

**FORGERY, DIS/POSSESSION, VENTRILOQUISM
IN THE WORKS OF A. S. BYATT
AND PETER ACKROYD**

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Much has been written about the propensity of a vast part of contemporary fiction to seek its own voice via what Julian Barnes came to define in *Flaubert's Parrot* as literary psittacism. The law of the new that sustained literary modernity has been overthrown by the melancholy, Borgesian conviction that everything has been said. The pervading presence of parody, ventriloquism, reappropriation and travesty in contemporary English fiction especially seems to suggest that the guiding principle of innovation is on the wane and consequently that the author's authority over his/her creation will necessarily have to be redefined. The ventriloquism favoured by A.S. Byatt, Peter Ackroyd, Julian Barnes, and before them Angela Carter indeed implies a form of delegation of the power of voice to an instance whose identity is irremediably hybrid, in-between, as if un-authorized.¹ The very concept of creativeness seems to have become depleted and replaced with a weaker version of invention that equates writing with the mere reactivation of past idioms, with a form of clever if exhausted mimicry.

As if in a kind of infinite regress, acknowledging the exhaustion is in itself always already a cliché handed down to us by the theories of aesthetic negativity (Budick and Iser, 1987). As such, the demise of originality does not necessarily entail any drastic rethinking of the mimetic agenda of writing. On the contrary, for many a critic of our so-called postmodern condition, from Zygmunt Bauman to Fredric Jameson, from Jean Baudrillard to Charles Jencks, the logic of appropriation is in

tune with the cultural logic in which we are caught, a cultural logic which results in the blurring of the former distinction between model and copy and which exploits the nostalgic counterfeiting of the past. With the 'pale of history', to resort to Arthur Danto's expression (Danto, 1997), historicism seems to have got the upper hand and to have ousted the modern arch concept of history, just as originality has been superseded by mimicry. Unlike Jameson's reading of historicism however, Danto's interpretation of this change of dominant remains resolutely optimistic, in spite of the fact that he acknowledges the current age to be one of 'aesthetic entropy' (Danto, 1997: 12). To him,

the major artistic contribution of the decade was the emergence of the appropriated image—the taking over of images with established meaning and identity and giving them a fresh meaning and identity (Danto, 1997: 15).²

However, placing history under aesthetic erasure may also be interpreted as spelling the demise of creativity, as a perverse embracing of the spirit of death, as a renunciation to the genuinely dialectical affirmative energy of art. Fredric Jameson's by now well-known denunciation of parody as "speech in a dead language" (Jameson, 1991: 17) warns us against the all too enticing lures of nostalgic parody that forecloses the concept of originality to enclose us in a dizzying hall of mirrors. Whether one chooses to read this undoing of the concept of originality and authenticity as meaning the end of art or as implying a change of dominant the consequences of which it is our task to fathom, one cannot deny that the logic of aesthetic appropriation compels us to rehistoricize our understanding of such notions as authenticity, originality, forgery and, symmetrically, to try and assess the ideological import of such insistent return of/to the past of writing.

Haunted fakes

A.S. Byatt's *Possession* and many of Peter Ackroyd's novels, from *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* to *Chatterton* and *English Music* seem, at first glance, to be arch examples of the rampant historicism Jameson perceives to be at work in today's art. Their historicism does not confine itself to the realm of style; to a great extent it becomes the very stuff of their elegiac plots. In *Possession*, as in *English Music*, the elegiac mood ties in with the traditional heuristics of narrative, both novels resorting to the archaic motif of the quest. In *Possession*, the two protagonists—two present-day 19th century literature scholars—have embarked on the excavation of the hidden lives of two Victorian poets inspired by Robert Browning and Christina Rossetti. One of the present-day protagonists proving to be the descendant of both poets, they eventually succeed in retracing the lost threads of

filiation—where previously there only existed random connections and misconstrued traces surfacing in inscrutable, mislaid letters, cryptic poems or lost tokens of love and betrayal. In *English Music* Tim, the child-medium, travels back into adapted versions of *Great Expectations* or of Blake's epic texts, meets William Byrd or William Hogarth, in order to uncover the essence of the Englishness of English art.³ *Chatterton* elaborates on the paradigm of appropriation and deceit even more explicitly by developing five interwoven narratives offering five variants on a central meditation on authenticity, appropriation, forgery, creative authority and impersonation. Chatterton himself is, for instance, revealed to have faked his own suicide; in the present time, an arthritic painter employs a forger to produce paintings in his own manner; the central plot describes the quest of a failed writer hunting for the truth behind Chatterton's life of make-believe, a last plot describing Henry Wallis and George Meredith's confrontation as the painter paints his famous portrait of the novelist as Chatterton on his death-bed.

In all cases, the quest motif is too insistent to be anything but ironical. As often as not, these journeys towards the light of truth and a sense of authentic plenitude, will in fact disclose nothing but a sense of absence and dereliction. Byatt's and Ackroyd's fantasies seem to suggest that the exploratory dynamics of literature has run its course. This is the well-rehearsed tale of the end of all histories: once it has moved beyond its former historical condition, writing is supposedly condemned to be haunted, to shadow the past and to try to appropriate it in slightly adapted versions echoing lost original voices. When the energy of creation has become exhausted, only re-creation, in the two meanings of the term, subsists.

One may consider Byatt's and Ackroyd's haunted tales to pander to the syncretic playfulness of the clever art of citation favoured by such advocates of stylistic pluralism as the architect Robert Venturi. Unhinged from their historical frame, the literary references, the quotations and reconstructed texts, in the manner of Blake or Rossetti, Browning or Dickens, may seem to be mere floating signs, textualist stratagems, disenfranchised from history.⁴

The matter is of course far more complex than might be suggested by Jameson's dismissal of textualism and of its related historicism. The paradigms or metaphors adduced by Byatt and Ackroyd to convey the incapacity to exorcise the anxiety of influence speak for themselves. If Byatt and Ackroyd are possessed by the past, theirs is anything but a playful kind of possession. It is a "demonic possession", as Ackroyd himself suggests in relation to T.S. Eliot's *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (Ackroyd, 1993: 27). When the sacred fount of art has dried up, no parousia is to be expected, except one of a dark, crepuscular kind. Writing is caught in an echo-chamber of its own making, an echo-chamber haunted with ghostly visions. The fact that Byatt should have chosen to stage the resolution of the plot

of *Possession* in a churchyard, where the characters unearth the hitherto unknown last letter of Christabel La Motte to Randolph Ash is allegorical of Byatt's understanding of literature's present predicament. Ackroyd's biography of William Blake similarly pictures the poet-seer finding his inspiration as well as learning his trade in Westminster Abbey as he makes drawings of the monuments for the first volume of Richard Gough's *Sepulchral Monuments in Great Britain* which James Basire had been commissioned to prepare engravings for:

He experienced an intense collaboration with mortality, and with the remnants of the past [...] He entered a communion with the dead, with the passage of the generations, and thereby was granted a vision of the world that never left him (Ackroyd, 1996: 46).

It is only logical that Chatterton and Blake should be seen to commune in a common reverence for the past which eventually makes the binary opposition between authenticity and forgery of little account and which concurrently redefines writing as possession (Ackroyd, 1996: 44). While trying to forge anew, to reinvent language, the writer is condemned in fact to be spoken by the past, is encrypted in the monumental, funeral architecture of past literature. In that respect the ambiguity of Randolph Ash's surname, in *Possession*, is all too transparent. Coleridge's organic vision of the natural development of the tree of literature may in fact only disclose a landscape of cold ashes. Negativity would thus seem to have triumphed over the modern principle of invention.

Memory, or more precisely hypermnesia, disempowers the writer who, like Ackroyd's own version of the Pip of *Great Expectations*, is doomed to wonder endlessly:

What have I inherited? And from what —from whom— have I inherited it? I walk, I talk, as if everything were of my own volition, as if I understood precisely what it was that sent me rushing through the world. But now it is as if I were possessed by a stranger. Literally possessed (Ackroyd, 1992: 84).

The same insistent sense of possession pervades all of Ackroyd's texts, his biographies as well as his novels or his monumental essays such as *London. The Biography* or *Albion*. The test of literariness lies in its capacity to sing the dead back to life with "a terrible threnody" (Ackroyd, 1991: 546). Such communing with the ghostly shadows of the past may be interpreted as a mere homage to the unique Gothic spirit of English literature; it is also an implicit attack on the enduring modern law of innovation and inventiveness.

The truth of forgery: towards impersonality

Redefining writing as possession implies that one turns one's back on the Platonic binary opposition between original and copy, between truth and make-believe, while paradoxically reinstating it. In *Possession*, *Chatterton* and *English Music*, Byatt and Ackroyd seem in fact to have moved a long way from the system of values of which the opposed concepts of originality and forgery partook. For all its dubiousness, for all its destabilizing of the established contours of authenticity, the contract inherent to forgery still necessitated faith in the metaphysics of presence and of truth. The pragmatics of forgery relies on our being able to distinguish ontologically between truth and lie. Ackroyd's dizzying meditation on the demise of this ontological set of beliefs in his novel *Chatterton* jeopardizes this ontological contract. The plot running parallel to the central character's hunt for what proves in fact to be an apocryphal version of Thomas Chatterton's life, and in which the assistant of a famous painter takes over from him and produces paintings which become indistinguishable from what the originals might have been, allegorizes the ontological questioning central to today's redefinition of originality. The mirror-effects created between the two plots also reflect and reflect on the economics of authority underwriting the concept of authenticity. "What's in a name?" Ackroyd seems to ask with Shakespeare's Juliet, if not the key to the interlacing of authorship and authority, if not the fetishistic transmutation of the artist's aura into a legally binding reference.

The moment the seals of this legally binding distinction between truth and lie have been broken, the moment one starts considering that "the truest Plagiarism is the truest Poetry" (Ackroyd, 1988: 87), writing escapes the jurisdiction of originality to pass into that of inventive mimicry. Pastiche as it is practiced by Ackroyd and Byatt seems thus to function not so much as a weaker form of forgery but rather as a paradoxical form of creative imitation. The text flaunts its stylistic mask instead of erasing the clues to its facticity. Its purpose is thus not to steal a stylistic identity, but on the contrary to leave the breach unhealed and insist that this raising of the literary dead yields but a second hand identity. Like forgery, contemporary pastiche still avails itself of the auratic value of authenticity. However its polyphony fails to achieve perfect impersonation and is thus as melancholy as it is playful. In that respect it may be interpreted as some failed work of mourning which endlessly commemorates voices that were once incarnate and vibrant with a sense of presence.

The quest for the buried words of Randolph Ash and Christabel la Motte in *Possession* or Tim's distraught pilgrimage in *English Music* eventually come to hollow out the writer's voice. The characters are seen struggling with a heritage that weighs them down, that possesses them to the point of making them

impersonal. Appropriation thus also makes for an extreme form of impersonality that is indebted to Eliot's definition of the concept while placing this definition at one remove.

Ackroyd and Byatt seem to agree with Eliot that writing is partly ventriloquism. Ackroyd's biography of Eliot repeatedly insists on the poet's capacity to impersonate voices, to put on stylistic masks in his creative borrowing of styles and syntax "which releases a plethora of 'voices' and perceptions" (Ackroyd, 1993: 117). Just as much a form of training or drilling as the one gone through by academic painters, this borrowing also means that "there is no 'truth' to be found, only a number of styles and interpretations —one laid upon the other in an endless and apparently meaningless process" (Ackroyd, 1993: 119). According to the biographer, the same impersonality, the same evasion of truth is to be found in Dickens's "ability [...] to assume a variety of characters and voices" that suggest "both a mastery and an evasion of personality" so that impersonation becomes "a way of lifting the burden of selfhood" (Ackroyd, 1991: 147).⁵

16 Yet, one should draw a distinction between the syncretic capacity that according to Eliot was also of the essence of writing and Ackroyd's or Byatt's own handling of ventriloquism in *English Music* or *Possession*. Whereas for T.S. Eliot the poet was able to engage with a tradition that was simultaneously authorized and empowered by this engagement, today's great ventriloquists admit to being aesthetically possessed and condemned to be spoken by the past without necessarily succeeding in transcending it. Failing to forge a new language out of the voices of the past, the writer is doomed to remain an imposter, an impersonator merely adopting a series of stylistic postures: Browning's dramatic monologue, Blake's epic accents or Wilde's theatrical voice in *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*. The experience of dis/possession cannot be overcome; on the contrary it is relentlessly repeated. Tim's encounter with the Red Queen in Ackroyd's rewriting of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in chapter two of *English Music* is in that respect allegorical of the disempowering of the writing self. Unable to remember his name Tim is christened by the Red Queen "Isoecho" which, the red Queen insists, "means I saw echoes" (Ackroyd, 1992: 31). The vocalic indeterminacy is emblematic of the papery flimsiness of the writer who has no proper voice anymore. Already in his early *Notes for a New Culture*, Ackroyd had laid emphasis on Pound's reworking of the modern poetic "I" which was no longer, according to his reading of Pound, "that of moral experience [...] but the combined voice of earlier poetry" (Ackroyd, 1976: 35).⁶

Such undoing of originality, such emphasis on the collective nature of inspiration was of course already central to earlier definitions of the art of citation or of forgery. However successful, forgery also posited that individual genius could be

appropriated. The status of the very concept of creation has however irremediably changed. Contemporary ventriloquism seems to imply that the process of covert empowering inherent to Chatterton's romantic forgery or to modernist intertextuality is no longer to be achieved. Deprived of the creative impact of Eliot's syncretic impersonality, it fails to rethink the collusion existing between the logic of aesthetic property and the Kantian (and then modernist) concept of genius which allows Eliot and Pound to reclaim the past in order to claim quotation to be creative. On the contrary, it corroborates this collusion while refusing to exploit it and to appropriate the past as modernist poets or artists would appropriate found objects or found texts. The voice of pastiche remains literally improper, avowedly fake. Furthermore, unlike the true counterfeiter —to coin a paradoxical phrase— the ventriloquist does not pocket the benefits to be derived from eschewing one's self in order to become somebody else.

The position of the ventriloquist is an ambiguous one. He does not truly appropriate the other's voice so as to truly avail himself of his aura; yet he necessarily needs this aura to validate his own literary venture into the always already known. Thus he both kills the author while forcefully reinstating him as a set of distinguished and distinguishable style effects, or as this "fonction auteur" introduced by Michel Foucault (Foucault, 1983). The very pragmatics of *Possession* and *English Music* relies on this mannerism, if one may take the concept literally, the text affecting the reader in so far as it affects to mimic past voices.

The ventriloquist does not so much construct himself as other, as disembodiment himself, lingering thus as the empty echo of a once authentic voice which he however needs in order to flaunt his own emptiness. As the respectful heir to a great, now impoverished line, the ventriloquist sidesteps the discredit that eventually attaches to the forger, while never fully basking in the aura of stolen or faked identity. *English Music* is in that respect exemplary of the new economics of intertextuality and of literary value that has replaced the former more daring logic of forgery. One can only give Ackroyd credit for always crediting his sources of inspiration. His work's credit lies precisely in its intelligent aesthetic investment, in its openly acknowledging what his vested interests are. Symmetrically its value lies, at one remove, in the value Dickens's, Carroll's, Blake's works have been invested with by literary history. Paradoxically such complex transfer of value relies on the now exhausted belief in the metaphysics of presence according to which the use value of a text lay precisely in its being attributable to a unique, original voice.

Needless to say, ventriloquism may yield itself to a different, altogether more optimistic interpretation. According to this, intertextual free play is achieved which allows us to escape the strictures of authenticity and enjoy the communion of spirits more characteristic of the pre-modern era. As Michel Schneider reminds us in his

essay on plagiarism, the ideology of aesthetic authenticity is but a recent invention, following in the wake of the modern definition of genius and of the autonomous subject. In France, the legislation on intellectual property was introduced with the Revolution in 1791 and then 1793 (Schneider, 1985: 39). Does the end of the grand-narrative of artistic progress thus release us into a form of uchronia already present in Dickens's imagination ("There is something which exists beyond the ordinary reaches of chronology; and it is to be found in Dickens's novels" [Ackroyd, 1991: 667]) and also fantasized by Jorge Luis Borges in "Tlön Uqbar Orbis Tertius"? Could the desubjectivation of the writer's voice, his disempowerment be a paradoxical instrument of the immanence characteristic, according to Ihab Hassan, of postmodernist literature and of the death of the subject and of the all-powerful romantic figure of the author (Hassan, 1987)?

Already in his *Notes for a New Culture*, Ackroyd extolled the virtues of a language, here embodied by Joyce's *Ulysses*, which would have "retrieved its history" and which "emerges as its only subject", a literature "about nothing" (Ackroyd, 1976: 59). According to this reading of intertextuality, literature authorizes, begets itself in an ongoing dialogue with the past, once it is disencumbered of the overweening authority of the subjective writer.⁷ This is what, according to Ackroyd, Chatterton had already understood and the paradoxical "truth" Blake learnt from him (Ackroyd, 1996: 50). Flouting diachrony, all Ackroyd's seers seem to espouse the same belief in the communion of minds across History. The *Discourses* of Sir Joshua Reynolds which provide one of the epigraphs to *English Music* and Eliot's opening words to "Burnt Norton" which haunt Ackroyd's entire work would thus partake of the same vision of the dehistoricized immanence of creation.

Invention, strictly speaking, is little more than a new combination of those images which have been previously gathered and deposited in the memory: nothing can come of nothing.

Joshua Reynolds, *Discourse II*

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past.

T.S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton"

Writing seems here to have become paradoxically apostate in this disenfranchisement from the yoke, the authority of authorship. Yet its freedom is not that of the modern heroic shelleyan poet-hero who forges a new idiom and breaks his chains. It pertains to a different form of hypostasis according to which the figure of the author is superseded by that of a collective spirit seen to be at the very root of all writing and which transcends individual authors, thus making the concept of forgery or of innovation irrelevant to the proper understanding of the value of art.

Commemoration

Writing holds the entire history of literature at the tip of its pen. Yet the reconfiguration involved in this process of reappropriation is of a mournful sort. Once more, the ultimate mood of literary appropriation remains ambivalent. As the metafictional paradigms referring to the world of death to be found everywhere in Ackroyd's texts and in Byatt's *Possession* imply, the capacity of literature to reinvent the past, to forge it anew has become problematic. Whereas, in "The Literature of replenishment", John Barth could hail the arrival of a generation of writers who "neither merely repudiate nor merely imitate either [their] twentieth-century modernist parents or [their] nineteenth-century premodernist grandparents" (Barth, 1992: 178). Contemporary pastiche seems to preclude any transcendence of the past. Cultural commemoration has replaced invention. Writing has become one of the "memory sites" analysed by Pierre Nora (Nora, 1992), a uchronian space in which texts are seen to wander endlessly as *Blake's* incipit suggests: "In the visionary imagination of William Blake there is no birth and no death, no beginning and no end, only the perpetual pilgrimage within time towards eternity" (Ackroyd, 1996: 3).

In lieu of the breakthrough of the new, appropriation orchestrates the return of identifiable, stable identities by plundering a cultural habitus common to the prospective readers. Instead of opening a new space of indeterminacy and *unheimlichkeit*, it takes us back to the hearth/heart of our aesthetic *heim* or home, to Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities" (Anderson 1983). Writing proves literally nostalgic, aching with a longing to be taken back to its imaginary origins. As Harold Bloom and then Margaret Rose suggested about parody, it thus also involves a form of "strong reading" (Rose, 1993: 90), which in turn defines a community of model readers, as if retroactively. Yet unlike parody, pastiche, as it is practiced in *English Music* and *Possession*, does not seem to have any obvious critical intent. It does undoubtedly reflect upon canon formation, yet does not engage in a critical dialogue with the canon it elects as worthy of being appropriated. The genius of culture, the "music of Albion", seems to have silenced individual genius. The recreation of past idioms, of lost cadences is always a resuscitation (Ackroyd, 1996: 250). Writing may thus be redefined as prosopopeia, a prosopopeia that deprives literature of any dialectical capacity. Its pragmatic effect lies almost exclusively in its ability to arouse echoes. It thus triggers off a process of stylistic identification in the reader which folds the canon back upon itself and indeed forecloses the history of literary forms. Beyond the pale of history, only a form of nostalgic historicism seems to prevail which one could easily mistake for the "blank parody" of the neo aesthetics denounced by Fredric Jameson (Jameson,

1991: 17). As a kind of extended prosopopeia, it can indeed be conceived as "speech in a dead language", as literally "the wearing of a linguistic mask".

However, Ackroyd's and Byatt's cryptographic art is removed from the "random cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion" (Jameson, 1991: 18) Jameson sees as archetypal of neo aesthetics. Their nostalgic mood is indeed ambiguous. While it seems to pander to the conservative nostalgia of our heritage culture, it also concurrently functions as an allegorical reflection deconstructing our cultural habitus as well as our —admittedly— conservative sense of loss. The art of appropriation is anything but random and —if one may return to the economics of authenticity previously analysed— gratuitous. Indeed the price of appropriation is a heavy one to pay, since it is that of originality and autonomy. Far from being a remote and soothingly containable fantasy, this "English music" is, if anything, in fact all too haunting, all too authoritative, all too culturally binding still, its "hieroglyph [...] encircles us" (Ackroyd, 1992: 172). Similarly, far from resulting in the "waning of affect" denounced by Jameson in the contemporary triumph of simulacra, ventriloquism becomes deeply elegiac. But its nostalgia is far from playful, far from soothing. The past is indeed a distant country which no commemoration is likely to take us back to; yet we keep harking back, yearning to be reunited with its supposed sense of plenitude.

Paradoxically a form of contradictory historicity is reinstated in this open breach which challenges the common idea that literary appropriation allows literature to opt out of history. The pain involved in conjuring up a departed language, a departed sense of belonging necessarily situates the novelist in a historical continuum, however dislocated it may be. A contradictory sense of historicity is consequently achieved which makes it impossible for the art of appropriation to step out of history while conjuring up only a landscape of borgesian circular ruins.⁸ As is suggested by the paronomastic play on words linking "dad", "dead" and "farther" introduced in Tim's dialogue with Obstinate and Pliable, in chapter two of *English Music* ("I wish Dad were here. He would know exactly what to do" / "I shouldn't say dead if I were you. I should say farther" [Ackroyd, 1992: 29]), innovation is inextricably bound up with the acknowledgement of the writer's symbolical debt to his forefathers, while paradoxically this very debt seems to lock him in a deathly embrace with the past, to bury or encrypt creativeness even as it is formulated.

Yet an altogether different kind of reading could be proposed of the dis/possession at work here. Appropriating and reconfiguring the past may also afford us some purchase on a meaningless present. Far from relinquishing their faith in the past, Byatt and Ackroyd rely on the persistent value of inherited voices to bail the present out of anomia. Part of the popularity of *Possession* and *English Music* stem

from the fact they are essentially "romans à clefs" which impose a strong reading by which a sense of cultural order is eventually achieved. To counter the "waning of affect", ventriloquism still needs, like forgery, the seal of the author's stylistic signature. Modern art conceived itself as intrinsically apostate. For Byatt and Ackroyd there is, on the contrary, no apostasy, no running away from the past. In that respect, nostalgic pastiche is indebted to this metaphysics of presence the free play of heteroglossia is supposed to deconstruct. It is this very metaphysics of presence which, albeit of a shadowy nature, may instil some sense of meaningfulness into a derelict present.

Byatt's private pantheon is in itself revealing. According to her the great writers of the Victorian age (Browning, Tennyson or George Eliot) already conceived of writing as a form of resuscitation, as a form of prosopopeia which had the capacity to raise the dead. In her essay "Robert Browning: Fact, Fiction, Lies, Incarnation and Art", she thus turns the miracle of Elisha (2 Kings: 4.34) into an allegory of writing. Quoting from Book I of *The Ring and the Book*: "Mimic creation, galvanism for life / But still a glory portioned in the scale", Byatt construes resurrection in terms metaphorical of pastiche and mimicry: "The act of resuscitation is an act of love; it is a passing of life and identity from one figure to the identical other, which then warms" (Byatt, 1993: 47). In this transfusion, the respective identities of the dead and of the miracle-worker come to be blurred. In the miracle of Elisha, the dead child is brought back to life by the prophet's breath. The past still has the privilege of essence and presence over a bloodless present waiting to be galvanized into existence.⁹

Yet Byatt also knows that between the parable and Browning's appropriation there lies this same breach which ventriloquism fails to heal. According to Byatt, Browning, like Tennyson, writes on the brink of a tomb, in the full awareness that the "glory portioned" by "mimic creation" is but a thin-blooded version of the original words. The mournful elegies of Browning, the sad dirges of William Byrd, the haunting words of Thomas Chatterton share with their contemporary recreation an experience of writing as postlapsarian. There is no going back to an original text that would guarantee the authenticity of meaning. Writing is always apocryphal. Moving beyond the grand-narrative of aesthetic progress may have laid bare the deceptiveness of originality. However for Byatt and Ackroyd it has not excoriated the desire to achieve incarnation, to steal the right Promethean fire. If anything it has made it more urgent.

Notes

1. I do not mean to suggest that all practice a similar kind of rewriting or reappropriation. Needless to say, Carter's forceful political agenda in her rewriting of Perrault's tales in *The Bloody Chamber* allows her to write very much in her own name and her intertextuality precisely entails a foregrounding of the feminine voice in this radical reappropriation of masculine discourse. Nevertheless, one should ponder on this very post-modern move which leads Carter back to the present of writing via such a circuitous path. As such it implicitly reveals how problematic the very notion of novelty may have become in a present that is no longer that of the avant-garde and yet which comes after the great avant-gardes.

2. Ihab Hassan chooses to read our posthistorical condition in a similarly positive light when he commends art's present "dialectic of equitemporality" — a concept borrowed from Heidegger — which he perceives as "a new relation between historical elements, without any suppression of the past in favor of the present" (Hassan, 1987: 171).

3. In that respect, *English Music* may be considered as the novelistic matrix of Ackroyd's most recent essay, *Albion. The Origins of the English Imagination* (Ackroyd, 2002), in which he elaborates his own haunting nostalgia into a national, atemporal trait of character, thus implicitly sidestepping the current warnings against the dangers of historicism. Needless to say, Ackroyd's nostalgic national narrative is anything but ideology-free, since it can easily read as a belated, post-modern version of the Burkean conservative defense of the transcendent authority of the stabilising dialectic of permanence through change.

4. One must at this point insist on the historicity of the very concept of textualism. Even in the field of French

formalist theory, this disenfranchising has a history, if only the history which, under the influence of the Tel Quel group and of Roland Barthes, brought the author to the scaffold and hailed the triumph of the text and of the abstract concept of writing. This history has not gone unheeded. As early as 1983, Marc Angenot chose to deconstruct its hidden logic, already bearing in mind the way the notion of intertextuality had travelled across the Atlantic and had been appropriated by Fredric Jameson, Jonathan Culler and Harold Bloom (Angenot, 1983).

5. See also his description of Dickens, like Eliot, as a "ventriloquist" (Ackroyd, 1991: 283).

6. Although this essay — which Ackroyd actually disowns today as the mere rambling of a complacent research student — remains in the line of the grand narrative of modernism as the last and supreme stage in the glorious story of aesthetic autonomization, a hindsight effect may also allow us to read in its foregrounding of impersonality the incipient meditation on the dialectic of possession and dispossession that is central to the rest of his work. Thus his interest in Duchamp's ready-mades and on their "overturning of the metaphysics of 'presence' within the object, of what is unique and personal" (Ackroyd, 1976: 44) can be interpreted as an anticipation of his definition of writing as haunted impersonation.

7. In his history of the concept of intertextuality, Marc Angenot of course insists on the coincidence between the rise of intertextuality and the critique of the subject heralded by Tel Quel or Lacan (Angenot, 1983: 130).

8. See Jorge Luis Borges, *Fictions*. Peter Ackroyd's novel *First Light* already exploits a similar set of metaphors, including the archeological paradigm, to systematize a circular conception of creation, across time.

9. For his part, Ackroyd insists on the influence Swedenborg had on Blake because of his belief "that the spirits of the dead rose from the body and reassumed physical form in another world. He was the

philosopher who could give substance to Blake's visions, in other words, and reaffirm Blake's own instinctive sense of life and death" (Ackroyd, 1996: 99).

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Catherine Bernard

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**EVERYTHING YOU ALWAYS HATED ABOUT
THATCHER'S BRITAIN: A CULTURAL ANALYSIS
OF MIKE LEIGH'S *HIGH HOPES* (1988)¹**

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One of the major trajectories in cultural studies has been to introduce into the academy previously excluded and disenfranchised subjects (Abbas, 1996: 290). In this respect even a late-comer like Spain has benefitted from developments abroad. Indeed, already in the 50s and 60s, cultural studies emerged in Britain as a form of dissent against the ideological bias of ruling-class culture, which took the directions of a critique of ideology, the study of subcultures and working-class cultures, and the study of the mass media. The related critiques of race and gender soon also became part of the same agenda, followed (especially in the United States) by multiculturalism and the politics of identity which allowed ethnic minorities to voice their dissenting views on Western *historical* culture (Robins, 1997:61; Gilroy, 1997: 299-346).

From this very brief rehearsal of well-known trends, the obvious observation is that the enlarged and inclusive notion of culture developed by cultural studies in Britain and the United States (without forgetting Canada or Australia) has won real spaces in the Spanish academy, most universities having by now opened their curricula to marginal voices and positions. And yet, in its travels to Spain, it seems that cultural studies has simultaneously lost or shed one of its most important peculiarities: namely its radical, critical, *political* sparkle.² As I have argued elsewhere (1999:12-13; 2001: 15-18), despite the number of self-declared cultural studies courses, projects and publications crowding the academic marketplace, so far, there have