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IMITATION, STYLE, FICTION: ETHICS OF WRITING, ETHICS OF READING IN *CHATTERTON*, BY PETER ACKROYD

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Résumé : L'article revient sur la réflexion menée par Peter Ackroyd sur les notions de style, de fiction et de réalité à travers le prisme de l'imitation ; il a choisi de le faire dans un roman intitulé *Chatterton*, dont le héros éponyme fut célèbre pour ses pastiches du style médiéval.

Mots-clés : style, réalité, fiction, imitation, pastiche, intertextualité, hypertextualité

Introduction

The concepts of “style” and “imitation”, are essential to the works of Peter Ackroyd and Thomas Chatterton.

Peter Ackroyd is a prolific contemporary British writer who is particularly interested in British culture and history, as well as language and literature. He has written a substantial number of novels and non-fiction books such as the biographies of TS Eliot, Charles Dickens and Shakespeare. He has always clearly shown his cultural lineage and is very talented at imitating, pasticheing the voices and styles of his famous forebears. In *English Music*, which came out five years after *Chatterton*, one of the characters declares:

“You honour your father by imitating him, just as we honour an author by the same means. For what we virtuously imitate we approve and admire; since we delight not to

resemble our inferiors, we aggrandize and magnify those whom we copy.” (Ackroyd 1993, 167)

Thomas Chatterton was a poet who died from arsenic poisoning in 1770 when he was seventeen years old. He is as famous for the poems he published under his name as for those he wrote under the name of Thomas Rowley, a 15th century monk he invented. He forged the style and vocabulary of the Middle Ages and wrote poems and history from some fragments of medieval culture that were taken to be authentic till his death.

Chatterton, which was published in 1987, is a novel, a work of fiction featuring fictitious and real characters in three layers in time whose (hi)stories are closely linked and reverberated. The first story takes place in the 20th century and mostly stages fictitious writers and painters, such as Charles Wychwood, Harriet Scrope and Philip Slack who get interested in the story of Chatterton after they found a portrait and manuscripts apparently written by the poet after the official date of his death. The second narrative shows Henry Wallis and George Meredith during the realisation of the painting “The death of Chatterton” in 1856. The then young poet serves as a model for Wallis in order that the scene should be more realistic, according to what the Pre-Raphaelites advocated. This painting, which is at the core of the three narratives of Ackroyd’s novel, is best known as “Chatterton” and can be seen at the Tate Gallery in London¹. It shows a realistic representation of the dead poet in his garret, with all his manuscripts torn down on the floor. The third narrative unfolds in the 18th century; it is that of Chatterton, after he settled in London. A third person narrator tells of his very last days in his garret in Holborn.

These three narratives allow Peter Ackroyd to reflect about style, reality and fiction through the notion of imitation. Already present and promoted in his early literary manifesto *Notes for a New Culture*, which he wrote in 1970, imitation and copying are at the core of Peter Ackroyd’s works in general, and *Chatterton* in particular. Browsing the novel reveals an impressive number of occurrences of the words “copy”, “imitation”, “style”, but also “real”, “true” or “fake”. First, a discussion is brought about around the relations between art and reality, or between language and reality. Ackroyd questions the act of representing reality, notably by carefully mingling real and fictitious elements, which inevitably triggers a reflection on the status and value of texts and works and on the way they should be read. Then his conclusions about language and imitation pave the way for a further polemical discussion on the writer’s ethic

¹ The painting can be seen on the Tate Gallery’s website:
<http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?cgroupid=999999961&workid=15906&searchid=10238&tabview=image> (consulted 02/07/2011)

of writing, which is tackled in many ways in the echoing plots of the novel, mainly through the notions of hypertextuality and intertextuality according to Gérard Genette and Julia Kristeva; imitation and borrowing are confronted to the problems of property and origins. This focus on writing and reading will help me show that the novel appears to deal first and foremost with textuality, making language emerge as the most important subject of literature according to Peter Ackroyd.

Imitation, representation, reality

Among the many lines devoted to the question, some particularly challenging cues are worth quoting, such as:

“I said they were **fakes**, I didn't say they were not **real**” (219)
He managed to **create** an **authentic**² medieval style (foreword)

The use of two stylistic devices, respectively antithesis with the parallel structure of antithetical words (fakes/real), and oxymoron that juxtaposes antithetical terms (create/authentic) suggests that fakery is here associated with art and considered to be authentic material. The dichotomies real/fake, imitation/reality, along with the notion of origin, are thoroughly blurred by Ackroyd whose aim is to argue that reality cannot be objectively depicted or realistically represented because it is hardly possible to fix what reality “really” is. In order to illustrate those issues, Ackroyd has chosen two examples: art, which is dealt with through the story of Henry Wallis painting Chatterton on his death bed, and history, through the story of Chatterton whose name was chosen for the title itself as it would have been in a biography.

These two modes of representation are constantly tackled in their relation to life and reality. Let us first briefly see how realistic painting is depicted. On page 132 the 19th century plot begins with Henry Wallis and his model Georges Meredith. The two have a different conception of reality and its representation. Henry Wallis sticks to realism and declares “I can only paint what I see” (133) and “I am glad that you're amused at my poor attempts at realism (137)”, thus justifying his need for a model, for rehearsals and his efforts to stage again the “true” setting of the poet's death place. Meredith answers “And what do you see? The real? The ideal?”; he is reminding Wallis of the myth of Plato's cave. He adds “Of course there is a reality but (...) it is not one that can be depicted”, and later: “Call it verisimilitude” (137). Wallis's devices to achieve realism lead George Meredith to declare: “so the greatest realism is also the greatest

² The highlighting is always mine, unless specified.

fakery” (139), pointing at the fact that he is the one who is pretending to be dead and is represented dead on the couch, not Chatterton. We can feel all this challenging in another question by Meredith while he is posing: “Is it becoming more real?” (138). Of course, as the scene is gradually depicted, the painting resembles not Chatterton's death itself, but the real painting more and more; in that sense only is it becoming “more real”. The reader is reminded that the real painting by Henry Wallis is the starting point of all the plots imagined by Ackroyd but more than that it is strongly suggested that painting cannot imitate but another painting, not reality, as language can only imitate language.

This challenging of mimesis in art goes along with the challenging of history, or historical narratives as being the depiction of reality. From the very beginning of the novel, stable referents, like reference books or authoritative texts, seem fallible. Let us give an example:

‘If you don't believe me.’ He found the **reference book** he wanted and read at loud. (21)

Charles got up quickly and went back to the **reference book** which he had consulted a few minutes before [...] ‘Thomas Chatterton completed the fake medieval poem, *Vala*, a few days before his suicide’. (23)

These examples mention the word “reference” implying official knowledge and standing for truth; the use of that word is quite telling about the status of the “reference book”. And yet, the trust to place in it is immediately debunked, as *Vala* was not written by Chatterton but by Blake in 1797. So very early in the novel the status of historical narratives in relation to reality is questioned, and Charles directly formulates this on page 40:

‘It's a question of language. Realism is just as artificial as surrealism, after all. The real world is just a succession of interpretations. Everything which is written down immediately becomes a kind of fiction.’

This clings to Hayden White's theory of history or historical narratives, in which events emerge as plotted stories (“emplotment”)³. Reality is equated to fiction as it is constructed and therefore subjective. Subjectivity is thus affirmed as inevitably mediating representation, which is why there is “reality but not one that can be depicted” (133).

³ See White 1987 and 1999: “It is only by troping, rather than by logical deduction, that any given set of the kinds of event we would wish to call historical can be (first) *represented* as having the order of a chronicle, (second) *transformed* by emplotment into a story with identified beginning, middle and end phases; and (third) *constituted* as the subject of whatever formal arguments may be adduced to establish their “meaning”. (9)

This inevitable bias is in fact alluded to very early in the book, in the paratext where a short biography of Thomas Chatterton precedes the actual beginning of the novel. It occurs before the initial fragments and before “Part One”, and is typographically differentiated from the novel as it is written in italics, a convention that leads the reader to consider it as non-fiction material, as a reference to official information on Chatterton’s life. While the reader is legitimate in reading it as the “true” life of the poet, it already encompasses the notion of unstable truth or reality:

It was here on the morning of 24 August 1770, **apparently** worn down by his struggle against poverty and failure, that he swallowed arsenic. [...] An inquest was held and a verdict of *felo de se* or suicide was announced.

The adverb “apparently” leaves room for another interpretation of his death. Despite the mention of an enquiry stating his suicide, doubt is cast on this version. It has to be noted that the different biographies of Chatterton or the entries in encyclopaedias are not completely assertive on his suicide, though they most often implicitly allude to it. Let us look at a few of them. In 1813, Joseph and Louis Gabriel Michaud indicate in their *Biographie Universelle, Ancienne et Moderne*: “After several days without eating, he poisoned himself with arsenic (286)”⁴. They do not clearly mention his suicide but seem to establish a causal link between Chatterton’s starving and his taking of arsenic. Charles Bonnycastle Wilcox, in the biographical part of *The Poetical Works Of Thomas Chatterton with Notices of his Life* published in 1842, clearly asserts his suicide: “The suicide was effected by arsenic mixed with water” (CXXXIX). The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Micropaedia vol.3 1986, 140) uses the same technique as Michaud’s: “Though literally starving, Chatterton refused the food of friends and, on the night of August 24, 1770, took arsenic in his Holborn garret and died.” In 1989, Louise J. Kaplan while mentioning his taking of arsenic, alludes to another version - some say he tried to cure himself from gonorrhoea - and proposes a critical survey of this hypothesis. While this explanation does not usually appear in Chatterton’s biographical notice, Ackroyd precisely chose to use it in his fictional biography. The adverb “apparently” introducing doubt in the biographical notice already paves the way for his challenging of historical narratives. Thus, he shows the reader that his version might be as true as the official one – and he read a lot about Chatterton before writing this novel – as nobody can know the truth. Ackroyd even stages Harriet Scrope inventing her memoirs in chapter 7, so as to prove again that any writing is – at least – partly apocryphal. This echoes

⁴ My translation of “Après avoir passé plusieurs jours sans manger, il s’empoisonna avec de l’arsenic”. In both French and English the reflexive can simply mean that he “introduced” something into himself without knowing the consequences.

Ackroyd's seeing biography as "a convenient fiction" (Lewis 2007, 34) and leads Charles to say on page 127: "If there were no truths, everything was true". Origins and reality are equated as unstable, ungraspable and unrecoverable.

Ackroyd's challenging of reality is furthered in the novel thanks to several devices. First, he constantly blends fictitious and real elements, be it blatantly or more subtly. For instance, true and invented quotations sometimes mingle in an ironic way. Charles is reading the manuscript of Chatterton he has just discovered:

And then he read out: **'Arise now from thy Past, as from the Dust that environs thee.** When Los heard this he rose weeping, uttering the original groan as Enitharmon fell towards dark Confusion.'

'Blake.' Philip looked at the vacant seat beside him, as if someone had just moved into it. **'That's William Blake.'**

'I know that.' Charles was suddenly very calm. 'But then why is it signed T.C.?' and as the train took them homewards Charles read out, in mounting excitement, another line from the same page. **'Craving & devouring; but my Eyes are always upon thee, O lovely Delusion.'** (60)

The first lines ("Arise now from thy Past" etc) are immediately identified as Blake's by both writers, while they do not exist and have obviously been pastiched by Ackroyd. It is actually the last lines ("Craving and devouring; but my eyes are always upon thee my lovely delusion") that are unmistakably Blake's. They were taken from *The Four Zoas* (Vala). Here, Ackroyd shows the easy blurring of origins and shows the art of pastiche as he created an "authentic" Blakian verse.

The second example calls on intertextuality in a very particular way. Near Saint Mary Redcliffe, Charles enters the garden of Chatterton's house and sees verse inscribed under a sundial:

Had restless time whose harvest is each hour
Made but a pause to view this poet's flower
In pity he'd have turned his scythe away
And left it blooming to a future day (57)

This text does not seem to have been written by a famous writer but what is sure is that it was not invented by Ackroyd. Indeed, this text exists and lies on the tomb of Peggy Irving in Arthuret, a town in Cumbria, with a slight difference in the second line: "But deign'd to pause and view this lovely flow'r" (Graham 1821, 138). Moreover, Chatterton's house does exist in Bristol and does have a garden; but there is no sundial in it, or at least none that can be seen by a passer-by as a huge wall hides part of the garden. And the descriptive records of the town do not mention a sundial at all. Thus, once again, Ackroyd

displaced existing text into a half-fictitious situation. By blurring texts and origins, existing and invented material, doubt is therefore cast upon every single element, and their reality or truth becomes unstable.

Then, fiction even seems to become reality for some characters:

It was then that he saw the picture. He had the faintest and briefest sensation of being looked at, so he turned his head to one side – and caught the eyes of a middle-aged man who **was watching him**. (11)

When she eventually opened her eyes, Thomas Chatterton **was staring at her**. (188)

In these examples characters painted on a canvas are treated as if they were lively or “true” people; Charles and Harriet feel Chatterton’s painted face actually watching them. This tinge of romance or even magic realism that we can find elsewhere in the novel sustains the feeling that fiction becomes reality. The blurring of the two has come to a complete reversal; Meredith’s wife thinks that her husband is “more natural on paper” (141) and Meredith himself claims:

‘I can endure death; it’s the representation of death I can’t bear.’ (138)

‘The invention is always more real.’ [...] ‘No one had properly understood the medieval world until Chatterton summoned it into existence. The poet does not merely recreate or describe the world. He actually creates it’. [...] ‘And that is why’, he added quietly, ‘this will always be remembered as **the true death** of Chatterton.’ (157)

Here, art clearly seems to be claimed to surpass reality; it does not only represent it, it creates it. The reader is led to reflect upon the work of Chatterton under the name of Rowley, when he created medieval knowledge though he was only supposed to depict it. Moreover, by having Meredith call the painting “the true death of Chatterton”, Ackroyd insists both on the uncertainty of history, of its construction, its textuality and on the fact that art has an influence on life. The acute concern for details in this last scene staging Chatterton’s death seems to transform it into a realistic representation of Wallis’s painting. Mimesis seems to be reversed here. It is also most likely that Peter Ackroyd chose a romanticised ending that matches the alleged realistic execution of the painting in order to enhance the irony of the term “true death”, as Chatterton dying from arsenic was probably not smiling when he died.

Imitation, style and intertextuality

If reality cannot be copied or imitated, language can: just as a painting can be imitated by a painter, words can be imitated by a writer, and the subject is tackled in quite a polemical way in *Chatterton*. Ackroyd gives a blatant

demonstration in chapter 6 when he stages his imitation of Joynson imitating Chatterton imitating medieval style (Now Rowlie ynne these mokie Dayes/Sendes owte hys shynyng Lyghte, 87).

From the very beginning the reader gets the idea that echoes are constituent of the book. Pages 2 and 3, which come before the first part entitled “Part One”, are bits, echoes of the novel we are going to read and each of them displays a particular topic. The three layers of time are represented and each echo of the novel to follow has been chosen for its link with the notion of reproduction of language (quotations) or truth and reality (representation). It has to be noted straight away that those fragments do not strictly reproduce the parts of the novel they allude to. The writer engages in a distorted play of echoes- or a play of distorted echoes- as soon as the peritext⁵. Here are two of those fragments:

[...]

‘I am not so poor that I need pity from such as you!’ Chatterton ran out into the open fields, pushing his face against the wind that chilled him; then he stopped short, sat down on the cropped grass and, gazing at the tower of St Mary Redcliffe, muttered the words that had so powerfully swayed him:

The time of my departure is approaching.
Nigh is the hurricane that will scatter my leaves.
Tomorrow, perhaps, the wanderer will appear-
His eye will search for me round every spot,
And will, -and will not find me.

He looked at the church and, with a shout, raised his arms above his head.

*

Harriet Scrope rose from her chair, eager to deliver the news. ‘Cut is the bough,’ she said, ‘that might have grown full straight.’ And she doubled up, as if she were about to be sawn in half.

‘Branch.’ Sarah Tilt was very deliberate.

‘I’m sorry?’

‘It was a branch, dear, not a bough. If you were quoting.’

Harriet stood upright. ‘Don’t you think I know?’ She paused before starting up again. ‘We poets in our youth begin in gladness. But thereof in the end come despondency and madness.’

[...]

⁵ The word “peritext” refers to the paratextual elements inside a book (cf. Genette 1987).

The first lines uttered by Chatterton (the character) illustrate the technique of pastiche; they are Ackroyd's creation, not a quotation from Chatterton's works; we are already given the idea that the book will constantly play with authentic and invented material, and challenge the notion of "authenticity". Then, these lines point to one of the main questions of the novel: is the poet going to survive after his death thanks to his work? Will his voice be identified as his own even in the texts of others? In the second extract, the reader witnesses Harriet Scrope quoting or rather misquoting lines by Marlow ("Cut is the branch etc") and by Wordsworth ("We poets in our youth.."), those lines coming from the very stanza in which the poet mentions "Chatterton, the marvellous Boy". Quotation is once again at the core of the peritext, in the mouth of a writer who (incorrectly) takes up the words of previous writers. These misquotations clearly allude to intertextuality and probably raise the question of origin.

These borrowings from Ackroyd's own novel announce many other borrowings inside the novel and, indeed, many deliberate or hidden quotes run through its entire space. In other words, the novel is highly intertextual. We may be more precise and use Gérard Genette's terminology to identify the types of borrowings that can be found in *Chatterton*: intertextuality (allusions, quotes and plagiarism), hypertextuality and hypotextuality (Genette 1982 and 1987). Another category should be added here, as the novel sometimes borrows from itself or from Ackroyd's other works: this is called "autotextuality", or 'internal/autarchic intertextuality'⁶. The fragments aforementioned belong to this category.

The reader gets the idea of a whole dialogical space, be it literary or not, riddled with voluntary or involuntary quotations or borrowings:

And at once he [Charles] realised that these were not his words, but those of someone other. (78)

'I [George Meredith] never know what is mine any more.' (134)

Words and voices reverberate inside the speakers' minds and mouths. This clearly raises the question of origin and this question is even more blatant when famous quotations in the novel appear to be unmistakably anachronistic. On page 85, Chatterton says: "Schoolboy tho' I was, it was even at this time that I decided to shore up these ancient Fragments with my own genius". This sentence is highly reminiscent of a line by T.S. Eliot, written almost two centuries after Chatterton's death: "These fragments I have shored against my

⁶ "Internal intertextuality" was used in Ricardou (1971) and Dallenbach coined the term "autotextuality" and defined it as "autarchic intertextuality" (see Dallenbach 1976).

ruins” (*The Waste Land* 1922). Less than casting doubt on the origin of Eliot’s line, it highlights the circulation of words in time and the normal blurring of origins. The text seems to be “woven entirely with citations, references, echoes (...) antecedent or contemporary, which cut across it through and through in a vast stereophony” (Barthes 1971, 1473).

This question on origins is further dealt with in the debate concerning “influence” and “anxiety of influence” displayed in the novel. Indeed, some writers in the book show how ethically problematic to them it can be to be influenced by other texts or other writers. They see the influence of a hypotext through borrowings or imitation as an ethical fault called plagiarism⁷ or fakery (and we must remember that all the plots are closely linked to these notions). Let us have a look at a conversation between Harriet and Charles:

Then she [Harriet] sighed. ‘But Eliot took me under his wing.’

Charles stopped writing for a moment and looked up at her. ‘Why should the aged

‘What?’

‘It’s a quotation from Eliot.’

‘It sounded like Shakespeare to me’.

‘It was Eliot.’

‘Well you know these writers. They’ll **steal** any...’ (100)

This conversation stages a distorted case of intertextuality, which is quite common in the novel. Charles takes up Harriet’s mention of “Eliot” and “wing”, and quotes half a line from *Ash Wednesday* “Why should the aged eagle” (stretch its wings). Harriet identifies it as being Shakespeare’s, which is actually not the case. But Ackroyd playfully hints at a real case of intertextuality between Shakespeare and Eliot in the same poems:

Because I don’t hope to turn
Desiring this man’s gift and that man’s scope
I no longer strive to strive towards such things
(Why should the aged eagle stretch its wings)
(*Ash Wednesday*, l.3-6)

When in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes,
I all alone beweep my outcast state
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries

⁷ There is a difference here in the way Ackroyd’s characters define “plagiarism” and the way Genette defines it. While the latter considers plagiarism as a literal borrowing and thus labels it “intertextuality”, plagiarism seems to be clearly linked with hypertextuality in the words of the characters. They are anxious about borrowing plots or styles from previous texts, from hypotexts.

And look upon myself and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope;
Featured like him, like him with friends possess'd,
Desiring that man's art and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least;
(*Sonnet 29* 1.1-8)

The lines are almost identical. Of course, the choice of the verb “steal” is quite telling of the ethical blame in Harriet's mind. She is herself quite ashamed of having borrowed plots from another writer, which she calls “plagiarism” (103). The same trouble occurs for Philip:

Not only had he written with painful slowness and uncertainty, but even the pages he had managed to complete seemed to him to be filled with images and phrases from the work of other writers whom he admired. It had become a patchwork of other voices and of other styles, and it was the overwhelming difficulty of recognising his own voice among them that had led him to abandon the project. So what right did he have to **condemn** Miss Scrope? (70)

The same vocabulary of fault and guilt appears here. Both are an example of Harold Bloom's 1997 anxiety of influence theory; they cannot accept their forebears' influence and cannot be creative thanks to – or because of – their previous readings. Both are quite anxious to be recognised as “authors” and both long for originality as writers, thus clinging to the romantic concept of creation which warns against “the hazards of imitation” which “denies one's own potential for greatness⁸” (Leitch 2001, 427).

Meanwhile, mimesis and hypertextuality are elsewhere advocated in the novel to achieve creation:

Chatterton knew that original genius consists in forming new and happy combinations, rather than in searching after thoughts and ideas that had never occurred before (58).

The choice of the adjective “original” in this statement acts as a counterpoint for the romantic conception of originality aforementioned. In chapter 6, Chatterton's art of forgery (or pastiche) is described and the reader is shown how the forger has to master the original material. Hypertextuality is highlighted, and pastiche of great authors advocated as creation and not mere imitation. This is reminiscent of Ackroyd's conception of “the history of English literature as the history of plagiarism” and his description of TS Eliot as “a great plagiarist” (Smith 1987 in Finney 1992, 245) “absorb[ing] and articulat[ing] voices from the past” (Finney 1992, 245). TS Eliot's position

⁸ Edward Young' “Conjectures on Original Composition” were written in 1759 and the first modern printing of them dates back to 1918.

itself is that “each poem exists within the tradition from which it takes shape and which it, in turns, redefines” (Leitch 2001, 1089), a position that Bloom harshly criticizes but that finds an echo in Kristeva’s 1969 analysis of poetic language as dialogical:

Poetic language appears as a dialogue between texts. [...] Every sequence has a double orientation: towards the act of reminiscence (evoking the other writing) and towards the act of summation (transforming this writing). The book refers to other books and [...] gives those books a new way of being (181).⁹

The positive aspect of the concept of borrowing is furthered and illustrated in the image of the father and son relationship that runs through the novel. While at first Edward is scolded by his father while imitating Mr Leno (“it’s rude to imitate people”, 44), at the end of the novel, his perfect imitation of his dead father acts as a palimpsest:

And in his expression at that moment she could see the lineaments of Charles’s face: her husband was dead and yet he was not dead.

This echoes another cue by Chatterton in chapter 6: “Thus the living and the dead were to be reunited”. We seem to be given the idea that authors and their texts acquire immortality thanks to this palimpsestic condition, the past and present figures having thus a reciprocal benefit on each other. However, there is no clear-cut view about the place of the author. While some passages suggest his supremacy, as hypertextuality compels a mastery of the hypotext, some other might allude to his disappearance, to “the death of the author” whose text, so full of alien voices and writings, totally submerges him. The episode of Chatterton’s portrait restoration by faker Stewart Merk looks like a metaphor for this statement. Having discovered that the portrait was a fake and asked by Harriet to make it “authentic”, the faker realises that “the painting contained the residue of several different images, painted at various times” (205). And when he finds out the original painting underneath, the portrait begins to dissolve, showing a palimpsest of faces before being totally destroyed. Here the search for origin is shown as doomed or useless and the work of art is seen as a composite, multi-layered and autonomous object. This recalls Barthes’s definition of text as “a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash” (“The Death of the Author” 1968).

⁹ My translation.

Concluding remarks

Though in *Chatterton* the reader can never hear the opinion or the voice of the implied author whose heterodiegetic, unintrusive narrator stages different characters with different opinions without creating a distance or a bias, he can nevertheless recognise some of Ackroyd's polemical literary claims already exposed in his *Notes for a New Culture*.

First, the ethics of writing are staged in terms of mimesis after a predecessor. In the novel, when characters manage to get rid of their anxiety of influence and transform it into influence, they become creative and travel from mimesis to poesis. There is a claim that writers are first readers and as such that the circulation of texts is inevitable and to be sought after. Intertextuality and hypertextuality help celebrate words and language: quotations and pastiche of style are recognised as the only possible mimesis. Words can only imitate words.

Conversely, the structure of the novel including heterogeneous elements, both fictional and actual, realistic and romanced ones, helps convey the idea that "reality", contrary to words, cannot be represented entirely realistically as it is necessarily mediated by the subjective eye of the viewer. Thus following Plato's cave myth, and White's theory, Ackroyd challenges representation as imitation in general, and historical narratives as reference in particular. A strong linguistic claim is prevalent throughout the novel and the referential value of texts is somewhat undermined. Ackroyd invites the reader to critical distance, to adopt an ethic of reading and to appreciate texts and literature for their linguistic value, for what he calls "le jeu de la forme", the free play of linguistic forms, in his *Notes For A New Culture* (Onega 1998, 7).

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