

Fabian Ivanovici*

**FORGERIES, FALSEHOODS AND FIGURATIONS:
READING TRUTH(S) IN
PETER ACKROYD'S CHATTERTON**

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Abstract: *Truth, always the embattled realm, is at the core of Ackroydian novels. Its nuances and delineations, its vagaries and fluctuations, make up the crux of Chatterton (1987), a novel which proposes a motley, synoptic construction of truth. Deeply tied with issues of self and self-effacement, it is a destabilizing force, engendering anxiety through its frightening potential, creating a space that negates identity. Under constant threat of rewriting, the self becomes a matter of caprice, seeking footholds in notions of originality and forgery, in obsessions with roots and root causes, to provide a second, more reliable Truth, free from the confines of ambiguity. This is a hermeneutic effort par excellence, in that it enforces a frantic reinterpretation of the past and its artifacts: whether through poet Chatterton or novelist Scrope, ruminations on plagiarism and literary influence suffuse the text, never affording a clear-cut conclusion, offering mere hints in tantalizing directions. My paper will investigate these places of lived tension through the lens of hermeneutic theories, as provided by Paul Ricoeur, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Merold Westphal, David Couzens Hoy, and others, in order to shed light on the precarious interplay of truth and falsehood, and their configurations within the novel.*

Ackroyd's texts, always eschewing linearity, call for the erasure of the ontological stability of time. The novel opens with the child Chatterton reciting a prefatory excerpt, foretelling the need for future interpretation at the hands of someone unknown: "Tomorrow, perhaps, the wanderer will appear- / His eye will search for me round every spot, / And will, - and will not find me" (Ackroyd 2). The identity of the wanderer remains elusive, but his act of seeking out the poet remains a central mechanism, establishing a frantic process that sways the seeker to and fro; "from round every spot" the poet-forgery Chatterton is analyzed and investigated, but ultimately remains as difficult to grasp as the relationship between originality and forgery itself. In another fragmentary scene, following immediately from the previous, the poet George Meredith is depicted posing for the death of Chatterton. His musings on the subject reflect a burdensome dichotomy: "I can endure death", he declares to the painter Henry Wallis, "it is the representation of death I cannot bear" (Ackroyd 2). Wallis reveals that immortalization can be reached through representation. But what of the enduring self in this game of poets and painters? Meredith asks whether he will be remembered for his own real self, for the poet Meredith, or for Thomas Chatterton, whose death he endows with meaning.

* University of Bucharest; Romania.

Corniș-Pop remarks that recent novels, in hovering between mimetic realism and endless self-reflexivity, have shifted the discussion to what fiction can and can't produce. He quotes the qualities of "abstraction, improvisation, and opacity" as accurately describing fiction in defiance of Aristotelian notions of plot, imitation, allegory, and ultimately, meaning (Corniş-Pop 128). Postmodern novels, in being subservient to both realism and reflexivity, produce a unique "mimetic poetics" which is "ontologically ironic, contingent and problematic" (Corniş-Pop 130). Gallese focuses on the non-destructive aspect of Girard's mimetic theory: far more than being the "main source of aggressiveness and violence" in humans, it represents the act of "opening out of oneself" to others, underlining the notion of intersubjectivity that drives human behavior (Gallese 21). He puts forth the idea of a shared manifold that enables "implicit access to others as subjects of experience" similar to us, whereon we construct our own subjectivity (Gallese 34). Mimesis relies on ontological openness; the self seeks similarities with the other because it wants to become the other. Both are inextricably bound through intercorporeity, and they are co-constitutive (Gallese 39). Similarly, Harold Bloom takes on the subject of mimesis, stating that poetry thrives on discontinuity and rupture (Bloom 78). To bring about poetic misprision is to commit "sin against continuity" and the patriarchal standards of one's precursor. The ephebe, a new-born poet, experiences "having been thrown, outward and downward" through the vicissitudes of his craft (Bloom 79). Resorting to repetition dialectically "raised to re-creation" is the only way to avert the horror of discovering oneself to be a mere imitator (Bloom 80). He must imitate, but he must do so in paradoxical rebellion against the poets that predate him. His imagination faces "painful birth through savagery and misrepresentation" (Bloom 86), through the discontinuity-producing act of kenosis, an "emptying" or "ebbing" of self which precludes mere imitation (Bloom 87-88). Kenosis, then, is an "act of self-abnegation" that deconstructs atavistic influence, simultaneously draining the poet of his own divine power (Bloom 91).

In standing in for others, in representing them, and taking on their masks, there is an uneasy sense of imitation and effacement. An artistic endeavor—or more narrowly, poetic—to imitate is both necessity and curse: "We poets in our youth begin in gladness", the novelist Harriet Scrope quotes Wordsworth, "but thereof in the end come despondency and madness" (Ackroyd 2). The happiness of poetic birth through the mechanism of imitation slowly brings about the madness of an uncertain identity, of constantly swapping masks, until nothing factual can be asserted. It is the nature of facts and fiction that informs the Ackroydian novel; the malleability of the former and the expansive scope of the latter are recurring motifs within its space, but the act of imitation itself always remains morally ambiguous: it is constitutive and liberating, as well as destructive and kenotic. Upon visiting the Lenos' shop, Charles Wychwood, the would-be poet and main character of the novel, is asked about his profession, whether he resides in "the realm of fiction" or "merely the imagination". Revealing that he is a poet, his work is dismissed as "bags of fluff" (Ackroyd 6). This division between fiction and poetry, or rather, between serious work, in Harriet Scrope's and Andrew Flint's case, and idle pretence, in Charles's, is the meeting point where a theory of imitative practice can be articulated. The discovery of Chatterton's picture engenders a fundamental shift in Wychwood's imagination. "He

was wearing a dark blue jacket or top-coat and an open-necked white shirt [...] a costume which might have seemed too Byronic, too young, for a man who had clearly entered middle age" (Ackroyd 6). He is struck by the familiarity of the figure, not recognizing it at first; he wonders at its "sardonic and even unsettling power", not knowing precisely why it is that he feels a connection to it. Wychwood is confronted by his son, who claims that the artwork is a fake, and not the "painting of great value" he had purchased. It begins to haunt him even within his own work, though this is very briefly mentioned: ostensibly confident in his own skills, Wychwood "slowly and infrequently" writes a poem that would secure his fame, despite having "no intention of yielding to the conventional anxieties about recognition" (Ackroyd 8). With Wychwood, there is a suppression of anxieties which deal with how poetry is received or criticized or praised. He hides these, and his poetry itself, under his obsession with the newly-acquired painting. His research becomes his prime directive, and his imagination is stirred into fruitful activity, as he tries to discover the true identity of the figure. This he does at the expense of his own health, which is affected by some unknown disease, vehemently denied. Girard remarks that there is always a desire to "be Another" within the self, primordial and metaphysical, and particular desires are simply instantiations of an "infinite variety" (Girard 83). A desire for an object is always subservient to its metaphysical meaning (Girard 85): it can never affect the superordinate desire, nor in any way prolong it. Acquiring the object leads to inevitable disappointment in the absence of an "expected metamorphosis" that would redefine the self (Girard 88). These desires, constantly supplanting each-other, are taken for versions of truth that rely on a "veritable murdering of the living memory", disallowing the self from reaching into lived experience in order to protect itself (Girard 90). Any unitary vision is illusory in this concurrence of fragmentary truths.

Wychwood's relationship with Philip, his university friend, manifests its "peculiar obliquities" in their parodies of other writers, famous or obscure, and it is Philip's literary knowledge that sheds light on who the man in the painting is—none other than Thomas Chatterton, the poet enshrined for his forgeries. "If this is real", Wychwood declares, "this is him" (Ackroyd 14). But reality is nothing more than an unstable signifier, as the text argues, a fiction that would believe itself coherent. The fickle dichotomy of truth and fiction is further problematized through the character of Harriet Scrope, the aged novelist, an erratic thief of ideas. Her declaration that she "can't write about the past", that there is "so much to hide", shows, on the one hand, the dissimulation that fiction can produce, a necessary distancing, and the visceral nature of lived experience. But what beliefs and what ways of acting in the world can stand against the knowledge that "everything is made up", as Scrope herself admits? (Ackroyd 17) The past belongs to that "whereof we cannot speak", a realm that one's own language can only mediate but never fully explore. Scrope is confronted with the task of writing her own memoirs, and implicitly exploring her past—fraught with plagiarism and forgery—for public consumption. Yet the possibility of telling the truth, the "real story of her life", would mean her death, a "cleansing and a purification" that would annihilate her (Ackroyd 18). Forced to escape threatening introspection, she dons different personas, pretending to be people she is not. She becomes a cockney hag for a blind man roaming the streets of

London, taking on his speech and his demeanor, and she finds herself projected far too deeply into the identity of her partner and the "darkness which enshrouded him" (Ackroyd 18). Her mimicking gives way to an appropriation of identity; her entire personality appears to be made of fragments gleaned from the selfhood of others. Her art runs dry: conversing with her friend, Sarah Tilt, she admits: "I think I'm getting like you, Sarah. I can't finish them. I'm getting nowhere". Her writer's block is decidedly existential, a linguistic insufficiency that mirrors ontological emptiness: "The point is, you see, that I've really got nothing to say" (Ackroyd 22). And precisely because she has nothing to say, she resorts to the words of others to construct her texts and thereby her own person.

Derrida's vision enshrines narrative as an act of bearing witness: it is more than genealogy and memory, it is a directive to reflect upon modernity. To this end, it is important to separate self from mask, or the self from the roles it dons in a search for "originary authenticity" (Derrida 36). Enshrouded in mystery, this authenticity cannot be unveiled or impinged upon, and any attempts to reveal it denote a false authenticity and therefore a false self (Derrida 37). The author describes death as being one of the inalienable facets of true selfhood, and, in discussing the hermeneutics of death, he underlines several key aspects in approaching the relation between self and dying. Apprehending death goes beyond the "concern, anxious solicitude, care taken for the soul" to the "meaning given to death by the interpretative attitude" that differs for each individual in their "experience of anticipation" (Derrida 39-40). The mechanism of relating to death unfolds in a dialectic of "interpretative apprehension" and a "representative approach" whereby one attempts to make sense of it, recreating it in a way that can enable such sense-making. Ricoeur's discussion of self through the lens of the Cartesian cogito presupposes an ambition, present in philosophers ranging from Descartes to Fichte, to assign to the cogito the role of an "ultimate foundation", a relation of dependence between "I" and "I think" (Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* 4-5). The I is "free-floating", constituting its own "will to certainty and to truth" through its fixation with doubting. Nietzsche, in pointing to the inherently deceitful nature of language itself, takes on the role of the deceiver: by claiming that language to be a realm of "substitutions and inversions", he removes from it any real ontological certainty (Ricoeur 13). Truth and lies are no longer clearly delineated; facts ultimately reveal themselves to be interpretations; thinking itself is shown to be a fiction, undifferentiated from the "bristling multiplicity of instincts" (Ricoeur 15).

An accomplished novelist, eccentrically embodying her characters' quirks and dilemmas, Harriet Scrope finds little value in poetry's effulgence; Wychwood, on the other hand, has faith in his own poetic genius. Producing the "slim xeroxed pamphlet" containing his poems, he tries to present it to Scrope, who gives it a perfunctory read before discarding the subject. "My genius will one day be recognised", (Ackroyd 24) is Wychwood's theatrical declaration, but it is not met with any present recognition from the novelist: Scrope complains about a sense of loss. "I am not myself", she tells him, "I need bringing out". Wychwood does not understand her plight, thinking her remark a jest. Evelyne Grossman's concept of creative delinking aids us in understanding this conundrum: the counterpart to the "painful modern experience" that leads to the erosion of linkages, be they "psychic,

linguistic, cultural, social, political" is the "creative delinking and relinking" that thrives in such an unstable environment. The modern condition does not aim to undo deconstruction or its practices, but to live within them and, ultimately, to create within their bounds (Grossman 85). Within these shifting fields there is an operation of the negative, and ultimately the "inhuman, and the infinite", that preclude whatever semblance of stability and order that has populated grand narratives. Identity itself can be reshaped in such movements, and relinkages may arise (Grossman 88); the negative evinces an "indefatigable energy" that is displayed in inhumanity's prime artifice, language itself.

Origin becomes irrelevant, and present use—and perhaps abuse, when done incorrectly—is the only important arena for interpretation. Wychwood's response is cold and academical, reducing her ordeal to a "question of language". He points out that realism is as much of a construct as surrealism, and that the real world, solid and thinglike, is nothing more than a "succession of interpretations". wherein the written, irrespective of its subject, "immediately becomes a kind of fiction" (Ackroyd 24). Scrope, however, does not go into intricate theoretical debates; instead, having found "another opening" that can justify her position, she textualizes herself, reducing her selfhood to the written word: "That is precisely why I need you. I need you to interpret me!" (Ackroyd 25) The subject of her memoirs requires an outside interpreter, ostensibly impartial, who can make sense of her past and thus render it readable to the public. The novelist leaps at the chance, trying to convince Wychwood that he can work through "all the names and dates", all the information which Scrope has at her disposal but which cannot congeal without the hermeneutic efforts of an outside man. In accepting to become her ghost writer, the poet then claims authorship over Scrope's past, laying out her truth by connecting all the disparate fragments of experience, while still being aware that his creation is no less fictional than the novels Scrope has written. But fictionality is not simply a matter of writing or reading, of memoir-making or poetizing. Language has no truth value and no inherent sense here, and conversation is mechanical, superficial, reduced to noise and (com)motion, ultimately free because relieved of meaning: the world is a whirl of colors and sounds, endlessly interpretable but bereft of any kind of enduring significance. The metonymy of smaller texts and smaller men, of Charles Wychwood seeking out the truth of Thomas Chatterton, is reconfigured with each interpretive act and with each step taken in the direction of pursuing dogged obsessions, either of grasping at some primordial sense of originality or untangling a knotted series of forgeries upon forgeries.

Ricoeur's definition of hermeneutics as the "theory of the operations of understanding" through text analysis sets the background against which he pits his thesis: hermeneutics is the realm of aporias, of semantic polysemy, of the careful reconstruction of contexts (Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* 3-4). Man's own individuality renders him and his work interpretable, and his co-existence in a society of individuals ensures that "the life of others can be discerned and identified in its manifestations" (Ricoeur 10). To do hermeneutics is to attempt to "reproduce an interconnection, a structured totality" within a textual system that constitutes itself in order to be understood (Ricoeur 11). Heideggerian hermeneutics saw a shift from epistemology to ontology, from understanding oneself through a

relation with another to "the relation of being with the world" (Ricoeur 15). What we must recognize is a "relation of entrenchment" which places language within a realm of being that language cannot articulate (Ricoeur 16). Understanding a text, by this logic, is understanding a "possibility of being" engendered by the text itself (Ricoeur 17). Gadamer's notions of distanciation (*Verfremdung*) and belonging (*Zugehörigkeit*) have also had an impact on later theories of hermeneutics. It is this distanciation which makes history what it is: a "paradox of otherness, a tension between proximity and distance" (Ricoeur 21), and which produces his idea of *Sprachlichkeit* (translated as *linguality*) as that which engenders a sense of belonging to any given tradition through adhering to its codes of interpretation (Ricoeur 22). The text is distanciation in motion: it embodies historicity, arising through a "praxis and a techne" that is specific and context-bound (Ricoeur 98). *Verfremdung* is what grants a text its independence from its author: "the 'world of the text'", Ricoeur asserts, "may explode the world of the author" (Ricoeur 101). Distanciation creates a world of infinite readings; far from being "superfluous and parasitical", it is "constitutive of the phenomenon of the text as writing", (Ricoeur 102) as an embodied praxis.

Shepherdson's interpretation of the meeting between Gadamer and Derrida offers a notion of truth that, for Gadamer, lies far beyond scientific notions of truth and the rigors of theory. Understanding, paradoxically, is an ontological experience: a "phenomenon of understanding" that eschews "'understandings' that may in fact be positively constituted and articulated" (Shepherdson 188). In resisting articulation and reasoning, truth is established as a dimension that cannot be apprehended except through direct experience (Shepherdson 189). Shepherdson describes a tension between hermeneutics and experience: the one aims to "justify philosophically" and the other resists justification or explanation. Madison, on the other hand, focuses on Derrida's belief that language is a system which precludes "meaningful self-understanding" as well as "a genuine mutual understanding [*Verständigung*]" in opposition to Gadamer's view of language as a "bridge" that renders communication possible (Madison 193). But the fundamental aspect of hermeneutics, that of understanding what one's interlocutor is trying to say, cannot exist in the absence of "good will:" "Without this, one will more than likely simply read one's own presuppositions into what the other is saying and will, accordingly, misunderstand what he or she is saying" (Madison 194). A dialog must be present, tenable or otherwise, direct or reconstructed.

Once at Chatterton's former house, Philip Slack and Charles Wychwood remark upon Chatterton's skilful imitation—and purported discovery—of the medieval monk Thomas Rowley, laying "the foundations of his everlasting fame" (Ackroyd 36). Words are resources to be seized, always pre-configured: the key to new creations is to break apart these preconfigurations, and to take whatever elements resonate with one's poetic genius, which are then freely reshaped: a patchwork poetics, a poetics of reassembled bits. The two stumble upon lines written by Chatterton in a recovered document, wherein the poet describes himself as the mythical boy who leads the blind poet, a shepherd of antiquity and ancient texts, caretaker and author alike. But he fears his own discovery at the hand of "one bookseller who suspected the truth" of his plagiarism (Ackroyd 37). If delusion is to

be taken as a driving force, one may never trust anything one reads, as the written word is an instrument of deceit and dissimulation, but in this precariousness there is freedom to relink meanings, to begin new hermeneutic projects.

Hoy's comparative analysis of Gadamer and Apel in terms of hermeneutic theory focuses at first on Gadamer's insistence upon the notion of the "finitude and situatedness" of interpretation, which would superficially prevent any notion of truth from articulating itself within the interpretive act. However, truth is to be read as a kind of "unity of meaning" that is found inside the text, steering the reader in the right direction (Hoy 107-108). Apel's development in the area of hermeneutic truth lies in his "ideal community of investigators" who construct truth in a regulatory manner; however, this community allows for "inadequate present knowledge" and criticism, in that truth may be formed and reformed dynamically, as a result of a consensus (Hoy 109). There is no transcendental subject here that establishes truth; rather, it is intersubjectively contingent (Hoy 110).

The novel offers more than one disquisition on plagiarism. Philip Slack unearths the connection between the novels of Harrison Bentley and those of Harriet Scrope: the novel *Stage Fire*, by the former, is reused and rewritten by Scrope, describing a famous poet who "believed himself to be possessed by the spirits of dead writers" and who was widely regarded as "the most original poet of his age". This is doubly recursive: it references not only the two novels within the space of the story, but also the subject of the Ackroydian novel itself, concerning Chatterton, the poet in whom reside all poets. But Philip is not taken aback by this discovery, as he believes there is only a small number of plots, and that their repurposing is inevitable; he acknowledges the possibility that these similarities might even be coincidental. His own writerly efforts end up being a "patchwork of other voices and other styles", suggesting the idea that originality, as some mythical locus of uninfluenced creation, cannot exist. The act of forgery marks the core of the novel: it informs the characters' actions and introspections, crowning itself as a natural fact. To write is to rewrite, and even that rewriting mirrors previous works. Imitation is the force of creativity, and no writer can produce work that is not tinged, willingly or otherwise, by previous texts. Philip later comes across a book which posits far more than either he or Charles had suspected: an academic treatise detailing the lasting impression Thomas Chatterton had left on William Blake: the argument appears to be that Blake would not have been nearly as important a writer, had he not been influenced by "the work of a forger and a plagiarist" (Ackroyd 45). Andrew Flint, the novelist, asserts the all-enmeshing scope of intertextuality: "And it does matter. It does matter. Think of them all around us, watching us, Blake, Shelley, Coleridge-" to which Charles, caught in a frenzy, replies: "They got it all from Chatterton. Did you know that? I do". The chief plagiarist is raised to the status of prime poet, of originator through his imitative praxis.

Westphal compares the hermeneutics of Gadamer and Ricoeur through the concepts of belonging and distanciation. Gadamer's understanding of belonging refers, on the one hand, to the historical conditioning of man: he belongs to history as much as history belongs to him. The interpreter is prejudiced by dint of his being rooted in history (Westphal 45). This has to do with the hermeneutical circle drawn through "preunderstandings" and preconceptions that are subject to constant change

(Westphal 46). In Gadamerian hermeneutics, distanciation means breaking away from the original context and enabling a reading that is contemporary with the interpreter, endowing the text with a meaning that "goes beyond its author" (Westphal 48). The secondary sense of belonging, in Gadamer, relates not to belonging to a world that is historically determined, but belonging to the text itself, the game of "determinacy and indeterminacy" in which author and reader alike must engage, so as to complete the text (Westphal 48). Ricoeur makes a claim for the text's subjectivity, signified by "a referent other than the author", namely the world within, or rather, the world "opened up in front of" the text (Westphal 55). Westphal is right in assuming that this inconstancy in the philosophy of hermeneutics is "incurably dialectical", describing a "lived tension" between interpretation carried out from a place of fore-knowledge and presupposition, and interpretation that aims to distance itself from an "immersed belonging" that can very easily slip into subjectivism and ideology.

Chatterton's narration of his own life attempts to ground itself as the only valid interpretation, but it is one of many. "Take then the following Account for what it is, tho' a Better", he asserts, "could not be given by any other Man: for who was present at my Birth but my own self" (Ackroyd 50). In light of the foggy circumstances of his existence and the quality of the work (re)produces, even an autobiographical narrative can be doubted, perhaps more so than evidently fictional retellings. His obsession with the past—with ancient languages and ancient world-views—prods him into present action: "I will perform a Miracle", he tells his mother, "I will bring the Past to light again" (Ackroyd 51). His method is not history but a projection into the history of the texts he uncovers. "My Imagination was all on Fire, and I began to transcribe them in my own Hand". He refers here not just to their obsolete spelling norms, but to the messages contained therein, to the truths of their age. "When I wrote out their words, copying the very spelling of the Originals, it was as if I had become one of those Dead and could speak with them also" (Ackroyd 52). His affinity goes beyond language, for Chatterton claims he can embody bygone truths by weaving himself into their text: "The very words had been called forth from me", he claims. The words are summoned, not forced to arise; his imitative talent preserves a continuity between past and present, artificial though it is—this artifice is what renders past and present readable in their interdependence. Language makes this whole endeavor possible; it "[awakes] the Reality itself" (Ackroyd 52) as it conjures up true history. This he passes off as the work of a monk, Rowley, based on "authentick evidence" found within St Mary Redcliffe. Truth is no longer the precinct of fact and reality, but the substance of imitation and poetic effort. Interposing himself in the turbulent stream of history, the poet fabricates links between the ages; in lying about the nature of his work, he utters truths that otherwise would not be speakable. All semblances of unity appear to be the product of sly falsehoods and of skilled forgeries. If they are taken for granted, they become true by virtue of consensus, and truth itself becomes a context-sensitive variable. Joynson, however, sees through the lie, and recognizes Chatterton's hand in Rowley's verses, but he does not chide him. "You may live well without Rowley, if you choose to. I have no doubt that there are other Authors within you" (Ackroyd 55). Joynson reminds Chatterton of Platonic philosophy, wherein to enact forgery is

to bring about “imitation in a world of Imitations”, urging the poet to prove his “Strength by doing their Work better than ever they could” (Ackroyd 56). The weight of the canon perched upon the shoulders of a poetling, a farfetched and risible assumption to any reader, is what the text proposes: Chatterton writing Blake, and Shelley, and Meredeith, and many others, in effusive falsification; the debasement of the great, and the uplifting of the minor and the obscure.

Lewis's counterfactuality of worlds becomes useful in discussing the construction of narrative. The existential quantification present in the statement that “there are many ways things could have been besides the way they actually are” predicates the existence of what he terms possible worlds (Lewis 84). These are not to be found only within hypothetical linguistics: we can ascribe realism to them; they can be analyzed descriptively. Actuality, in this sense, and the actual world more narrowly, refer to the act of inhabiting a given time and space: our world is “only one world among others” precisely because we inhabit it deictically. Ryan develops Lewis’s theory concerning possible worlds, claiming that any new information between what we regard as “the real world” and the world of the text with its implicit norms creates a distancing between the real universe and the textual (Ryan 51). She names the principle of “minimal departure” as a means of approaching this correlation: we reconstruct text-worlds the same way we reconstruct possible worlds within nonfactuals, by means of “conforming as far as possible” to the actual world.

When it is brought to Harriet Scrope’s attention that her novels resemble those of Harrison Bentley, she becomes visibly shocked, leaving Charles with his Chatterton manuscripts. Her fear is brought to paroxysm: “this was the discovery which she had always feared, this was the revelation which she had suppressed but which had provoked so much anxiety in her” (Ackroyd 62). She, unlike Chatterton, does not welcome the idea of plagiarism, and she is thrown into wild disarray when the truth of her methods is revealed. The sacrality of words, “forming their own associations and gathering in their own clusters of significant sound”, functions only on a basic, lexical level: signifier and signified, bereft of narrative substance which is to be found “somewhere within the workings of her own consciousness” (Ackroyd 62). The discovery of other plots, “themselves . . . of little consequence”, proves to be a wellspring of inspiration. In the plot of Harrison Bentley’s *The Last Testament* she finds the starting point for her own novel, essentially reworking it until the original is hardly detectable. Originality, then, lies in deconstruction and appropriation, in the dissecting and patching up of other stories and plots, whereby a writer’s imagination is freed from the anxiety of non-influence, relishing in its own “obliquities and discordancies” (Ackroyd 63). The language of imitation can be unconscious, tossing its user about without mapping out a clear path: “She had allowed the language to carry her forward; she had not tried to direct it. She had been a serious writer then, a proper writer: she had not known what she was trying to say” (Ackroyd 63). This view of writing does away with any notion of linguistic motivation, and assigns a prophetic role to the act of laying out a story: a tale can only be told if one does not have any preconceived notions about what the tale is trying to say.

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