From Fake Lit to the Value of Real Nightingales

An Interview with Nick Groom

Nick Groom, Professor of English at the University of Exeter, counts among the most prominent representatives of Chatterton scholars today, with a broader outlook on high and popular culture since the 1700s down to our day. He is married with two children and seems to burst with creative energy. As he is always on the – real and virtual – move, this interview, conducted via Skype on 27 June 2012, tries to trace his former achievements as well as his current and future projects.

What led you to Chatterton in the first place?

I first encountered Chatterton when I was reading John Keats back in school. It was a combination of reading Keats and how he dedicates *Endymion* to Chatterton and also encountering the Henry Wallis picture in the Tate Gallery, this iconic image of Chatterton dead on his bed, which as you know is really the writer George Meredith. So I soon became aware that Chatterton was a significant figure and yet it was impossible actually to find works by Chatterton in the school library. In fact, I eventually discovered just a few lines in a book of quotations, and that was as far as it got. And so I went to university, and with the resources at the university library, I was able to learn more about the actual works that Chatterton had produced himself. And there was Donald Taylor's collection,[1] which remains a landmark, a magisterial edition, which then completely opened up the possibility of writing about Chatterton, so I wrote an undergraduate essay on him, and when I moved into doing graduate work, I realized that despite Taylor's edition, there was an absolute dearth of serious critical attention to him. For my doctoral work, I worked on Thomas Percy's *Reliques* of the English and British ballad tradition. I remember discussing the choice of Percy with my supervisor Roger Lonsdale, who is a great scholar of 18th-century poetry, and the idea was that a good grounding in Thomas Percy, an account of English literary history from the 1760s created the ideal context for looking at Chatterton subsequently. So I did write a chapter on Chatterton although that didn't appear in the eventual book on Percy but found its way into the collection of Chatterton essays I worked on after that. So my interest in Chatterton seems to have been long and abiding; on the other hand, it actually re-

1. Donald S. Taylor & Benjamin B. Hoover, ed., *The Complete Works of Thomas Chatterton: A Bicentenary Edition*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

quired a series of steps to get there and after I'd done the book of essays on Chatterton, I was in an ideal position to focus on him and his work much more acutely, and that was of course when *The Forger's Shadow* was written.

To come to Chatterton via Keats seems a really universal thing, as it were. . .

Well, I think Keats is key in the reception of Thomas Chatterton. But of course Keats's own reception is problematic because he himself has a posterity, he has a sort of posthumous reception which is much more significant than his reception during his lifetime, so there are interesting parallels there. It is very suggestive that reading Keats should entail reading Chatterton. Of course it makes it quite difficult to read Chatterton *without* Keats and without that whole way to mortality, I think, but that, you know, perhaps is just inevitable.

Actually, that raises another question. Keats and several other Romantics would often refer to Chatterton. Would you care to catalogue such allusions?

Certainly Coleridge, for one, was obsessed by Chatterton. His monody on Chatterton is something that was I think his first serious published poem that he worked on and reworked throughout his life. Coleridge was actually married in St Mary Redcliffe and as he stood at the altar with his wife-to-be, he couldn't help but think of Chatterton. And you can certainly find Chatterton all over Coleridge, in poems such as the "Nightingale," for example, which has a series of definitive references to Chatterton.

There are Wordsworth's famous lines on Chatterton "the marvellous boy"; they're directed to Coleridge, so you end up having this composite figure, I suppose, so in the same way that I was suggesting that you can't read Chatterton without the Keatsian lens, that's also going on in the way that Wordsworth writes about Chatterton in connection with his relationship with Coleridge, so he actually creates a sort of stratum that goes through the literary or writerly personalities, or in the inspirational figures of many of these writers. So Chatterton literally haunts Coleridge, he comes down to Coleridge as a daemonic figure.

He seems to be there in De Quincey, who doesn't write directly about Chatterton but is clearly devoted to Chatterton's writing, De Quincey's flight to London itself being an imitation of Chatterton's own move from Bristol to London and again it doesn't require much critical acuity to see Chatterton appearing at various points in De Quincey's writings. And he's there in Shelley as well. So he's certainly with the canonical Romantics, and with the less canonical writers, too, John Clare, for example. Clare clearly read Chatterton very closely and picked out his natural history images. In fact, Clare emphasizes that Chatterton was not writing about flowers in a metaphorical way but in a very literal way as somebody who had gone out into the meadows and was writing about his actual experiences. And then of course there's Blake, who is another clear example, in a direct engagement with Chatterton.

There's a contested critical heritage as well. You see this for example in Robert Southey's work on Chatterton, as an editor of Chatterton. He seems to go through a series of mood swings and eventually he decides that the whole answer is, well, that Chatterton was just mad. And that solves and dissolves all Robert Southey's problems. [*Laughs.*] It's about containment: that Southey would probably want to nail him down and sustain his madness, and that explains everything. Ironically, of course, Southey then had his own psychological problems. One wonders to what degree he was just using Chatterton as a way of reflecting on his own mental state. I think that the excitement and the challenge in Chatterton is not to pin him down, for him to remain fugitive, elusive, a quality in which there isn't a centre. It's sort of spreading in all sorts of ways that actually challenges our whole hierarchical way of critical and cultural thinking.

After many years, it's still surprising to me that despite this very significant reception by several generations of poets and writers and painters and artists as well, there hasn't been serious critical attention paid to Chatterton, nowhere near what one would expect and what he really deserves. And the reason for that is twofold: the suicide myth and the question of forgery.

> *You have mentioned Donald Taylor's edition, while in terms of the Chatterton biography, its equal probably is M. W. H. Meyerstein's* Life of Chatterton.[2]

But again, that was published in 1930 and hasn't been superseded since, as far as I'm concerned. One can certainly enhance it but the biographies of Chatterton that have come since then haven't really represented Chatterton in a psychologically believable way.

> *It was also Meyerstein who made the point about substituting "imposture" for the term "forgery," which had been loaded with a good deal of negative connotations over the centuries. You, however, go back to "forgery"; what was your main motive in returning to this terminology?*

Well, I wanted to ask this question head on; I wanted to use the term "forgery" but not as a pejorative term. I wanted to use it in its other meanings, in terms of the forge, the blacksmith who actually makes and crafts something, and indeed the way that a poem, a work of literature can be crafted, so it involves a series of other compositional activities or standards. And there's also another side to this: it's a word that is very frequently used about national identities – nations are, so to speak, forged. I think it is often used quite unironically by historians in that sense, but by politicians as well. So it does have a positive edge to it. But there's another aspect in terms of national identity, usable in the context of a literary history that writers like Chatterton and Macpherson are exploring. They're also tied up quite closely with regional and national identities, so it's like a coin

2. E. H. W. Meyerstein, *A Life of Thomas Chatterton* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1930).

that has two faces: on the one hand there is the positive use of forgery, on the other, it has negative connotations as well. But I certainly wanted to distinguish forgery as a creative act, something that exists in certain areas of the arts, while not extending forgery into legal dealings or science or medicine, or anything like that.

Still I think it's important that we just think about forgery and how it functions within literature and how it tests boundaries of what we believe as readers, what we're prepared to accept, and how literary conventions work and how we read things like footnotes, prefaces, and appendices, all that supporting material. How we, I suppose, investigate unfamiliar calligraphy or orthography in terms of the spelling and so forth. So it does test us and tease us, and it challenges us as critics to judge works on whether they are any good or not, so it goes back to old questions of literary value, I think.

Certainly Chatterton is doing that. I think writers like Richardson were also doing it; there were many readers in the 18th century who read even *Clarissa* as if it were real, so this goes back even earlier. There is evidence, however shaky, that some people thought *Gulliver's Travels* was purporting to be an actual or real travel narrative. So we're reading a period in which there aren't clear distinctions between fiction and non-fiction. And Chatterton is someone who is exploring that, testing those boundaries. But he puts us on our mettle as readers; we are asked to judge his writing. And far too many readers say that it's forgery and therefore has no value. You know the fact is that he's playing with these conventions. He's extremely experimental and speculative, but he is also undermining the critical conventions that literary historians and scholars want to maintain. He's always crossing that boundary between the professional critic and the writer who's safely in their box, breaking out of those categories. He's troubling the whole institution of literature. That's one of the reasons why it's tempting to dismiss him in a footnote but not actually tackle what he's doing head on.

In terms of using this special terminology, do you think words such as "imposture," "forgery," "fake," or "counterfeit" carry any fixed or permanent currency?

I think it's very revealing when one looks at the history of these words and finds that they do shift and they're getting different sorts of associations, different resonances at different times. So I would certainly say that I would want to distinguish *forgery* as a potentially creative activity from *counterfeiting*, which strikes me as producing a facsimile of something else. Chatterton or Macpherson are forgers in the sense that they are composing new works, whereas counterfeiting would be a species of cheating – counterfeiting a bank note or a painting that already exists. It's a different sort of activity. You can still gather all this together with plagiarism and imposture as well and call it "fake lit," which I would like it to be called, if anybody will take that up.

I think it is quite revealing that imposture and performance become more significant after Chatterton. As Chatterton goes up to the muniment room in the church of St Mary

Redcliffe and tells people he has found stuff there, there's performance in what he's doing, which lies beyond simply writing *about* it. He is acting out the part of an antiquarian who's rummaging in these chests. That becomes more significant as we move towards the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th, into the Romantic period. It goes along with an increasingly individualistic notion of identity, which we associate with the Romantics in any case, and the development of certain subjectivities, and so you do see more performed imposture, having characters like Princess Caraboo, for example, acting out the part of a semi-folkloric figure. In other words, people are internalizing the forgery and becoming different personas acting out different roles. It's interesting that Meyerstein identifies that happening earlier, in Chatterton, but I think it really blooms a generation or so later.

> *Your etymological take on these terms is fascinating in* The Forger's Shadow *as well. Do you think this approach and the considerations mentioned so far are enough to assume your alignment with "uncanny" criticism, postmodernism, deconstruction, or all or any of these tendencies?*

I think that's a fair assumption. I certainly felt so when I was writing the preliminary essays that then got me in the way of planning *The Forger's Shadow*; there's an essay I just called "Thomas Chatterton Was a Forger,"[3] in which I was preparing certain ideas and I certainly found certain aspects of Continental theory very helpful for that. The Foucaultian idea of the author function, Derrida's "Signature Event Context,"[4] Barthes's work on the death of the author, Baudrillard, and also Deleuze. On the other hand, I was trying to avoid going down the psychoanalytical route too much because that's a form of medicalizing Chatterton's condition and I didn't want to see forgery as a symptom of some psychological disturbance; I wanted to treat it as literature. I felt that all of those theorists and critics were enabling me to find ways of talking about Chatterton that hadn't really been explored consistently. And it was also part of the international atmosphere at the time, that sort of fad into postmodernism, really.

I suppose the intellectual climate has changed a bit now and one of the reasons for the controversial reception of my book was that it did utilize quite a lot of that Continental theory to think about the value of literature. But ultimately what it's about *is* about the value of literature and I was very heartened by a review that was in the *TLS* that in the end tried to go back to a much more humanist position or thinking. It is Deleuze who maintains that there are ways of reconfiguring the human intellectual and artistic activities that don't lose the human aspect. That's important, you just flex those

3. Nick Groom, "Thomas Chatterton Was a Forger," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 28 (1998) 276–291.

4. Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," *Limited Inc.* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1988), 1–23.

emotional muscles a bit further or engage in different sorts of exercises. And I think that's what I found the most interesting, really, that it was actually possible to get to a point using that thinking, there was a point at which I thought I was doing the writers a service, ultimately. But it is a very uncanny book and I was quite haunted by it while writing it. . . As if you go very deep into these realms, it can be quite unnerving to become defamiliarized from oneself and othered in peculiar ways. But that's good, you know, that's part of the excitement as well, part of the fun! You need to have an escape route, too, though.

> *Your exchange with Terry Eagleton in the* London Review of Books *seems to be a case in point in that respect. How would you characterize your professional and/or personal, informal connection with this prominent reviewer of yours?*

Well, I like Terry Eagleton; when I was an undergraduate, he gave one of the first lectures I went to, an introduction to literary theory, was it? Yes. . . And you know I've encountered him since then at various points. One of the things I noticed among all the reviews (I'll come to Eagleton himself in a moment) was that they tended unconsciously to imitate how reviewers in the 18th and 19th centuries had responded to writers who *were* forgers. Now I was just writing *about* forgery, I wasn't presenting my work as anything else than a critical book. However, some of the critics at the time of Macpherson and Chatterton, Ireland or Wainwright, would try to say that these people were mad, or that they were criminal – using Foucaultian discourses of the law and medicine and psychology and so forth. They were trying to characterize forgery in those ways. Or they're saying that's absolutely wonderful, and so you get to Thomas Gray being 'ecstasié' with the infinite beauty of Macpherson's fragments and you get people being possessed like Coleridge was by Chatterton. So it either goes into the areas of extravagant praise, or it goes the other way and says that this person's mad or even criminal.

That was certainly a way you could characterize the contours of the reviews that *The Forger's Shadow* itself received. Some of the reviews are wonderful, and others were truly ghastly, and I was accused of evil sorts of things. Terry Eagleton's review was one of the most intelligent reviews of the book, but it also had elements of the other reviews. It showed an awareness of this complex although what troubled me most about it was his intentionally going for minute things like the acknowledgments page or the blurb and while Eagleton certainly got engaged with the arguments, at the same time, he seems to be representing it all as a sort of postmodernist extravagance. His attention to the most marginal details of the book, including the people that I thanked in the acknowledgments, seemed to me to be demented, frankly. And there are jokes in the book, too, in the index, for example. One of the jokes was that Eagleton clearly looked himself up in the index and when he got to the relevant page for the reference found that I couldn't re-

member which book of his I had quoted from. It was meant to be just a little sort of gag, really, but he took it all most seriously, I think.

In addition to an overall reassessment of Chatterton and the Chatterton phenomenon, you have also targeted individual works in the Chatterton canon. An important philological point, for example, was your attack on Donald Taylor's decision to include the vitriolic lines "To Horace Walpole" among Chatterton's authentic works. Do you think there will be room for further similar disqualifications in the future?

This, I suppose, is inevitably tied up with Chatterton's life. It's a huge challenge; you just can't separate the two. I gradually got interested in the whole question of Chatterton's death and the circumstances and the writings that led up to it. To go back to Meyerstein, he comes so close to challenging the suicide myth, but for whatever reasons, he doesn't actually take that particular step. And when you begin to investigate it, you realize that there have been a number of both critics and novelists who have actually challenged that particular version of the events. So I think the more that one investigates that – and I'm trying to do more work on it still and I think there is another level of research to be done here – the less it is premeditated suicide, which comes out of a number of bits of evidence in earlier works. So I certainly challenge the "Lines to Walpole" in the same way that you know one has to challenge the lines that John Dix "discovered," which were meant to be the suicide note.

Using ECCO (Eighteenth-Century Collections Online), it's possible to challenge various other items in the Chatterton canon, which has become slightly more stable since we've been able to use ECCO and just identify a few things he couldn't possibly have written, published before he was born, for instance. But any edition is going to be contingent, again, you have to draw the line somewhere. We now have stylometry, we have the electronic archives, and there is going to be an opportunity for further reassessment of the Chatterton canon, but it won't be a significant one. I think that although Taylor was working under very difficult circumstances, his scholarship is just amazingly perceptive and in the main he's right, but there are certain instances with which I'd disagree. But I'm also prepared to admit that that's because there's the bigger story behind it and that bigger story has to do with Chatterton's relationship with Rowley[5] and how he's imagining that, and also with the circumstances of his death. So I wouldn't want to pretend that my research is independent of those two big questions.

5. Thomas Rowley was a fictitious 15th-century monk whose character Chatterton invented, attributing to him a number of literary works such as *Ælla*, a tragedy that is his most sustained "forgery," local topographical writings, as well as assumed translations from Latin.

This whole issue about "Lines to Walpole" shows an interesting process. In The Forger's Shadow*, you'd only hinted at the likelihood of this poem being a 19th-century forgery, while in a subsequent essay you argued beyond reasonable doubt that it cannot be Chatterton's. Through what stages did you arrive at this conclusion?*

Actually, one of the things, you see, is that I simply didn't have time to do it and it seemed to be a digression in *The Forger's Shadow* and it required a bit of investigative work to find out how this poem had emerged. I also didn't want to muddy *The Forger's Shadow*. We're talking about John Dix, and he would have been a complete red herring in that book. And I wanted, I suppose, to tantalize the reader slightly that this canon wasn't so stable as it might otherwise appear. But those lines are perpetually quoted, so I'd also think that it's important; if this is one of those poems by which the non-expert would recognize Chatterton, then that's what you attack because it is a central strut, if you like, in his critical reception. But I just needed a little more time to think about how the manuscript had purportedly travelled around and to describe all those things that are ridiculous simply in terms of the work itself and the way in which it got into Dix's hands. Also I've done some more work on Dix since then, I wanted to find out a bit more about him. And everything that Dix says has to be queried. He's one of the most unreliable commentators I've ever encountered, I think, somebody who would make an interesting case using psychological, no, psychiatric criticism because he fits even more than William Henry Ireland into the psychiatric definition of a fabulator or a fantasist. I have been talking to psychiatrists about this and it'd be quite an interesting project for someone to find similar case studies. Dix and Ireland both seem to me on the surface to be classic cases of confabulators, really.

Do you find it difficult to revise your own position in light of newly emerging information, for instance? Have you ever been forced to take a conceptual U-turn?

I think that one must always be prepared to develop one's own position and I certainly tend to see the use of Continental theory to be quite dated in *The Forger's Shadow*. It is a book of a certain period, I think. And yet it does still antagonize some people; there's been a big spat in the *Johnsonian Newsletter* focused on Thomas Curley, who's recently published a book on Macpherson's Ossian[6] and his relationship with Johnson. This was originally in consequence of an essay that he wrote and I responded to. So the latest exchange is a review[7] that was published last year in the *Johnsonian Newsletter* in which I

6. Thomas M. Curley, *Samuel Johnson, the Ossian Fraud, and the Celtic Revival in Great Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge: CUP, 2009).

7. The prehistory of the affair includes Thomas M. Curley, "Samuel Johnson and Truth: The First Systematic Detection of Literary Deception in James Macpherson's *Ossian*," *The Age of Johnson: A*

reviewed Thomas Curley's book, and one of the things that Curley's book reminded me of is that the battle's not won. I haven't succeeded yet, and neither has Fiona Stafford,[8] or Chattertonians like Susan Stewart or Margaret Russett or Debbie Lee.[9] Even though we would hope that the critical opinion is shifting, for many people everything stays the same.

It's surprising to me how many times I still have to make the case at conferences, for example, that it is too easy that problematic writers are still being dismissed, with Chatterton foremost among them, and despite the excellent work on Chatterton both before and after my book by other people. But you know one book doesn't change the opinions of the professionals of the literary critical world. And so there's still a long way to go and we're going to keep on fighting the battle. Although you know one's own thoughts might be shifting, you still go back to the old arguments. Despite having written the book and other essays since then and despite the fact that there's a good number of people who are developing thought in this area, who are investigating Chatterton and other writers, it's still surprising how mainstream critical opinion continues to parrot the old prejudices, really. So we've still got a long way to go, we've got to keep on flogging away at this.

> *Actually that raises the question of cultural memory: however much you write about "To Horace Walpole" and its inauthenticity, for example, or other issues that would revaluate the situation, do you think it can fully be deleted from cultural memory or will it always be a part of "Chatterton," even if not the right kind of Chatterton?*

I think that the problem is that it's so much part of the cultural heritage of Chatterton now that it's virtually impossible for some people to accept that there are these things in question. And that is because the whole development of the myth is one that speaks very powerfully to a certain type of Romantic or Post-Romantic identity. We haven't got over the Romantics yet. All Modernism was a minor digression from a huge Post-Romantic cultural juggernaut that just keeps on driving on and we're still in it, we're still really in Late Romanticism. It's very difficult to get out of it not least because everybody now

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Scholarly Annual 17 (2006): 119–96; Nick Groom, "Samuel Johnson and Truth: A Response to Curley," *The Age of Johnson: A Scholarly Annual* 17 (2006) 197–201.

8. Professor of 18th and 19th-century English literature at Oxford, with a keen interest in Macpherson, author of *The Sublime Savage: A Study of James Macpherson and the Poems of Ossian* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1988) and *Local Attachments: The Province of Poetry* (Oxford: OUP, 2010).

9. Cf. Susan Stewart, *Crimes of Writing: Problems in the Containment of Representation* (Oxford: OUP, 1991); Margaret Russett, *Fictions and Fakes: Forging Romantic Authenticity, 1760–1845* (Cambridge: CUP, 2006); Debbie Lee, *Romantic Liars: Obscure Women Who Became Impostors and Challenged an Empire* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

who's got a computer and a broadband connection and one finger can become a commentator or, indeed, a poet or a writer and they're falling back on these extremely dated models of authorship or composition or inspiration, and rather than historicizing them they're thinking only of mad, unrecognized suicidal geniuses.

Unfortunately, one of the models for that is Chatterton, so no matter how much you challenge it, it's a cultural archetype which is perpetuated. It's a certain radical typology which keeps being renewed at the moment. So it's challenging not just that figure but the whole cultural context which seems to think there is something to be valued in a suicidal teenager. That to me is terrible and says ghastly things about our culture. We should instead be addressing that morbid love affair with young death, really. I think that's much more topical or relevant to consider the possibility of a teenager who goes to London and dies from an accidental drugs overdose. That speaks so much more powerfully to current concerns. . . not the fantasy of the unrecognized genius who kills himself in a fit of pride. We should not be celebrating things like that. This is an ethical issue as well and it has to be seen in a broader context. But you're right, the cultural memory has invaded it so deep that it keeps popping out all over the place. Lots of popular books are written by people who've never done any decent research, so I think they just go out to resell the easy old prejudices.

> *What you are saying raises the question of virtual realities. In* The Forger's Shadow *you mention that visiting Bristol brings a veritable disappointment to the Chatterton scholar. On the other hand, certain websites offer a virtual tour of various literary figures' dwellings or notable sites of activity exceeding the information or even the mere added value of experience ensuing from visits to actual physical sites of memory. Do you think such virtual spaces may ultimately replace actual journeys and field trips in literary research as well?*

Well, a lot of my work at the moment is trying to do the complete opposite. While I think it's important to have those virtual environments, and that can be a huge value and benefit in terms of mapping cities and their associations and so forth, I think you've got to get out and engage with these places and think about the actual bricks and mortar of Chatterton's house or the architecture of St Mary Redcliffe and to see how badly it's been treated in the past. There's now a dual carriageway between the house in which Chatterton was born and St Mary Redcliffe Church. Now, to its benefit, the Bristol City Council are now addressing what to do with Chatterton's house. This is after years of neglect, I mean decades of neglect.

The statue that used to stand outside the church was taken down in the 1960s and it's been variously ill-treated but I believe it's actually now secure in a museum storeroom. I find it astonishing that a city like Bristol, which is the crucible of Romanticism, where Wordsworth and Coleridge met, doesn't do more to celebrate one of its most influential

writers. And this is something which really goes to the heart of the potential significance of a writer like Chatterton today. The area that he came from is still a socially deprived area of Bristol and, as I have been trying to point out in the Chatterton Society, he could really be speaking to those young disaffected teenagers who are dropping out of school and taking drugs but who nevertheless have the potential to be writers or musicians, or entrepreneurs for that matter.

So in other words there's a real social and political agenda we could develop here, to actually help people directly. But for that it is really important that we get literary studies out of the classroom, out of universities, and think about how they can help people in those circumstances on the ground. So while the virtual world is something where we can learn a lot about 18th-century Bristol, for example, or about the way that Chatterton is mapping or remapping the region, at the same time, we've got to do something about the actual place itself and about what it can give to future generations. I think that there can be a moral dimension to heritage tourism. It is one of the great things about literature that it can bring in people and therefore money to areas that might not have other things to offer, other reasons to visit. So it is keyed into sustainable communities. We ought to think about what we're doing in those contexts. So there's an important environmental aspect in its broadest terms.

> *Aside from Chatterton, you also took an excursion to Shakespeare criticism. In* Introducing Shakespeare,[10] *you offer a lively and youthful presentation of "Will the Bard" and his reception over the centuries. Do you consider such a medium as a firm bridge between high and popular culture?*

Yes, definitely. But I don't see this that differently from my work done on Chatterton. It's looking at how the myths about Shakespeare emerged, how we deal with Shakespeare as a cultural phenomenon today. I mean Shakespeare is probably the most massive example of this as opposed to Chatterton's tiny niche example. I should also stress that I wasn't responsible for the images, which were negotiated quite tongue-in-cheek by the editor and the artist. But it is a book which I started writing thinking that I was going to be following a more cultural materialist line and say, well, you know, Shakespeare is popular just because he's been popular in the past. . . there are whole material cultural theories for that, such as the extensive printing and circulation of his work across the globe.

However, by the time I finished the book, I'd changed my mind completely. You see, Shakespeare is just *better* than anybody else and it was a very satisfying book to write because unwittingly it restored lots of my faith in the actual value of literature. And despite all of the arguments about Shakespeare being related to certain ideologies and printing practices and educational strategies and so forth, you just can't escape the fact

10. Nick Groom & Piero, *Introducing Shakespeare: A Graphic Guide* (London: Icon, 2001).

that as a writer he is just in a different league, if not on a different planet, to anybody else. Thank God we've got him, really! It's not just because of cultural mechanics that he keeps being reinvented; it's because the works are bottomless, you can't end up categorizing them as having like a single line. So yes, it was a refreshing book to write and I absolutely love teaching Shakespeare. I think he's a fantastic and thrilling writer. You know there's always something. . . there's always something new and refreshing there.

Do you think Shakespeare ever borrowed anything from Thomas Rowley's Ælla, for example?

O, of course he did! [*Laughs.*]

In writing Introducing Shakespeare*, were there any particular advantages you capitalized on or were there any dangers in this different genre that you had to face?*

You mean because the book was pitched for a certain sort of audience?

Yes, exactly.

I'm not completely happy with the account that's given of theoretical positions at the end of the book; that was a result of simply having to edit it down to virtually nothing. But it's quite an ambitious book that tries to cover quite a lot in a short space and unfortunately I've had to simplify some quite complex ideas. The idea is that it ought to encourage readers to go and find out more for themselves. It's certainly a starting point and I wanted to demystify a lot of stuff as well, I wanted to make it more accessible and put it in a context.

I think my other regret about that book is that though it's been reissued, it could have benefited from being updated, really. Shakespeare scholarship is constantly on the move and the points about collaboration, for example, really have become a hot topic, with the possible collaboration of Middleton again with Shakespeare. And just after *Introducing Shakespeare* came out, there were a series of very important books about Shakespeare's acting company, too, so it would have been nice to have a second edition which could have had a few more pages about the company in light of that more recent research.

Also, as I was pointing out, and this goes back to fake lit, in another way, I now regularly get communications from people who think that Shakespeare didn't write Shakespeare. There's a very energetic community out there of people who're promoting all sorts of other candidates for the authorship of Shakespeare. And I'm one of the people who have exposed themselves and said yes, these authors, these authorship controversies are just nonsense, really. You'd expect them to have reasonably thought about it as well. But no, it means that you get a lot of people invading you with their latest theories, which is

rather irksome. [*Laughs.*] It's another example of the fact that despite how much evidence you produce to the contrary, you're not dealing with people who can change their minds on this. It's deeply rooted in all sorts of other cultural prejudices, I think. So there's always going to be that lunatic fringe in Shakespeare Studies.

You're not the only person who has this combined and very deep-going interest in Shakespeare and Chatterton. From the fictional side, there are Neil Gaiman or Peter Ackroyd, of course. . .

Absolutely, yes.

I wonder if you could relate your work to theirs in terms of fiction, non-fiction, or any other context.

Well, I'm flattered that you should mention me in the same sentence. . . I'm a huge admirer of Peter Ackroyd's work, certainly, and I think that he's an extremely interesting and energetic thinker.[11] As far as Neil Gaiman goes, again he's out there as someone that is really testing boundaries, a real experimenter – I mean always inviting you to look what he's doing next, really. . . I feel embarrassed that I should compare myself seriously to those people. It'd be presumptuous of me to do so. . .

Well, I understand. On another note, I gather that you're still working on some further Chatterton essays right now. What else are you dealing with?

I'm about to start an essay on reassessing the idea of authenticity in poetry in the 18th century, so that'll be my latest comment on that. I've got a couple of other essays that I was commissioned to do, all of them, I'm ashamed to say, late, but that's because we've just had the new baby and I'm now Director of Education on the Cornwall Campus. But I've got the proofs for a book about the Gothic arriving in a couple of weeks.[12] It will be out in autumn this year; Oxford University Press are running a series called "very short introductions"; mine is a very short introduction to the Gothic and its unique selling point is that it looks at the Gothic throughout history, so it starts with the sack of Rome (410 AD) and the barbarian tribes and it ends with contemporary Goth culture today. And so along the way it takes into account political theory, architecture, medievalism – Chatterton himself is enshrined in the book – and it takes in the Gothic novel, Gothic film, as well as music. It's trying to fit a lot into a short book, so it's an essay, really, which looks at whether it's possible to trace the history of that particular world and associations

11. Incidentally, Peter Ackroyd wrote the foreword to Nick Groom, ed., *Thomas Chatterton and Romantic Culture* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), the essay collection mentioned earlier on.

12. Nick Groom, *The Gothic: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: OUP, 2012).

through the past fifteen hundred years or so. I really enjoyed writing that, so I'd like to expand the work into a broader project.

And then next year I've got a book coming out, a cultural history of the seasons.[13] This is following up on a book about the Union Jack, which came out some six years ago.[14] On the face of it, it looks a bit of a digression. I mean why should I turn from Thomas Chatterton towards writing about the national flag of the United Kingdom? Well, it's because of the point that we were talking about earlier, that relationship between authenticity and national identity. That means you can mobilize the same critical and interpretive strategies whether you're looking at the reception of a poet like Chatterton or, indeed, like Shakespeare, or whether you're looking at the way that a particular symbol such as the Union Jack has been adopted. So that's the actual connection between various myths of national identity, concerned with reinventions of history.

That was a book about the union and about the national regional identities. But that has gone off to the direction of thinking about the environment more and thinking about what those identities mean in Post-Devolution United Kingdom, also in the context of the economic recession. That has encouraged this work to link the literature to the environment more securely; that's why I was talking about Chatterton's houses within the sense of this wider project. And so the book about the seasons will be trying to argue that the seasons aren't simply a meteorological or an agricultural way of organizing time and activities, but they're cultural, and when we actually look at them as a cultural product, we discover all sorts of things about them and, most importantly, we realize what we're in danger of losing not just from climate change but also from the homogenization of farming practices and global markets, villages and towns and high streets throughout the country. Now I don't know whether this is the case in Hungary as well, but this galloping globalization I think is something which is eroding identity in *every way* and it's, well, destroying the traditional meeting places, the festivals and forums of expression, locally specific particular identities.

The book about the seasons will be an attempt to draw attention to that, so it's a polemic, really, an attempt to try to get people to realize that there are huge cultural dimensions to the environmental issues that we're currently facing. In other words, it's not *just* via scientists that we should be dealing with this, it's also people who think about literature and culture that have a major part to play in this. I don't know whether you've read Tim Morton's book, *Ecology without Nature*,[15] which is quite an influential post-ecocritical book that came out a few years ago; my project's also a response to that, but

13. Nick Groom, *The Seasons: An Elegy for the Passing of the Year* (London: Atlantic, 2013).

14. Nick Groom, *The Union Jack: The Story of the British Flag* (London: Atlantic, 2007).

15. Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2007).

it's taking a much more neo-pragmatic position on thinking about the way that culture and the environment interact together.

And to go back to what I was saying about John Clare at the beginning, it's the same reason that John Clare likes Chatterton. John Clare likes Chatterton because he knows the right names for the flowers, he's gone out and inspected these, he's not treating them as a metaphor. I think that culture is becoming increasingly metaphorical. To go back to Keats, where we started: his readers all know the nightingale ode, but how many of them have ever heard a nightingale or could recognize a nightingale or distinguish a nightingale from a blackbird? And are we in danger of making literature into an abstract which doesn't actually connect with what it's like to listen to a nightingale? And whether we should actually be conserving nightingales, with their habitats, when farming practices threaten their existence. Well, there's another question: whether *Keats* knew what a nightingale sounded like. . . or is it already a metaphor for Keats?

Or the scent of the eglantine. . .

Yes, well, that's absolutely right. And the nightingale is also very prominent in Coleridge as well. The essay that I did on Chatterton and Coleridge in the southwest was partly about how Coleridge tried to resist the cultural associations of the nightingale, but then he'd realize that all he could do was to reinvent them, so that it is already a bird of culture, even though it also is a feathered creature that flies around and sings.

And that famous anti-Miltonic line, "In nature there is nothing melancholy"?

Precisely. And so you know I think that these questions about the relationship of metaphor to culture and to the environment are really ones that one should start addressing more profoundly. It's also about authenticity in a way. I'm interested in making sure that our understandings of poetry are rooted in direct rather than indirect experience. It's possible that the virtual environments you were talking about earlier could be a way into that. About ten years ago I wrote an essay on the Aeolian harp, but I have never published it because you need to be able to listen to an Aeolian harp as part of the essay. And so, without it, it simply risks making it abstract again.

So I'm quite interested in those digital technologies which could allow us to read accompanied by a soundtrack. And I don't just mean reading online and then clicking on a little icon, but that the soundtrack is much more embedded in the text, in the reading experience. So this paper seems to remain a lecture which I really enjoy giving because you can play things and talk over them, talk about them. The last time that I gave it, I actually had a dulcimer player with me who played the dulcimer as part of the lecture, which was again something you can't publish. That has to be about the live performance as well, something *to do*.

You have listed many very different areas of activity in your life. At the end of this interview, do you think you could highlight one major thread that ties them all together?

I keep coming back to the same questions and perspectives. On the face of it, you know, from Chatterton to Shakespeare, to national identity, to the environment, my themes seem to be very diverse, but on the other hand, they pose questions that concern authenticity and I think that's really the root of the work that I've been doing since my thesis and my doctoral research on Thomas Percy and how the national ballad tradition is being either researched or invented, depending on how you think about it. Or the current stuff about the Gothic, really, is testing what is real. And it's not just a forensic reality, it's about value. It's all about the value of literature and culture.

Appendix: Two Chatterton Poems

These two excerpts show the two main sides of Chatterton's poetic output. The first is an extract from Chatterton's fake-medieval verse drama *Ælla*, whose line "Comme, wythe acorne-coppe & thorne" John Keats would famously recite to himself. The glosses are Chatterton's own. The second poem is from Chatterton's last creative period. Both works are reprinted from Taylor & Hoover (pp. 210–212 and 590–593, respectively).

"O! synge unto mie roundelaie"

O! synge untoe mie roundelaie,
O! droppe the brynie teare wythe mee,
Daunce ne moe atte hallie daie,
Lycke a reynynge* ryver bee;
    Mie love ys dedde,
    Gon to hys death-bedde,
    Al under the wyllowe tree.

Blacke hys cryne† as the wyntere nyghte,
Whyte hys rode‡ as the sommer snowe,
Rodde hys face as the mornynge lyghte,
Cale he lyes ynne the grave belowe;
    Mie love ys dedde,
    Gon to hys deathe-bedde,
    Al under the wyllowe tree.

Swote hys tyngue as the throstles note,
Quycke ynn daunce as thoughte canne bee,
Defte hys taboure, codgelle stote,
O! hee lyes bie the wyllowe tree:
    Mie love ys dedde,
    Gonne to hys deathe-bedde,
    Alle underre the wyllowe tree.

Harke! the ravenne flappes hys wynge,
In the briered delle belowe;
Harke! the dethe-owle loude dothe synge,
To the nyghte-mares as heie goe;
    Mie love ys dedde,
    Gonne to hys deathe-bedde,
    Al under the wyllowe tree.

* running † hair ‡ complexion.

See! the whyte moone sheenes onne hie;
Whyterre ys mie true loves shroude;
Whyterre yanne the mornynge skie,
Whyterre yanne the evenynge cloude;
Mie love ys dedde,
Gon to hys deathe-bedde,
Al under the wyllowe tree.

Heere, uponne mie true loves grave,
Schalle the baren fleurs be layde,
Nee one hallie Seyncte to save
Al the celness of a mayde.
Mie love ys dedde,
Gonne to hys death-bedde,
Alle under the wyllowe tree.

Wythe mie hondes I'lle dente the brieres
Rounde his hallie corse to gre,
Ouphante fairie, lyghte youre fyres,
Heere mie boddie stylle schalle bee.
Mie love ys dedde,
Gon to hys death-bedde,
Al under the wyllowe tree.

Comme, wythe acorne-coppe & thorne,
Drayne mie hartys blodde awaie;
Lyfe & all yttes goode I scorne,
Daunce bie nete, or feaste by daie.
Mie love ys dedde,
Gon to hys death-bedde,
Al under the wyllowe tree.

Waterre wytches, crownede wythe reytes,*
Bere mee to yer leathalle tyde.
I die; I comme; mie true love waytes.
Thos the damselle spake, and dyed.

* water-flags

The Death of Nicou, an African Eclogue

On Tiber's banks, Tiber, whose waters glide
In slow meanders down to Gaigra's side;
And circling all the horrid mountain round,
Rushes impetuous to the deep profound;
Rolls o'er the ragged rocks with hideous yell;
Collects its waves beneath the earth's vast shell:
There for a while, in loud confusion hurl'd,
It crumbles mountains down and shakes the world.
Till born upon the pinions of the air,
Through the rent earth, the bursting waves appear;
Fiercely propell'd the whiten'd billows rise,
Break from the cavern, and ascend the skies:
Then lost and conquer'd by superior force,
Thro' hot Arabia holds its rapid course.
On Tiber's banks, where scarlet jasmines bloom,
And purple aloes shed a rich perfume:
Where, when the sun is melting in his heat,
The reeking tygers find a cool retreat;
Bask in the sedges, lose the sultry beam,
And wanton with their shadows in the stream,
On Tiber's banks, by sacred priests rever'd,
Where in the days of old a god appear'd:

'Twas in the dead of night at Chalma's feast,
The tribe of Alra slept around the priest.
He spoke; as evening thunder bursting near,
His horrid accents broke upon the ear;
Attend Alraddas, with your sacred priest!
This day the sun is rising in the east;
The sun, which shall illumine all the earth,
Now, now is rising in a mortal birth.
He vanish'd like a vapor of the night,
And sunk away in a faint blaze of light.
Swift from the branches of the holy oak,
Horror, confusion, fear, and torment broke:
And still when Midnight trims her mazy lamp,
They take their way thro' Tiber's watry swamp.
On Tiber's banks, close rank'd, a warring train,
Stretch'd to the distant edge of Galca's plain;
So when arriv'd at Gaigra's highest steep,
We view the wide expansion of the deep;
See in the gilding of her wat'ry robe,
The quick declension of the circling globe;
From the blue sea a chain of mountains rise,
Blended at once with water and with skies:
Beyond our sight, in vast extension curl'd,
The check of waves, the guardians of the world.
Strong were the warriors, as the ghost of Cawn,
Who threw the hill of archers to the lawn:
When the soft earth at his appearance fled;
And rising billows play'd around his head:
When a strong tempest rising from the main,
Dash'd the full clouds, unbroken on the plain.
Nicou, immortal in the sacred song,
Held the red sword of war, and led the strong;
From his own tribe the sable warriors came,
Well try'd in battle, and well known in fame.
Nicou, descended from the god of war,
Who liv'd coeval with the morning star:
Narada was his name; who cannot tell,
How all the world through great Narada fell?
Vichon, the god who rul'd above the skies,
Look'd on Narada, but with envious eyes:
The warrior dar'd him, ridicul'd his might,
Bent his white bow, and summon'd him to fight.
Vichon disdainful bade his lightnings fly,
And scatter'd burning arrows in the sky;
Threw down a star the armour of his feet,
To burn the air with supernat'ral heat;
Bid a loud tempest roar beneath the ground;
Lifted the sea, and all the earth was drown'd.
Narada still escap'd; a sacred tree
Lifted him up, and bore him thro' the sea.
The waters still ascending fierce and high,
He tower'd into the chambers of the sky:
There Vichon sat; his armor on his bed,
He thought Narada with the mighty dead.
Before his seat the heav'nly warrior stands,
The lightning quiv'ring in his yellow hands:
The god astonish'd dropt; hurl'd from the shore,
He drop'd to torments and to rise no more.
Headlong he falls; 'tis his own arms compel,
Condemn'd in ever-burning fires to dwell.
From this Narada, mighty Nicou sprung;
The mighty Nicou, furious, wild, and young:
Who led th'embattled archers to the field,
And bore a thunderbolt upon his shield:
That shield his glorious father died to gain,
When the white warriors fled along the plain:

When the full sails could not provoke the flood,
'Till Nicou came, and swell'd the seas with blood.
Slow at the end of his robust array,
The mighty warrior pensive took his way;
Against the son of Nair, the young Rorest,
Once the companion of his youthful breast.
Strong were the passions of the son of Nair,
Strong, as the tempest of the evening air.
Insatiate in desire; fierce as the boar;
Firm in resolve, as Cannie's rocky shore.
Long had the gods endeavour'd to destroy,
All Nicou's friendship, happiness, and joy:
They sought in vain; till Vicat, Vichon's son,
Never in feats of wickedness outdone,
Saw Nica, sister to the mountain king,
Drest beautiful, with all the flow'rs of spring:
He saw and scatter'd poison in her eyes;
From limb to limb, in varied forms he flies:
Dwelt on her crimson lip, and added grace
To every glossy feature of her face.
Rorest was fir'd with passion at the sight,
Friendship and honour sunk to Vicat's right:
He saw, he lov'd, and burning with desire,
Bore the soft maid, from brother, sister, sire.
Pining with sorrow, Nica faded, died:
Like a fair aloe in its morning pride.
This brought the warrior to the bloody mead,
And sent to young Rorest the threatening reed.
He drew his army forth: Oh! need I tell!
That Nicou conquer'd, and the lover fell:
His breathless army mantled all the plain;
And death sat smiling on the heaps of slain.
The battle ended, with his reeking dart,
The pensive Nicou pierc'd his beating heart:
And to his mourning valiant warriors cry'd,
I and my sister's ghost are satisfy'd.

Boldizsár Fejérvári