SPINNING TALL TALES: TOWARDS A HERMENEUTICS OF THE IMAGINARY IN PETER ACKROYD'S CHATTERTON

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Abstract: *Chatterton (1987), a novel woven with lexical and symbolic cross-references, demands a reading that interprets these cross-references as a locus for the construction of the imaginary. There is a fundamental, recursive folding-back upon elusive selves: a modern- day poet seeks a poet from the past, who, in turn, stages and belies the identity of another poet. This looped return is more than a narratological element in the make-up of the novel; it bespeaks a metaphysical dread that refuses rational categorization, flitting back and forth through textual vestiges and modern anxieties of influence. Imagination and the imaginary are pivotal tropes – in the realm of presentation and representation, the writers within the story become the writers of each-other's stories in wilful imitation, and performatively rooting themselves in practices that reiterate what was already said. The act of writing becomes a reflection of the previously written, while still eschewing linearity and the rules of cause and effect. In this vein, a crisis is engendered: where does the factual end, and the imaginary begin? It is the purpose of this paper to look at the blurred lines, and to try to provide an architectural sketch of the imaginary as it is rendered in the novel. This will be done through a hermeneutic lens, relying on concepts from several theoreticians in the field, in order to start a discussion on the line straddling fact and fiction.*

Keywords*: writing, hermeneutics, imitation*

Ackroyd's cast of characters—would-be poet Charles Wychwood, famed Thomas Chatterton, bestselling plagiarist Harriet Scrope—are all writers. Their tacit role in the Ackroydian text is to read, interpret, and rewrite each-other: a hermeneutic undertaking par excellence. Constructing a hermeneutics of the imaginary, the scope of which will be outlined in my paper, must necessarily take into account the embodiment of the imaginary proper, its expressions and configurations. Starting with Gadamer (2004: 397) who stresses the necessary connection between language and understanding, we follow the thought that understanding itself is another facet of interpretation: in Gadamer's view, understanding and interpretation are what engender the hermeneutical horizon, the only valid arena where meaning may unfold. The act itself presupposes a type of translation "into our own language" of meaning, thus reducing the vast array of possible meanings into a narrower, more personal subset. The blind work of the historian, electing a conceptual framework that ignores the historicity of his subject matter, may in fact "subordinate the alien being of the object to his own preconceptions," demonstrating that he is "a child of his time who is unquestioningly dominated by the concepts and prejudices of his own age." (*ibidem*) Self-awareness, then, is key in carrying out hermeneutics, as are a sense of rootedness in one's own temporal particularities and a keen observation of one's methodologies, which are

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always ideologically motivated and structured by interests that drive the endeavor. The dangerous flip-side to conceptual blindness, namely the desire to eradicate all prejudice from interpretation, is just as unattainable. The solution, then, to a successful interpretation goes beyond a "naive transposition into the past" (Gadamer, *op.cit.*: 398) demanding self-consciousness, its relation to "one's own concepts," and a firm middle ground between historical concepts and "one's own thinking," at the same escaping the "not only impossible but manifestly absurd" belief that prejudices can be done away with. Texts are granted voices through being interpreted, and as such, the necessity of a language that can carry across the interpretation is what Gadamer highlights, a "right language" that imbues the text with life, producing a "constantly assimilated and interpreted" tradition that can endure only so long as it is subjected to the rigors of a hermeneutics rooted in spatiotemporal specificities (*ibidem*). Furthermore, the validity of interpretation lies in its ability to connect the one who does the interpretation to the person who reads or hears it: it is this communication, the "concretion of meaning itself," (*ibidem*: 399) which is the final step in hermeneutics. Interestingly enough, Gadamer pushes interpretation away from scholarly confines into artistic realms, where reproductions themselves are not "a second [work] recreating the first;" but rather make "the work of art appear as itself for the first" (*ibidem*: 400), thus enforcing a two-way gaze that is constitutive of identity, backed by a "secondary aesthetic differentiation."

Unconscious textual meanings are unconscious simply because the writer was not cognizant of them, according to Hirsch (1967: 51). He provides the image of an iceberg, with its visible surface and invisible depths, to prove the point: it is the surface that dictates what belongs to the iceberg, and it is the surface that enforces continuity with those parts human eyes can't reach. Continuity and coherence are the necessary common denominators between unconscious and willed meanings (*ibidem*: 54). To illustrate how one may tell apart antithetical impulses (that is to say, where two types of meanings clash), he gives the example of a stuttering liar: the stuttering is an unconscious symptom, not a sign, and the meaning, in our case the transmission of a successful lie, is hindered without wilful opposition between different meanings (Hirsch, *op.cit.*: 55); it is here a misfortunate accident. The work of a critic is to discover the determinate, limited nature of meaning and to set it apart from significance, the result of which frees the critic to do perform tasks previously impossible to him (*ibidem*: 57).

Confronted with the picture of the unknown man, Charles Wychwood, one of the novel’s main characters, stares at it, noticing its finer details:

> He was wearing a dark blue jacket or top-coat and an open-necked white shirt, the large collar of which billowed out over the jacket itself: a costume which might have seemed too Byronic, too young, for a man who had clearly entered middle age. His short white hair was parted to display a high forehead, he had a peculiar snub nose and a large mouth; but Charles particularly noticed the eyes. They seemed to be of different colours, and they gave this unknown man (for there was no legend on the canvas) an expression of sardonic and even unsettling power. And there was something familiar about his face. (Ackroyd, 1987: 6)

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The language Ackroyd uses to describe the man is telling: "there was no legend on the canvas," Charles Wychwood thinks, but the "unsettling power" of the imagery engenders a feeling akin to fear, creating an obsession that haunts the poet Wychwood until his very death at the end of the novel. The uncertainty of the painted figure foretells the ambiguity that shrouds its subject: the poet-faker Thomas Chatterton, the imitator, the highest genius of English literature, a father to the Romantics and the central point around which the Ackroydian novel constructs its argument vis-a-vis fictionality and imagination. Wychwood's attempts to understand Chatterton lead to disease and ultimately death. But it is Wychwood's interpretation of Chatterton that allows Chatterton to endure, if not as a writer, then as a symbol for something more lasting, of poetry removed from the strictures of high originality, placed within the fearful realm of plagiarism and derivative imagination. Upon later inspection of the picture with its "fresh colours and contours" Wychwood feels as if "he had become the painter – as if the portrait was only now being completed." (Ackroyd, *op. cit.*: 13) It would not be a serious departure from Ackroyd's language and Wychwood's implicit appropriation of the artistic product to assume that the interpreter, much like Gadamer asserted, becomes a co-author, a twinned artist, finishing in the present what was once begun in the dimness of another age. Wychwood tries to understand Chatterton, thus interpreting and creating him. Harriet Scrope, a novelist within Ackroyd's panoply of poets, proposes that Wychwood write her biography; requesting succor, she declares that she is not herself, and that she requires Wychwood's help to define herself. "You once told me a very beautiful thing, Charles," she says, "You told me that reality is the invention of unimaginative people," while not revealing that it was not, in fact, Wychwood who told her this adage (*ibidem*: 24). The poet is prodded into waxing philosophical, declaring that all is "a question of language," that "realism is just as artificial as surrealism, after all." (*ibidem*) Positioned within this mere "succession of interpretations," Wychwood professes his belief that all things written, be they history or poetry or any hybrid creation in-between, become "a kind of fiction." If everything can be reduced to language, and language itself cannot hold a mirror to truth or any kind of lasting value, interpretation becomes the chief prerogative of the postmodern character, who, in trying to assign value, endlessly (re)cycles through texts in order to interpret them. Chatterton's unconscious meanings fuel Wychwood's relentlessly imaginative search for an elusive truth: did Chatterton kill himself, or did he live a long life, having staged his death in order to gain notoriety? Was he truly the author of Blake's poems, and the author of all the other poems of his age? The text poses questions that are answered too late, and too abruptly, and the truth—insofar as it can be called such—the fact of Chatterton's accidental suicide, is presented to the reader only after Wychwood's own death. Interpretation goes on despite, or rather because, of these glaring ambiguities.

Palmer (2011: 275) brings up the subject of imagination as conceptualized in different literary periods, among which modernism and postmodernism. Postmodern novels, such as *Chatterton*, in providing "arbitrary and indeterminate narratives," display a break from modernist tenets. Showing "a delight in disorder, discontinuity, and ambiguity," and, furthermore, "a correspondingly cavalier attitude toward the conventions of coherent plot, realistic characterization, and clearly identifiable settings," (*ibidem*) they stress the (auto-)

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fictional and marginal, the unstable and the vague. Palmer quotes McHale's contention that the shift in postmodern novels is from modernist epistemological concerns (how to know reality) to ontological questions (what reality actually is) (Palmer, *op. cit.*: 276) which are never given clear answers, resting in uneasy awareness that everything is, at least partially, fictional. But Palmer asserts that the simplicity of dividing epistemology from ontology is untenable and reductionist: knowledge and being are "necessarily intimately entangled." (*ibidem*: 277) His attribution theory, whereby states of mind are attributed to characters by readers or other characters (*ibidem*: 278), provides a venue for analysis. Understanding the minds of characters means ultimately understanding the story, and without this essential aspect, the story itself loses coherence. Although attributions may be interpreted as being factual, they are always motivated; minds are "described in a certain way and not in other ways for particular purposes" (*ibidem*: 279) and they exist within ontological plurality, which further problematizes the idea of objectivity. Kearney (1998: 18) describes the metamorphosis of the idea of imagination, from its "various biblical, Greek and medieval" forms and its underpinnings rooted in "German Idealism, Romanticism and Existentialism" to postmodern concerns about its "crisis, death and disappearance." Postmodernism, then, rejects originality and artistic integrity, and ultimately "the modernist credo of perpetual newness." (*ibidem*: 21) A solution to the postmodern's grim obsession, its "apocalyptic paralysis," is to see the decomposition of modernity as a pathway to imagining, and therefore envisioning, the "causes of our contemporary dislocation," (*ibidem*: 26) salvaging whatever we can in order to put forth patchwork constructions.

Epistemology and ontology are entwined in the Ackroydian novel. The search for knowledge drives the narrative, whereas ontological concerns—what is existence when all we have at our disposal are words and delirious visions?—offer a rhythmic counterpart. Wychwood inquires after more and more information concerning the portrait of Chatterton, goaded by his budding obsession with the mysterious figure. At the same time, he is visited by odd images and dreams which he cannot make sense of; waking up one morning, he finds himself trying to speak, but is unable to: “He was about to call out ‘What time is it?’ but something had been stuffed in his mouth, and he choked. It was his tongue and it was not his tongue: someone else was forcing it down his throat.” (Ackroyd, 1987: 28). Ontological instability is what the novel constructs time and time again. Wychwood’s own rickety sense of self, interspersed with intimations of mystic union with the poet Chatterton, is an effort in imagination. As his illness progresses, Wychwood loses himself and takes on parts of Chatterton’s identity. Wychwood’s purported aversion to Wallis’s picture of Chatterton’s suicide describes this union at its climax: “But there was someone now standing at the foot of the bed, casting a shadow over the body of the poet? And Charles was lying there, with his left hand clenched tightly on his chest and his right arm trailing upon the floor.” (*ibidem*: 82) Ontology gives way to fluid identity, and a pathological imagination. Wychwood’s mind, burdened by a disease that ultimately robs him of his life, is never reliable: narrative slips between states of consciousness show that identity is nothing more than a palimpsest.

Focusing on notions of the unconscious, Palmer's (2004: 105) review of Antonio Damasio's understanding provides a solution for questions concerning the meaning of the

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unconscious, spanning such objects as "fully formed images to which we do not attend," "neural patterns that never become images," "dispositions [...] acquired through experience [that] lie dormant," up to "all the hidden wisdom and know-how that nature embodied" in thinking individuals (Palmer, *op.cit.*:105). Mere perceptions, then, are functionally loaded with unconscious directives. The act of creation, of the imaginary made palpable, is not simple or straightforward, relying rather on intricate processes that are difficult to delineate. The importance of the fluidity of mind goes against the dictum proclaiming the "rigid dichotomy of reflective and non-reflective thought," suggesting that cognition functions along a spectrum (*ibidem*). Consciousness is reserved for important events, and attention, using up mental energy, "goes to where it is needed." (*ibidem*: 108) The imaginary is firmly emplaced in this spectrum, eschewing polar opposites.

Chatterton lists his intellectual interests, quoting “heraldry, English antiquities, metaphysical disquisitions, mathematicall researches, music, astronomy, physic and the like,” all of them cultivated during a solitary childhood (Ackroyd, 1987: 51). Struck by genius, visited by necromantic inspiration, he exercises his gift for the first time: “It seemed even then that the Dead were speaking to me, face to face; and when I wrote out their words, coppying the very spelling of the Originals, it was as if I had become one of those Dead and could speak with them also.” (*ibidem*: 52) The conjoining of dead letters and living creativity spurs Chatterton into his dazzling career, leaving the source of his sudden imaginative streak within a pseudo-magical realm, between unconscious forces and transgenerational sorcery. Chatterton’s recreation of medieval texts repeatedly draws upon the imaginary. “I reproduc’d the Past and filled it with such Details that it was as if I were observing it in front of me: so the Language of ancient Dayes awoke the Reality itself for, tho’ I knew that it was I who composed these Histories, I knew also that they were true ones.” (*ibidem*) The ability to conjure up such details bespeaks Chatterton’s imaginative abilities, taking fragments and miscellanea and composing poetry that is both imitative and innovative.

The mind is ceaseless, even when "unfocused and left to its own devices," according to Richardson (2015: 230). Whether "ruminating on the past, planning for the near or distant future, fantasizing about unlikely or even impossible events," it never stops functioning. Richardson insists daydreaming is itself a form of imagination, noting that any mental act involving a future event is by its very nature an act of the imagination. The link between imagination and remembrance cannot be understated. (*ibidem*: 231) Memories are the building blocks of imagination, highly decomposable and reusable (*ibidem*: 232), and enable projections concerning others as well as oneself (*ibidem*: 235): memory primes the path to empathy, a fundamentally imaginative endeavor that is one of the driving forces behind narratives. Discussing the psychology of vicarious experiences, Ainslie (2001: 180) highlights the use of stories in eliciting emotional responses, as well as the risks these stories run of becoming ineffective, should they be repeated predictably. What he suggests is that there are methods of countering the risks, making it "possible to cheat at this game" (*ibidem*), including willingly interpreting stories to fit an ideological or personal conviction, leaving out aspects that are incongruous. The interaction between writer and reader, then, is likened to emotional manipulation and the creation of strategies to withstand it (*ibidem*).

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Ackroyd provides an instance of vicarious living and imaginative projection in Harriet Scrope's meanderings. Starting with her renaming all the streets of London according to her own whim, she rewrites her geographical surroundings and the stories of the men and women who cross her path. Fleeing the risks of introspection, she takes on fictitious personalities in order to influence others, and in order to become a character quite like those she writes about. In her encounter with the blind man, she dons an "extravagant cockney accent" so as to beguile him. "Harriet enjoyed inventing stories about herself," Ackroyd writes (*op. cit.*: 18) She informs the blind man about the area they are walking through, putting on a camp performance, enjoying the theatricality of the experience. But this mechanism ultimately fails: "As she stared into his wounded attentive face she began to enter the darkness which enshrouded him. She began to imagine his life, feeling herself stumble and fall, and she pulled back." (*ibidem*) Her daydreams and impersonations are a way to escape her own dread concerning selfhood and her fear of being a plagiarist Even these projections are curtailed shortly before they go too deep, as if assuming any kind of identity, whether her own or anyone else's, is tantamount to death.

Homodiegetic narratives, per Cohn (1978: 164), may evince ambiguity wherever self-quotation occurs. In "omitting clear signals of quotation" there is an amalgamation of "past and present thoughts," which may destabilize any sense of temporal continuity the reader might rely on (*ibidem*). By writing such "fusions and confusions of past and present thoughts," authors blur away the edges of introspection, especially when aided by certain syntactic artifices (*ibidem*: 165). Cohn further dissects the mechanisms of self-narration by hinting that whenever a character faces an "existential crisis" he is bound to "relive his dark confusions, perhaps in the hope of ridding himself of them." (*ibidem*: 168) What is crucial to our understanding is that first-person narrators easily disrupt narrative continuity whenever monologues enter the fray, especially in the presence of unusual syntax (an eclectic use of tense) or narrative modes of presentation (mixtures of heterodiegetic and homodiegetic stories). McHale's contribution (2009: 14) to the theoretical debate separating prose from poetry takes into account DuPlessis's concept of segmentivity. According to McHale, segmentivity is to poetry what narrativity is to narrative: a quintessential trait that is to be found in most texts of that type. Poetry "depends crucially on segmentation, on spacing," in order to create meaning (*ibidem*). This does not mean, however, that novels do not rely on segmentivity; however, the argument seems to be that segmentivity in novels "is subordinated to other features." The idea that "prose is a continuous medium, unsegmented" is strongly rooted in readers' minds, despite being "demonstrably untrue." (*ibidem*: 23)

Chatterton's monologues, lacking Cohn's "signals," show an absence of mental clarity. Relating his own beginnings as "a boy of obscure Birth and imperfect Education" (Ackroyd, 1987: 52) and his escape from the "Shit-hole and Whorehouse" of his native Bristol (*ibidem*: 53), Chatterton adds an element of self-aggrandizement: "I am a poet born, which is a greater thing than a Gentleman." He stops the narrative flow of his tale to expound on his own virtues, or, in the face of crisis, "to invoke the weeping Muse and have recourse to Elegie." (*ibidem*: 54) During Chatterton's death, Ackroyd flits between heterodiegetic and homodiegetic modes. The poet expresses his thoughts without quotation marks again: "Here is a strong blow. Oh. Very strong. But I will utterly defeat the clap, and

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rise in the morning purified." (*ibidem*: 141) The chapters in which Chatterton dons the role of narrator are interspersed with chapters narrated by others: Wychwood's, for example, or Scrope's. This illustrates segmentivity both in outward structure—the chapters themselves—and in content, where Ackroyd shifts between past, present and future tenses in order to convey a sense of temporal instability.

To conclude, I will look at Turner and Fauconnier's (1999: 397) linguistic notion of blending, or conceptual integration, as a productive mechanism in creating new meanings. It relies on combining previous linguistic items—such as metaphors—in order to produce new constructs. The validity of this mechanism is seen within literature as well: the authors discuss Milton's construction of Satan in *Paradise Lost*, claiming that an already pre-established blend for the character, between human and theological stereotypes, is reworked within the conceptual space of kinship relations, i.e. Satan as the father of sin (*ibidem*: 414). Bruhn's analysis of Shelley's poems (2011: 657) goes beyond blending theory, suggesting the notion of conceptual composition as an alternative. In this model, metaphors added together "do not resolve into a unitary concept or representation;" rather, they draw attention to the process of composition itself, inviting meditations on the forces behind conceptual production.

With Chatterton, Ackroyd creates a blend of two distinct conceptual spaces. On the one hand, the space of poetry, with its far-reaching influences, marked by creativity and deep feeling, an art enshrined and highly prized in culture; on the other, the space of plagiarism, historically vilified and despised, seen as the realm of the talentless and the unoriginal, something to be hidden and feared, as in the case of Harriet Scrope's wilful plagiarism of Bentley's novel. Chatterton's originality lies precisely in claiming the value of forgery: "Thus do we see in every Line an Echoe, for the truest Plagiarism is the truest Poetry." (Ackroyd, 1987: 53) He applies this philosophy to his very end, embracing it as a cornerstone for his enviable career, penning the "Elegies and Epicks, Ballads and Songs, Lyricks and Acrosticks" (*ibidem*) that would gain him his fame. Imitation, in the Ackroydian novel, is a product of the imaginary, and nowhere is this clearer than the poet-faker's modus operandi: to write is to use the wellspring of the imagination, freely tapped into, inexhaustible.

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