(Re)writing and Remembering

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Memory as Artefact and Artifice

Edited by
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Eléonore Cartellier-Veuillen,
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"*Like history, memory is inherently revisionist and never more chameleon than when it appears to stay the same.*"
—Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture,
Raphael Samuel

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INTRODUCTION

Recounting past events is intrinsic to the storytelling function, as most fiction assumes a past tense as the natural means of narrating a story. Few narratives draw attention to this process, yet others make the act of remembering a primary part of the narrative situation, with framed tales, memoirs, diaries, testimonies and epistolary novels among the ingenious approaches employed by writers to authenticate the ontology of the text as a written document or artefact recounting past events. As Peter Brooks argues, such an approach, in "dramatizing the relations of tellers and listeners, narrators and narratees […] enacts the problematic of transmission," and reflects an "anxiety" about storytelling in narrative.[1] Yet such fiction, as Susan Stewart asserts, "need not have the authority of the 'happened before.' What is fictive is the 'original context'; the pure fiction has no material referent. Hence fiction subverts the myth of presence, of authorial context."[2]

This volume focuses on works which problematise, or reflect the problematic nature of, narrating the past. Many of the chapters concern works which make remembering (whether personal or collective) a primary element of their discourse. To what extent, these chapters ask, are the fictional acts of remembering also acts of rewriting the past to suit the needs of the present? How seamlessly does experience yield to the ordering strictures of narrative and what is at stake in the process? What must be omitted or stylised, and to what (ideological) end? In making an artefact of the past, what role does artifice play, and what does this process also tell us about history-making?

It is often assumed that such a discourse is more or less an exclusively contemporary one, associated, for instance, with metafiction or other overtly postmodernist cultural production. However, this volume features chapters not only on contemporary works but also Medieval and Romantic

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[1] Peter Brooks, *Reading For The Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 28.

[2] Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), 20.

writing, First World War literature and biographical cinema, suggesting that the self-conscious engagement with rewriting and remembering has been a site of productive confrontation in many fictional forms for centuries.

The first part of this book examines issues related to authenticity and rewriting, whereby the intertextual reworking of literary precedents is intertwined with the problematic nature of how we narrate the past. Indeed, a brief look at the literature of the past centuries shows how the conception of memory as an artefact and artifice was central in Antique and Medieval works of art. The idea of creation was, after all, highly problematic in societies where creating was first and foremost a divine prerogative. Religious teaching and cultural transmission thus became the shields yielded by generations of artists to protect their creations from being defined as empty rhetorical exercises or simple lies. Our first chapter consequently analyses how Geoffrey Chaucer's *House of Fame* tackles the necessity of using cultural transmission to legitimise an original creation. While many translated, adapted or invoked the great poems of Antiquity to guide and protect their work (see for instance Virgil's presence in the *Divine Comedy*), Chaucer decided to show that this idealised literary past depended largely on men's ability to remember events without altering them.

This alteration can also be guided, of course, by a strong nostalgic impulse. A lot of Romantic writers were thus influenced by an almost "kitsch" vision of British northernness: James Macpherson or Sir Walter Scott were, as our second chapter shows, prominent figures in the romanticisation of Scottish Highlands. But this "kitschification" can be problematic when one starts to romanticise an already Romantic subject, as shown in John Wilson's "Unimore: A Dream of the Highlands."

The memoirs and semi-autobiographical works discussed in the second part of this book chart the use of narrative as a means of coping with the trauma of war, but also the process of creative renewal implied in the act of remembering. Dramatic world events in the early twentieth century motivated writers to explore the artifice of memory making and recollection to assuage traumatic loss and rediscover wholeness in "the salvation of the soul through memories."[3] Writers of the Lost Generation such as Ford Madox Ford, a precursor of modernism and instrumental,

[3] Michel Neyraut, "De l'Autobiographie," in *L'Autobiographie, VI Rencontre Psychanalytiques d'Aix-en-Provence 1987* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1988), 26.

through his involvement in the group, in developing early twentieth century literature, endeavoured to make sense of their lives, to create order amidst profound social instability by exploring the interactions between trauma and creation through semi-autobiographical characters who relate their process of reconstruction. Ernest Hemingway, in the memoir of his interwar years in Paris, tells how he found spiritual nourishment in France's gastronomy with others of that generation, seeking to "put down roots once more in time and in space, in eternity and in history."[4]

Autobiographical memoirs allowed writers to dispel moral disillusionment by reconnecting with personal memories. In post-World War food memoirs we find idiosyncratic and self-conscious use of memory artifice. Displaced writers evoked the sensual and aesthetic pleasures of adopted culinary traditions and the discovery of food that could nourish their souls as well as their bodies. Food writer Elizabeth David documents the treasured Mediterranean cuisine that was her antidote to the ration-bound war-traumatised Britain that confronted her return to Britain in 1945. Travel writer Samuel Chamberlain dissimulates the drama of his family's war-enforced displacement, and the loss of its adopted culture in an anecdotal tale of his cook. For war victims and its diaspora, individual and collective anamnesis is an act of both preservation and conservation.

The third part of this volume focuses on contemporary British authors who have written fictitious memoirs by narrators confronted by remorse and nostalgia in older age. However, these attempts to re-examine and rewrite the past prove more problematic and painful than cathartic. Their efforts to remember and make sense of personal trauma become acts of narrative which have implications for both psychoanalysis and novelistic discourse. While life itself is unplotted and often chaotic, the novels suggest, it becomes narrative as we seek to retrospectively impose meaning on it. As Frank Kermode argued in his seminal work of narratology, *The Sense of an Ending,* from which one of the works analysed here borrows its title, we "make considerable imaginative investments in coherent patterns which, by the provision of an end, make possible a satisfying consonance with the origins and with the middle." [5] Such retellings promise a sense of closure and pastness to events that is at once the forward-movement of all narrative and yet at odds with life as it

[4] [Editor's translation] G. A. Astre, *Hemingway. Par lui-même* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1961), 54.
[5] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 17.

is really experienced. The novels discussed also suggest that the stories we tell about ourselves, just like all forms of narrative, bear the imprint of other plots, texts and genres.

The final part engages with the precarious nature of narrating not the self, but of others, in literature and in cinema. Here biographical subjects prove elusive as memory and historical artefacts are found to be inadequate, contradictory or multifarious. Knowing the past becomes fraught with difficulty as the subjects emerge as unstable sites of mythologisation, ideological contestation and ambiguity. This part thus deals with the rewriting of the biography of two historical figures (Martin Luther and John Henry) or of a fictional character (Sebastian Knight) in order to see how these people/characters are remembered and presented to the reader or spectator. The texts and films studied all date from the second part of the twentieth century and are written or filmed as postmodern narratives which question memory and History in their tales. Indeed these tales question the fabrication of narratives and continually demonstrate that Truth and History are constructions and can never be Real. The texts and films strive to reconstruct historical truth about the characters, all the while recognising that this is impossible, that language itself is always ambiguous and that it acts as a veil to hide historical facts.

The three main characters discussed here, Sebastian Knight, John Henry and Martin Luther are all mythicised by the text/film which tries to recreate their biography. The multiplicity of voices and points of view also helps to create this myth as the polyphony in the narratives shows that there cannot be one official version of facts. Both in *John Henry Days* and in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* various voices paint very different portraits of the eponymous heroes who we never meet. The two films about Martin Luther enable us to see two contrasting visions of the man, a dignified and holy one versus an overtly human one. These narratives depict a kaleidoscope portrait of these characters with multiple points of view merging and rewriting each other in order to question the process of memory and writing.

As a result, the chapters in this book offer a vision of the diverse ways in which memory has been transformed into narrative throughout the centuries, and in different genres and media. Moreover, this volume also gives scholars the opportunity to explore this problematic in the fields of self-reflexivity and metafiction; narratology (narrative form and voice); intertextuality and genre; reception and the role of the reader; the interplay

between history-making and plot-making; the representation of memory; and the function and ideology of nostalgia in fiction.

PART I:

HISTORICAL REMEMBRANCE: CONFRONTATIONS WITH (IN)AUTHENTICITY AND NARRATIVE SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS IN MEDIEVAL AND ROMANTIC WRITING

CHAPTER ONE

RE-WRITING THE CLASSICS: GEOFFREY CHAUCER AND *THE HOUSE OF FAME*

JONATHAN FRUOCO

The notions of fiction and imagination were highly problematic in the Middle Ages because they implied a confusion between creation and lies. Thus, poets often had to authenticate their work by relying mainly on religious teaching and cultural transmission. However, this incessant anxiety of storytelling led some writers to question the human tendency to re-enact, re-write and interact with elements of our past. Few of them deconstructed the act of remembering like Geoffrey Chaucer in *The House of Fame*.

Written shortly after Chaucer's journeys in Italy in 1373 and 1378, during which he discovered the poetry of Dante and, a few years later, of Boccaccio, *The House of Fame* represents a major landmark in the history of English literature. Often considered as Chaucer's first "Italian" poem, *Fame*, undoubtedly his most Dantean creation, corresponds to the inception of the cultural paradigm shift that would lead to the English Renaissance. However, adapting Dante's creation and the beatitude of his vision was not an easy task. Unlike Boccaccio, who failed to understand his relation to the Classics and to Dante in his *Amorose Visione*, Chaucer, already had the experience required to deal with such a heritage. Indeed, like most poets of his generation, he was familiar with the narrative devices of French courtly poetry and therefore decided to develop his poem in a genre of which he mastered every code. *The House of Fame* is accordingly a dream vision narrated in the first person by Chaucer's narrative persona, Geffrey, a man whose knowledge of love is more bookish than based on personal experience. Hence we are told that, on the tenth day of December, he fell asleep in his bed and woke up in the Temple of Venus, from which he was afterwards taken by an eagle that led

him to the House of Fame as a compensation for his devotion to Love.

As soon as Geffrey wakes up, we understand that Chaucer is dealing with something new. Unlike what is usually expected of such a beginning, the poet does not use the dream vision in order to transport his dreamer into an allegory of love, but a world of books. The poem, consequently, takes place almost entirely in the realm of literature. In Book I, for instance, the Temple of Venus is covered with illustrations and statues relating the main events of Virgil's *Aeneid*; whereas in Book III, the House of Fame itself is supported by:

> the gret Omer;
> And with him Dares and Tytus
> Before, and eke he Lollius,
> And Guydo eke de Columpris,
> And Englyssh Gaufride eke, ywis;
> (III, l. 1466-1470)

Even the eagle supposed to pull Geffrey out of his contemplation has a literary origin, since it comes from Dante's *Commedia*. Indeed, when Dante is transported to the sixth sphere of Paradise, he encounters several souls floating in the air, who start to design before his eyes the signs "of our language" ("nostra favella," *Par*. XVIII, v. 72). The spirits gather and form, as they sing, letters and then words that Dante instantly recognises as the first verses of *The Book of Wisdom* ("Diligite iustitiam […] qui iudicatis terram,"[1] *Par.* XVIII, v. 91–93). And just as he is reading the words depicted in the sky, additional lights are drawn to the final letter of the word *terram*, **M**, which then starts to take the shape of an eagle.

Although the eagle remains the most obvious element borrowed from the *Commedia*, Chaucer does not conceive of the motif as a device to get his story moving. On the contrary, as Karla Taylor notices, "Chaucer borrows not words, but an image and the process by which it is formed."[2] Accordingly, when he resorts to Dante's eagle, he simultaneously borrows the motif of visible speech with its theological implications.[3] Without reproducing Dante's most subtle creations, such as the acrostic in the

[1] "Love justice […] you that are the judges of the earth"
[2] Karla Taylor, *Chaucer Reads 'The Divine Comedy'* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 22.
[3] Dante notices after the apparition of the eagle: "Quei che dipinge lì, non ha chi il guidi" ("He who paints there has no one as His guide"; *Par.* XVIII, l. 109).

twelfth canto of the *Purgatorio*, the concept allows Chaucer to think about his own position and responsibilities as an artist (see for instance *Paradiso* I, l. 13–18 and *Fame* III, l. 1091–1108) and to question the limits of the human mind and its implication in the creative process.

One of the first examples of Chaucer's use of the *Commedia* can be found in Book I, when Geffrey finds extracts and illustrations from the *Aeneid* in the Temple of Venus. Yet, despite the fact that Chaucer is here dealing with the Classics, his reaction as an artist remains guided by the tenth canto of the *Purgatorio*. His narrator discovers, for instance, the first words of the *Aeneid* carved on a brass tablet (I. l. 143–148). However, his description, in which he repeats the phrases "First sawgh I," or "And next that sawgh I" (I. l. 151, 162, 174, 193, 198…), seems to indicate that he is contemplating wall paintings or stone carvings. But if that were true, how could Geffrey see dialogues? He tells us, after all, how he saw Venus comforting Aeneas, telling him to go to Carthage (I. v. 224–238), and even refuses to spend too much time on Dido's encounter with Aeneas and "How they aqueynteden in fere." (I. v. 250) Chaucer thus willingly confuses our perception of these forms of representation. For if images can be painted or carved, why not speech? As the poet tells us himself:

> What shulde I speke more queynte,
> Or peyne me my wordes peynte[4]
> To speke of love? Hyt wol not be;
> I kan not of that faculte.
> (I. l. 245–248)

Unlike Dante, Chaucer, however, was more concerned with our earthly actions than with Heavenly bliss. As a result, he draws from Augustinian thought the main characteristics of visible speech and exploits its limitations. In his *Johannis Evangelium Tractatus*, Saint Augustine states that the human mind does not react the same way when confronted with an image or a written text: the simple act of looking at a visual work of art suffices to understand its message, whereas a written text requires a specific ability that is not necessarily shared by all, namely reading (XXV, 2). Augustine also adds in his *Confessions* that when events from the past are told, we do not extract from our memory the facts as they truly occurred. On the contrary, the words we hear will produce images in our

[4] The phrase "my wordes peynte" here has, of course, a double meaning since it can refer to a circumlocution but also, if understood literally, to a visual representation of his words.

mind standing for these experiences (XI, 18). There is, as we can see, a difference between events and their representation in the human mind, and that is precisely the weakness that Chaucer takes advantage of in *The House of Fame*.[5]

The scenes represented in the Temple of Venus become, in this respect, problematical, for, when Geffrey starts reading the words carved on the tablet, he does not render Virgil's words as faithfully as we might expect. The words enter Geffrey's mind and leave it transformed by his voice. Thus, whereas Virgil writes "Arma virumque cano, Trojæ qui primus ab oris / Italiam, fato profugus, Laviniaque venit,"[6] (v. 1–2) Geffrey says:

> I wol now synge, yif I kan,
> The armes and also the man
> That first cam, thurgh his destinee,
> Fugityf of Troy contree,
> In Itayle, with ful moche pyne
> Unto the strondes of Lavyne.
> (I. l. 143–148)

The translation itself is almost perfect. Yet the element "yif I kan" does not come from Virgil's text, but from Chaucer's usual *topos* of modesty. And it is only the first of a long series of changes that will increasingly diminish Virgil's own voice. When Geffrey tells us the story of Dido and Aeneas, the legend has accordingly very little to do with the version he found in the *Aeneid*, since he transforms the main character into a self-obsessed villain whose only interest is glory. Upon discovering his treason, Dido even starts describing a polygamist who "wolde have fame / In magnyfyinge of hys name." (I. v. 305–306) The queen of Carthage herself is, as a result, no longer the treacherous woman tradition has immortalised, but well and truly the victim of a man's dishonesty. After all, Dido's myth is nothing but a poetical reinvention of a historical character: her relationship with Aeneas and her supposed betrayal of her late husband are both parts of this rewriting. Whether the author of this revision is called Ovid (*Heroides*), Boccaccio (*De mulieribus claris*) or Chaucer (*The House of Fame*, *The Legend of Good Women*) does not change the fact that they all turned to Virgil's poetical re-imagination of this event. Virgil's strength

[5] Taylor, *Chaucer Reads 'The Divine Comedy'*, 27.
[6] "I sing of arms and the man, he who, exiled by fate, first came from the coast of Troy to Italy, and to Lavinian shore."

lies in his having imposed his own vision as a–historical account.[7] Chaucer's approach to the myth is apparently quite similar. Yet, he refers for the first time to the fictitious dimension of Dido's encounter with the heir of Troy by enriching his story with details for which "Non other auctour alegge I."[8] (I. v. 314) Even so, Chaucer does not simply blend his sources since he shows, by juxtaposing them, that they are quite often contradictory. In other words, he demonstrates that those recent additions to the myth are just as artificial as those included by his predecessors. Virgil, Ovid and the others had re-imagined the original story just as Geffrey has re-imagined the first lines of the *Aeneid*.[9] As a consequence, the transmission of the story is inevitably altered by the passage through the mind of a new transmitter. It is never as pure and close to the original as the author intends it to be. And when Chaucer reproduces a text with his own words, he challenges the fictitious dimension of the story and the responsibility of the artist and of literature in general. This is something he manages to illustrate through his assimilation of the notion of visible speech.

Of course, such a strategy forces us to question the origin of the images described in the Temple of Venus. When Geffrey finally gets out, he is blinded by the beauty of the surroundings, but feels nonetheless completely lost (I. v. 468–488) and starts praying to Jesus Christ to save him from "fantome and illusion." (I. l. 493) He is not particularly scared by his physical situation and was quite happy in the Temple, where he recognised every word and illustration. Deprived of the comfort of his literary world, however, he suddenly starts doubting his senses. Everything he has seen might just be, in the end, a trick of the mind without any foundations in the real world.[10] And just as Geffrey is pondering the implications of his situation, the eagle arrives and takes him to the House of Fame. According to his new guide, the "tydynges" (a word repeated more than twenty times in the rest of the poem) Geffrey will hear in the House of Fame might even benefit him. However, if the arrival of the eagle implies a return of the motif of visible speech, the very nature of those tidings remains obscure.[11] Geffrey himself is not quite sure what he is seeking in the House of Fame and answers an inquisitive spirit:

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[7] Taylor, *Chaucer Reads 'The Divine Comedy'*, 29.
[8] See for instance I. l. 293–310.
[9] Taylor, *Chaucer Reads 'The Divine Comedy'*, 29.
[10] *Ibid*., 30–31.
[11] David Wallace, "Chaucer's Continental Inheritance: the Early Poems and Troilus and Criseyde," in *The Cambridge Chaucer Companion*, ed. Piero Boitani and Jill

The cause why y stonde here:
Somme newe tydynges for to lere,
Somme newe thynges, y not what,
Tydynges, other this or that,
Of love or suche thynges glade.
(III. l. 1885–1889)

The eagle eventually explains that those tidings are sounds ("Soun ys noght but eyr ybroken," II. l. 765), words uttered in our world, which reach the Houses of Fame and Rumour where they take the shapes of their speakers. The House of Rumour is thus described by the narrator as a whirling wicker cage where gossip is filtered. In that place, the living and the dead whisper rumours and tidings into each other's ears, deforming the news and stories as they are passed along from one spirit to another, to the point of being unrecognisable. Accordingly, if the rumours are free to come and go in the House, they seldom leave it without changing shape. Truths and lies are often entangled and have no other alternative than to mingle:

We wil medle us ech with other,
That no man, be they never so wrothe,
Shal han on [of us] two, but bothe
At ones, al besyde his leve,
Come we a-morwe or on eve,
Be we cried or stille yrouned.
(III. l. 2102–2107)

Stories and tidings, whether true or false, are consequently altered by their transmission and combined in the House of Rumour before spreading to the world with Fame's blessing. In presenting a particularly corrupt chain of transmission, Chaucer thus calls into question once again the creative and distorting functions of the imagination through the use of visible speech echoing his treatment of Dido's legend in Book I.[12] But he also forces us to wonder if the story we are reading is as ambiguous as he seems to indicate.

Indeed, the need to authenticate a work of fiction was paramount in the Middle Ages. Whereas Dante used visible speech as one of the narrative devices protecting his work from any spurious misreading, Chaucer exploits this medieval distrust for fiction and does very little to

Mann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 21.
[12] Taylor, *Chaucer Reads 'The Divine Comedy'*, 32.

authenticate his own story. He rather accumulates the devices supposed to ensure the truthfulness of his narration and then suddenly turns away from them. For instance, the fact that the story takes place in a dream should have a particular meaning; according to medieval tradition, only morning dreams were prophetic and allegedly true. However, the narrator clearly indicates that he went to bed at nightfall and "fil on slepe wonder sone." (I. v. 114) We should therefore read his vision as a simple dream, but Geffrey himself seems puzzled. He asks himself why one man would dream of phantoms and another of prophecies ("Why this a fantome, why that a sweven," I. l. 11) and cries out in the first line "God turne us every drem to goode!" Later he tells us that no man ever lived "So wonderful a drem as I," (I. v. 62) without necessarily confirming if the dream is prophetic. Chaucer, in other words, offers devices proving the authenticity of his vision, and then disrupts his reasoning with contradictions and doubts that inevitably frustrate our desire to know whether the story is real.

Far from resolving this impasse, "[t]he journey of tidings through imagination and memory […] seems rather to magnify its troubling suggestion that reading and writing result in nothing but 'fantome and illusion.'"[13] For if the tidings issuing from the House of Rumour are a combination of truth and lies, how, then, can we be sure that the famous stories told in our world are not themselves partly untruthful? This fallibility is further intensified by the fact that most medieval poems were read aloud in public. In that situation, if we are to believe Saint Augustine, the author loses control of his creation since his words, once uttered, are assimilated by the listeners only to take different shapes and meanings in their minds. Chaucer's use of visible speech in Fame's domain is thus defined by orality. Indeed, the notion of stories taking the physical shape of their speakers makes visible the idea that human beings cannot help but speak in their own voices, no matter what universal truths they claim to utter. It comes therefore as no surprise that Geffrey should encounter figures related to the spoken word before entering the House of Fame. Not only does he see Orpheus, Orion and other legendary harpists playing music, along with musicians of lesser rank, but he also meets magicians, illusionists and soothsayers (III. v. 1201–1281). Besides, even though the inside of the temple is dedicated to written literature, Chaucer keeps reminding us that the two forms of expression are complementary. Geffrey hears, for example, the poets who immortalised the Trojan War argue about the *Iliad*, with some spirits defending Homer, while Trojan

[13] Taylor, *Chaucer Reads 'The Divine Comedy'*, 33.

supporters accuse him of having favoured the Greeks (III. v. 1477–1480). For one supporter in particular, Homer's version of the story is nothing but a fable. In other words, the story behind the myth is lost and the fragments that we possess are only rumours and tidings. It is the juxtaposition of points of view that allows Chaucer to emphasise that every story, once transmitted, is gradually altered to the point of becoming an unrecognisable association of rumours and tidings.

Truth in literature is a highly personal notion. For generations, poets considered the Classics as artefacts of a distant past, and accordingly, as a sacred part of our cultural heritage. They relied on those scraps of information to define their own world and their art. And it is no coincidence that it is Virgil who appears in the middle of the road of Dante's life, in a dark wood, where the true way was lost.

For Chaucer, however, the *Aeneid* and the *Iliad* remain nothing more than stories, transmitted from generation to generation, stories which cannot possibly reflect any sort of truth. As an artist, he contributes to this transmission and deformation. Chaucer consequently decided to acknowledge, in *The House of Fame*, the artificial dimension of those artefacts and more generally of story-telling and history-making. They are, in the end, largely based on a re-writing and re-enactment of the same old stories, and should only be taken for what they are, namely expressions of a human, and thus fallible, mind.

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CHAPTER TWO

JOHN WILSON'S "KITSCHIFICATION" OF THE ROMANTIC HIGHLANDS OF SCOTLAND

MAXIME BRIAND

Nostalgia was a strong impulse for many Romantic writers, especially in their expression of British northernness. Also, the perception of Romanticism has significantly altered since the mid-nineteenth century, to the point of being commonly reduced nowadays to a candlelit dinner or a walk on the beach at sunset. Indeed, this amusing realization poses a legitimate question to the literary student, that is, "how did Romanticism become so kitsch?"

"Kitschification" has always been at work in the process of historical remembrance. Addressing many issues such as taste, authenticity or nostalgia, kitsch played a major role in the artistic transition from the Romantic to the Victorian era. Scottish writer John Wilson (1785–1854) was one of the pivotal literary figures who both upheld and reassessed the Romantic legacy of British Romantic masters like Wordsworth and Scott. Endowed with a prodigious and sometimes edgy critical sense, his essays and fictions inspired an extensive readership including the Brontë sisters and Charles Dickens. His *Blackwood's* terror fictions were all the more crucial in shaping the Gothic tale as well as the modern short story on the international scene, influencing writers such as Hoffman, Pushkin, Mérimée, Balzac, Hawthorne and Poe.

Without necessarily contesting the innovative spirit of Wilson, this chapter shall examine his treatment of the Scottish Highlands, as previously romanticized by Ossian (James Macpherson) and the Wizard of the North (Sir Walter Scott), through a study of "kitschification" in one of his lesser known works, "Unimore: A Dream of the Highlands," first published in the August issue of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in 1831 (vol. 30, n°83). The envisioned goal is thus to expose the consequences of

romanticizing an already Romantic subject.

Like many notorious Romantics such as Wordsworth and Scott, John Wilson was genuinely responsive to "the call of the North"[1] which, given his Lowland birth, naturally pointed to the Highlands of Scotland but not exclusively, as he became a resident of the Lake District in 1807. In his *Blackwood's* article "The Moors" (1830), he playfully compares the Highlands with his first love, a love he came to shun for a time only to reunite with later on. Musing over his youth, he recalls vividly how a "beautiful lake, or a sublime mountain, drives a young poet as mad as a March hare." [2] Highly exemplary of Romantic metafiction, "The Moors" describes the natural romanticizing effect of nostalgia on his depiction of the Highlands from distant memories:

> we are happy that our dim memory and our dim imagination restore and revive in our mind none but the characteristic features of the scenery of the Highlands, unmixed with baser matter, and all floating magnificently through a spiritual haze, so that the whole region is now more than ever idealized […].[3]

That's precisely when John Wilson becomes the poet "Christopher North," losing himself thankfully in the hazy confusion of an older man's dream.[4]

Interestingly enough, he conjectures on a similar imaginative process in the case of the mythical Highland bard Ossian, who

> in such an age […] would, in his blindness, think dreamily indeed of the torrents, and lakes, and heaths, and clouds, and mountains, moons, and stars, which he had leapt, swam, walked, climbed, and gazed on in the days of his rejoicing youth.[5]

His position on the *Poems of Ossian* was that of a lucid poetry lover, Scottish to boot, who would loudly claim their poetic merits without ever

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[1] In reference to the author's Ph.D. thesis, "The Call of the North in British Romantic Literature: A Latitudinal Study of the Lake Poets and Sir Walter Scott," due for 2015.
[2] John Wilson, *The Works of Professor Wilson of the University of Edinburgh: Recreations of Christopher North*, ed. James Frederick Ferrier (Edinburgh: William Blackwood & sons, 1857), vol. 9, 263.
[3] Wilson, *Recreations*, 265.
[4] *Ibid.*, 264.
[5] *Ibid*., 384.

contesting any of the "inconsistencies" often reproached of James Macpherson. Not only was he able to perceive, like Scott, the universal appeal of these poems, but could also recognize publicly that their much-criticized redundant imagery was the actual key of their massive success. As a matter of fact, the latter was deliberately modelled on proto-Romantic conventions, where "the great and constant appearances of nature suffice[d], in their simplicity, for all its purposes." Thus, says Wilson, "the poet seeks not to vary their character, and his hearers are willing to be charmed over and over again by the same strains."[6] Walter Scott too admired Macpherson's depiction of nature but admitted nevertheless that he quickly became tired of "the eternal repetitions of the same ideas and imagery" which made Ossian more alluring "for youth than for a more advanced stage."[7] That, however, never prevented him from imitating the Celtic bard in his early metrical works such as "Glenfinlas; or, Lord Ronald's Coronach"[8] (1801), *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805) and *The Lady of the Lake* (1810), which, besides having earned him considerable literary recognition, could in many respects be regarded as Ossianic pastiches. Wilson was naturally reverent towards the great "Wizard of the North" who embodied Romantic historical fiction. In his tribute poem "The Magic Mirror" (1812), he evokes the bewitching effect of his story-telling:

A witching frenzy glitter'd in his eye,
Harmless, withal, as that of playful child.
And when once more the gracious vision spoke,
I felt the voice familiar to mine ear;
While many a faded dream of earth awoke
Connected strangely with that unknown seer,
Who now stretch'd forth his arm, and on the sand
A circle round me traced, as with magician's wand.[9]

The "seer" and the "magician" being of course Walter Scott, whose visionary art recalls throughout the whole piece Wilson's own imaginative process based on "dim memory" even though "Unimore: A Dream of the

[6] "[…] and the poetry itself, good, bad, or, indifferent, is so very peculiar, that to imitate it all you must almost transcribe it" (*Ibid*., 384).
[7] Sir Walter Scott, *The Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. Sir Herbert Grierson (London: Constable, 1932), vol. 1, 320.
[8] Matthew Gregory Lewis, *Tales of Wonder* (London: William Bulmer & Co., John Bell, 1801), vol. 1, 122–136.
[9] John Wilson, "The Magic Mirror," *The Works of Professor Wilson of the University of Edinburgh: Poems*, ed. James Frederick Ferrier (Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons, 1858), vol. 12, 426, ll. 63–70.

Highlands"[10] is explicitly not a historical romance but indeed a reverie set in an idealised Highland landscape out of time. The poem was warmly received by *The Edinburgh Literary Journal,* whose reviewer places Wilson in the continuity of a Romantic Highland tradition:

> It is a picture of the stern beauty and grandeur of the Highlands […] All that is mean and commonplace remains unseen – all that is seen is grasped in all its greatness, and placed before the listener as one majestic whole.[11]

Strangely enough, the piece is found all the more appealing for its exuberance, which in no way seems to vex the critic in his appreciation:

> There is, throughout, a profuse overflow of exquisite imagery, which shows the author's mind to be rich as it is powerful – in this, too, emulating nature, who lavishes her beauties with a spendthrift hand.[12]

Wilson's style is here justly described as prodigal which in today's critical standards would willingly be called "too much," as pertaining to the kitsch tradition discussed by Christophe Genin in his essay *Kitsch dans l'Âme* (2010):

> Through this excess of excess, this fakery of the fake, or this superlation of the superlative, kitsch comes close to ridicule. Its style is neither sober nor pompous, but ostentatious through a communication that goes to extremes lest it fails to be heard […] These tropes of exuberance can be grandiloquence, redundance, perissology (abuse of superfluities) that adds energy to the expression, but no thought or expletion through adjunction of accidental space-filling complements without bringing extra thought. As a result, this manner becomes impertinent and arbitrary; since inadequate to the situation, it is devoid of internal necessity. From hence, we can move to the heteroclite.[13]

German in origin, the word "*Kitsch"* stands for a rather complex and multi-featured cultural notion that shall be here narrowed down only to a

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[10] John Wilson, "Unimore. A Dream of the Highlands," *The Works of Professor Wilson of the University of Edinburgh: Poems*, ed. James Frederick Ferrier (Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons, 1858), vol. 12, 473–549.

[11] Review of *Unimore: A Dream of the Highlands in Ten Visions*, by John Wilson, *The Edinburgh Literary Journal; or, Weekly Register of Criticism and Belles Lettres* (6) 142, July 30, 1831, 61.

[12] *Ibid*., 61.

[13] Christophe Genin, *Kitsch dans l'Âme* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Virin), 2010, 85. Author's translation.