing different from what Martin Luther King's best friend, the late Reverend Ralph Abernathy, had been saying all along: that the best thing King's supporters could do for themselves, for the movement, and for King is to celebrate the leader's virtues, his talents, his dreams, but not to make him into something he never was and something no man could ever be. 

HISTORICAL UPDATE

Following *Chronicles'* denunciation of King's plagiarism in mid-August (Perspective, September 1990), the *Wall Street Journal* broke the story on November 9, after we had already put together the January issue. The *New York Times* then followed with its own version of the story on November 10. The editors of King's papers apparently believed the cover-up had continued for long enough.

In fact, Mr. Clayborne Carson now admits that he and some twenty other members and associates of his advisory board have known about the plagiarism for over three years, but chose to suppress the story until now. Actually Carson spoke not of "plagiarism," but of "a pattern of textual appropriation." Carson even instructed his staff members not to use "the P word," and it may have been Carson's game of semantics that led the *Journal of American History* last June to reject his article discussing King's dissertation; as the *New York Times* reported, "the journal criticized Mr. Carson's unwillingness to take a firm stand on the question of plagiarism." Carson, it will be recalled, told the London *Telegraph* in September 1989, "It's really not true [that the dissertation was plagiarized]."

Boston University's ad interim president continued to claim until the eleventh hour, as is evidenced in his October 5 letter to *Chronicles* published on page four, that the dissertation had been "scrupulously examined" and that there was "not a single instance of plagiarism." Now, after the breaking of the story, Mr. Westling reports that the issue of plagiarism merits "close scrutiny." Apparently "scrupulously examined" means something less than "close scrutiny."

Most interesting is the spin that Mr. Carson and King's apologists are putting on the facts. Mr. Carson told the *Times* that King "acted unintentionally," and Joseph Lowery, president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, said King merely "overlooked some footnotes." The most ingenious excuse floated by King's apologists was that somehow King mistook the academy for a pulpit and wrote his dissertation the way black preachers, by their own admission, have long written their sermons: by plagiarizing. Keith Miller, a professor of rhetoric and composition at Arizona State University, has written two academic articles and is preparing a book on the many other papers and speeches that King also plagiarized. Apparently stealing words for a speech doesn't constitute plagiarism, or even "textual appropriation." Professor Miller and others call it "voice merging."

Serious questions of academic and journalistic integrity remain as a result of the attempted cover-up. First, Clayborne Carson has consistently misrepresented the facts of the case and continues, even after having admitted the plagiarism, to distort the evidence. Mr. Luker of Emory University, the associate editor of the papers, told the *Wall Street Journal* that, in dealing with King's plagiarism, "Clayborne has to achieve a position that is politically viable in the black community, politically respectable." No statement better shows the extent to which the editors of King's papers have ceased to act as scholars and begun to think like politicians. Carson receives public funds via the National Endowment for the Humanities for his abilities as a scholar, not as a politician or a civil rights leader, and as a result of suppressing this story the publication of King's works is now 16 months behind sched-

ule. Carson has clearly forfeited his right to be taken seriously as an editor, and if he hasn't already resigned his position, he should do so immediately, if only to restore some credibility to the project.

Second, David Garrow, a member of the project's advisory board and author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of King, *Bearing the Cross*, also now admits to having known about King's plagiarism and deliberately suppressing the story. Shouldn't he give back his Pulitzer?

Third, if Jon Westling as ad interim president of Boston University was acting under his own initiative in concocting the story of King's innocence, then he is either incompetent or a liar. In either case, he should resign from the university he has disgraced. If he was acting as an agent for President John Silber, then the next move is up to Silber—who could, at the very least, strip King of his degree.

Fourth, the National Endowment for the Humanities has known about the plagiarism for over a year. Instead of coming clean with the American taxpayers, who have funded the King papers project with a reported half million dollars, the Endowment simply sat on the facts. Mrs. Cheney owes us a full explanation of the role she and the NEH played in this matter.

Finally, the time has come for a frank and open debate on the significance of the King legacy. Unfortunately, the evidence is locked up in sealed FBI files. Instead of subjecting the nation to an unending series of disclosures and scandals, the government should unseal the documents. The issue is integrity—not of Martin Luther King, but of an American regime that refuses to tell the truth.

—T.P.

Great Exaggerations

by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

"Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning."

—Romans 15:4

The Death of Literature

by Alvin Kernan

New Haven and London: Yale University Press; 230 pp., \$22.50

By the early 1960's, conditions in America and in Europe had proceeded far enough that pundits and intellectuals on both sides of the Atlantic felt free to confirm what they referred to as "the death of God." At about the same time, a coterie of American academic literary critics, inspired by others of their kind in France, were preparing to announce "the death of literature." Since God and literature have been more or less inseparable at least as far back as the ancient Hebrew prophets, it was perhaps unsurprising that the two deaths should have been announced concurrently. On the other hand, one may wonder whether people for whom such venerable traditions as God and literature are dead may not rather be said themselves to have died in some essential part. Alvin Kernan, Avalon Professor of Humanities Emeritus at Princeton University, takes a less prophetic and more Olympian view of the matter. The God problem, first of all, does not exist for him within the context of the death of literature, the Word and works of art constructed by human beings of words being apparently unconnected in his mind at the metaphysical—or indeed at any—level. (On the one occasion Kernan does make reference to what he calls "the holy," he has in mind the events of the holocaust and its sufferings.) As for the literary problem, the "literature" that Kernan believes to be "dead" is something much more specific and limited than anything the reader, in com-

ing to his book, likely understands. "What has passed, or is passing," Kernan writes,

is the romantic and modernist literature of Wordsworth and Goethe, Valéry and Joyce, that flourished in capitalist society in the high age of print, between the mid-eighteenth century and the mid-twentieth. The death of the old literature in the grand sense, Shelley's unacknowledged legislation of the world, Arnold's timeless best that has been thought or written, Eliot's unchanging monuments of the European mind, from the rock drawings in Lascaux to *The Magic Mountain*. . . . Not so long ago at all, there seemed nothing absurd in Northrop Frye's argument in *Anatomy of Criticism* that the totality of literature formed an extensive scheme, mystical in its symbolism, but orderly in its structure, originating in the fears and desires constituting the human soul and moving through history in the form of the great literary myths, corresponding with nothing less than the seasonal cycles of the natural year.

This understanding of literature appears restrictive enough to alleviate one's sense of dis-ease, until the realization dawns that Kernan is not speaking just of Romantic and Modernist literature, which after all forms a relatively small part of the corpus of Western literary works, but of the Romantic and Modernist comprehension of that whole as well: one which, moreover, prevailed as recently as the early 1960's, when it was laid precipitate siege to by "phenomenology, structuralism, deconstruction, Freudianism, Marxism, [and] feminism" in the universities and by what Kernan calls "the hermeneutics of sus-



Anna Mycek-Wodecki

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