1

‘A tiny light/seen in the mind’s eye as a phoneme’: the Poetry of Peter Ackroyd

It is so hard to tell parody from pathos
Geoffrey Hartman

I have long had a taste for discontinuous writing
Roland Barthes

I do not know any other way of associating with great tasks than play
Friedrich Nietzsche

Allusion and/as archive

The three volumes of poetry written by Peter Ackroyd – *Ouch* (1971), *London Lickpenny* (1973), *Country Life* (1978) – appeared over a seven-year period. Subsequently, they resurfaced in 1987, albeit partially, like the erased phrases of writing found on stone walls in Ackroyd’s *The House of Doctor Dee*, as a selection entitled *The Diversions of Purley and Other Poems*, a slim volume of fifty-three poems, some in prose. The poems of these hard-to-find publications appear densely allusive. A first, or even a second encounter will not, however, yield the meaning behind such use of allusion or reference, supposing that some ulterior meaning is at work in the frequency of allusion. We find ourselves in a textual archive without a key to the ordering or purpose of that structure. The archive of apparent reference obtrudes itself everywhere across the already fragmentary texts, seeming to demand or command: ‘read me’. Yet they remain not-read, even when the source is known, recognized or identified. Thus, the purpose of allusion, reference, parody and, in short, all playful troping, all the while on the surface of the text, if not in fact constitutive of the very texture of the text itself, remains undecidable, demanding in this undecidability that we continue to try to read. Yet it is precisely because the archive is not so easily resolvable into a purposeful unity that its play demands it be taken seriously. It is as if Ackroyd’s poetry, rather than awaiting passively the
Peter Ackroyd's poetry, where phrases from poems and novels, references to authors canonical and minor, central and marginal in western literary culture, allusions to both high and low culture (as well as all points in between), all are to be found. In Ackroyd's poems we find, for example, possible references to 'David Watts' ('Foolish Tears' DP 51; either from the song of the same name by the Kinks or the name of a journalist writing for The Times), and 'stairway to heaven' ('A love poem' DP 63). These allusions are possible rather than certain only because we cannot tell for sure that they are allusions or references (especially in the case of the second of the two citations, a common enough phrase, seeming to suggest a song by Led Zeppelin). It may even be possible to speculate that, if these are allusions, then there is some undisclosed function to their inclusion. It may be the case that such allusive populism is in itself an acknowledgement of sorts to the poetry of the so-called Mersey poets. This is no more than speculation though. More certainly allusions are the mentions of 'Captain Scarlet' and 'Tinker Bell' ('Only Connect …' DP ii 22, iv 24), though if they have a function in the sense of referring to something, some meaning 'beyond' the surface of the text, that remains undecidable. Indeed, in the installation of such apparently wayward, differing and, seemingly purposeless allusions and references – in this case to a 1970s puppet show and Peter Pan – in the same poem, the undecidable is instituted. The assumed connection being children’s entertainment, the examples being separated by over seventy years (and, presumably, the possibility of conventional aesthetic arguments over cultural ‘value’), this knowledge still will not suggest anything more about the poem ‘Only connect …’. The reader has ‘connected’, responding to that Forsterian imperative which supplies the poem’s title, but this still does not calm the referential play of the text, unless, once again, we acknowledge the text’s archival function. Thus, like many of Ackroyd’s poems, the text-as-archive is composed in part of cuttings, excerpts, extracts, fragments. A poetry in ruins, anarchival poiesis, the anarchic displacement and movement, making as unmaking; textual assemblage without the semblance of meaningful assembly, other than the acknowledgement that the archive is.

Then there are the still more obvious forms of acknowledgement and allusion such as the use of proper names of poets and novelists, which Ackroyd’s poetry seems to wear like badges, daring the reader to indulge further in