

Prologue

For almost one-and-a-half centuries after the British Museum opened its domed Reading Room in May 1857, scholars from all over the world used to assemble there in order to access an incomparable collection of printed and manuscript materials. To study in that circular room lined with books to a height of thirty-odd feet was to experience the encyclopaedic illusion of being at the very centre of knowledge. Not until sections of the wall swung open so that functionaries could retrieve some of the treasures hidden behind them did it become clear to bewildered newcomers that those portals of discovery were lined not with books but with *trompe-l'oeil* imitations of closely shelved volumes. The twenty columns which support the great dome were also 'covered with false book-backs' to the same height.¹

Fake books are what you expect to find in the mansions of parvenus like the hero of Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925). A sceptical visitor to Gatsby's 'high Gothic library' was surprised to discover, however, that every book housed there was an 'absolutely real' and 'bona-fide piece of printed matter' with 'pages and everything', put there by someone who sustained the illusion of connoisseurship by showing that he 'knew when to stop': that is, he 'didn't cut the pages'.² Fake books are not what you expect to find in one of the world's great libraries. Yet the real books on the walls of the British Museum's Reading Room and the false book-spines on its doors and columns constituted a visually seamless space, designed apparently by Antonio (later Sir Anthony) Panizzi, a lawyer and revolutionary who arrived in England in 1823 as a political refugee from Italy, and eventually became the Museum's Principal Librarian.

¹ P.R. Harris, *Reading Room*, 16.

² Fitzgerald, *Bodley Head Scott Fitzgerald*, 160.

Despised by his English rivals as a ‘mountebank’, a ‘scoundrel Italian’ capable of doing what ‘no gentleman could be found to do’, Panizzi had been so well connected as a protégé of the man who became Lord Chancellor, Lord Brougham, that his lack of qualifications in librarianship did not prevent his appointment as a cataloguer in the Department of Printed Books.³ Unqualified as an architect, he claimed in 1866 to have ‘originated’ the plan for the Museum’s Reading Room, although one of the men responsible for building it, Sydney Smirke, said that what Panizzi originally proposed was ‘a flat, low building’.⁴ A few years earlier, Panizzi had been accused of piracy in a pamphlet entitled *Some Observations upon the Recent Addition of a Reading Room to the British Museum* (1858), published by the professor of architecture and engineering construction at King’s College, London, William Hosking, who had submitted a plan for a circular and domed building on the same site which the Museum’s Trustees had rejected in 1849.⁵

The disputed origin and heterogeneous contents of that splendid Reading Room monumentalise various themes in this book, but particularly the imbrication of the spurious with the genuine in literature, that ‘strange institution’ (as Jacques Derrida describes it) whose history ‘is constructed like the ruin of a monument which basically never existed’.⁶ *Faking Literature* is about the power of literary forgeries to disturb the societies in which they are produced, and to do so in ways resented by the guardians of cultural institutions such as literary studies, book-reviewing and the literary awards system. For while the word ‘disturbing’ is commonly encountered in such quarters as a term of praise, this usage tends to be restricted to the contents of books that are thought of as disturbing us for our own good by unsettling our complacencies about a wide range of personal and social concerns. Writers are also permitted to disturb the conventional forms of literature by developing generic hybridities, provided they avoid the extravagances ridiculed in *Hamlet* as ‘tragical-comical-historical-pastoral’. Such transgressive behaviour is described as ‘innovative’. But no writer is permitted to disturb those cultural institutions which accredit and mediate literature by demon-

³ Edward Miller, *Prince of Librarians*, 213, 129; Ganzel, *Fortune and Men’s Eyes*, 117.

⁴ P.R. Harris, *History of the British Museum Library*, 188.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 187–88; Fagan, *Life of Panizzi*, vol. 1, 368–69, 375.

⁶ Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 36, 42.

strating inefficiencies in their operations and thus questioning the grounds of their existence.

This book treats both ‘literature’ and ‘literary forgery’ as categories of writing with much in common. It assumes that since what a society values will show up obliquely in what it rejects, reactions to literary forgeries illuminate perceptions of literariness. It therefore reconsiders the connections between literature and what are variously designated literary ‘forgeries’, ‘frauds’, ‘fakes’, ‘hoaxes’, ‘impostures’, ‘spuriousities’, ‘counterfeits’ and (more rarely in anglophone accounts) ‘supercheries’. No matter which term is used, the relationship between literarity and spuriousity is framed as a binary opposition, in which literature is valorised as the authentic Self and literary forgery disparaged as its bogus Other. The perceived business of literary studies is accordingly to preserve and fortify that distinction by practising a cultural eugenics designed to eliminate the dreck. This is why the outing of a literary forgery is generally admired as a culturally prophylactic event. In my view, however, literary forgery is not so much the disreputable Other of ‘genuine’ literature as its demystified and disreputable Self. If, then, the ‘spurious’ and the ‘genuine’ are consubstantial, how has literature come to be associated with the one by being dissociated from the other? I think that literature is systemically spurious on account of its long-standing association with rhetoric. Consequently, the history of literature is also and inevitably the history of recurrent defences of it against attacks on its epistemological status, the earliest and most influential of which emanate from that arch-enemy of rhetoric, Plato.⁷ Furthermore, I think that we ought to revalue literary forgery as an antinomian phenomenon produced by creative energies whose power is attested to by the resistance they engender in those who feel compelled to denounce and eradicate it.

In short, I argue that we should start thinking more positively about literary forgery, and not least because of its opposition to the establishment of no-go areas by cultural police of both the right and the left, who suspend their residual hostilities to one another by jointly condemning it as an unethical practice. Literary forgeries are worth studying because they display even more clearly than those other counterfactual assemblages we call literary works that ‘disruptive and capricious power’ of the imagination which Edgar Wind

⁷ Vickers, *In Defence of Rhetoric*, 83–147.

calls ‘anarchic’.⁸ They exhibit a carnivalesque irreverence towards the sanctity of various conventions designed to limit what is permissible in literary production. Whenever they succeed they destabilise the fragile economy of literary accreditation by drawing attention both to its conceptual shoddiness and the expediencies that characterise its operations. By doing so they provoke in our cultural gatekeepers anxieties displaced as anger and articulated as opprobrium. Literary forgeries, therefore, constitute a powerful indictment of such cultural practices as literary reviewing and the awarding of literary prizes, especially those which Doris Lessing labels ‘razzmatazz’.⁹ They are also a serious embarrassment to people who see it as their duty to protect the institution of literature from critiques of it by literary theorists who question received ideas about authorship, originality and authenticity. This is one reason for integrating literary forgeries into studies of cultural values instead of ignoring them as anomalies. Seeing that these supposedly ‘irregular’ and ‘abnormal’ literary phenomena occur more frequently than is generally acknowledged, the burgeoning archive of literary forgeries remains an unresolved problem for cultural analysts. Now that English studies is once again reappraising its activities, I think it timely to recall some of its repressed texts, and to consider how the discipline might refashion its agenda in the wake of such a reclamation.

⁸ Wind, *Art and Anarchy*, 1.

⁹ Lessing, *Diaries of Jane Somers*, [8].

CHAPTER I

Sampling the spurious

Certain times and places are undoubtedly more hospitable than others to the activities surveyed in this book. Britain in the 1760s must have been one such chronotope, when Thomas Percy was tampering with the texts of the ballads he was to publish as *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* in 1765. That appeared a year after someone called ‘William Marshall’ translated as *The Castle of Otranto* a book allegedly written by an equally imaginary Italian, ‘Onuphrio Muralto’, and given the fictive imprint of ‘Naples, 1529’. Marketed as ‘a Gothic story’ in its second edition of 1765, it turned out to be the inaugural manifestation of a literary genre characterised by its ‘ghostings of the already spectral’ and ‘recounterfeiting of the already counterfeit’.¹ Its actual author was Horace Walpole, fourth Earl of Oxford, who transformed his Strawberry Hill residence into a pseudo-Gothic castle. In 1768 a fifteen-year-old called Thomas Chatterton began to retro-fashion himself as ‘Thomas Rowley’ in order to compose fifteenth-century poetry and other literary muni-ments. After Walpole had indicated that he was ‘by no means satisfied with the authenticity’ of Chatterton’s ‘supposed mss’, Chatterton accused Walpole of having himself ‘indulge[d] in such Deceit’. The real foundation of Walpole’s double standard, he alleged, was economic: those with ‘the Gifts of Wealth & Lux’ry’ could get away with literary practices for which the ‘poor & Mean’ were castigated.²

At the beginning of that decade, James Macpherson extrapolated from fragments of Gaelic poetry what he claimed to be English translations of two ‘ancient’ epics attributed to Ossian: *Fingal* (1761) and *Temora* (1763). The year 1763 was also the date of the first recorded forgery of a document concerning Shakespeare, just a few

¹ Hogle, ‘Gothic Ghost of the Counterfeit’, 295.

² Meyerstein, *Life of Chatterton*, 262, 271.

years before he was installed as England's national poet at the belated bicentenary celebrations of his birth, which David Garrick organised for the Stratford Jubilee in 1769. An invented anecdote about Shakespeare was the substance of a letter quoted in an essay about the actor Edward Alleyn and published in the *Theatrical Review*. Written allegedly in 1600 by George Peele (who died in 1596) to Christopher Marlowe (who was killed in 1593), that letter – forged by the Shakespeare scholar, George Steevens – recalled Shakespeare's annoyance at being accused by Alleyn of having plagiarised their conversations when composing the speech about acting in *Hamlet*.³ The manuscript has not survived, but its 'olde' spellings were designed for a post-neoclassical generation whose antiquarian interests were nurtured by Richard Hurd's *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (1762), which praises Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1596) as a 'Gothic' alternative to those 'Grecian' notions of literary excellence advocated by neoclassical critics.⁴ The possibility that Shakespeare was a plagiarist must have occurred a decade earlier to readers of Charlotte Lennox's *Shakespear Illustrated* (1753), which analyses 'the novels and histories on which [his] plays . . . are founded'. It is certainly taken for granted by Herbert Lawrence, whose 'historical allegory', *The Life and Adventures of Common Sense* (1769), demystifies the Bard by representing his plagiarism as symptomatic of behaviour first recorded in Nicholas Rowe's *Life of Mr. William Shakespear* (1709), namely his youthful activities as a deer-poacher.⁵ At this iconic moment in the formation of English literature as a source of national pride, Shakespeare is both a transcendent genius and an all-too-human plagiarist. Literary forgery is in Joseph Conrad's sense the 'secret sharer' of literature.

North of the border, James Macpherson had already produced the canonical texts for anybody interested in either committing or studying literary forgery. Like Bardolatry, they too were conscripted for a nationalist agenda. One of their aims was anti-English: to show that, since the Gaels inherited a far more ancient culture than that of the Sassenachs who had defeated them at the Battle of Culloden in 1745, demoralised Highlanders had grounds for feeling culturally superior to their conquerors. The other, however, was anti-Irish: to show that, since the ancient bard who had composed those Gaelic

³ Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives*, 241–42; Grebanier, *Great Shakespeare Forgery*, 139.

⁴ Wellek, *Rise of English Literary History*, 95–102.

⁵ Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives*, 395–96, 68.

ballads ‘collected’ by Macpherson was a Scot called Ossian rather than an Irishman called Oisean, the originating site of Gaelic culture in the third century AD was not Ireland but Scotland. Macpherson’s Ossianic *oeuvre* is as cornucopian a text for analysts of spuriousity as that other 1760s phenomenon, Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, is for theorists of fiction. As part of a body of writing which ‘made use of some fourteen or fifteen Gaelic ballads’, *Fingal* is best described as ‘a “collage”’ of ‘reworked authentic material, together with a liberal admixture of pure Macpherson’.⁶ Neither wholly Ossian nor wholly Macpherson, but more Macphersonian than Ossianic, that mestizo corpus is the work of a composite figure I shall call ‘Macphossian’. Its formal innovation was to develop a generic hybridity which a subsequent generation of French Symbolist poets would know as *poèmes en prose*, but its literary strategy was to market genuine Macpherson in the guise of bogus Ossian.

Macpherson was a native speaker of Gaelic who could not read Gaelic writing, and the ambitious author of an heroic poem in six cantos called *The Highlander* (1758), which failed to attract the attention he had hoped for. In order to satisfy the curiosity of John Home – a friend who had written a successful play called *Douglas* (1756), but who knew no Gaelic – Macpherson ‘translated’ a poem on the death of Ossian’s son, Oscar, which Home showed to a group of Edinburgh literati. Among them was the inaugural professor of rhetoric and *belles lettres* at Edinburgh University, Hugh Blair, who would eventually write but not sign the preface to *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*, and allow Macpherson to rewrite the final paragraph of his also unsigned *Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian* (1763).⁷ Persuaded by Macpherson that this book was the pilot study for a major research project – namely, to retrieve the ‘lost’ epic poetry of the Scottish Highlands – the Edinburgh group funded a couple of field-trips by him between August 1760 and January 1761. This enabled him to collect not only Gaelic manuscripts but also transcripts by his research assistant, Ewan Macpherson, of ballads they heard recited.⁸ By January 1761 he was telling a correspondent that he had been ‘lucky enough to lay [his] hands on a pretty complete poem, and truly epic, concerning Fingal’.⁹ Macpherson made the

⁶ Thomson, *Gaelic Sources*, 10; Gaskill, ‘“Ossian” Macpherson’, 129.

⁷ Chapman, ‘Blair on Ossian’, 82–83.

⁸ Stafford, *Sublime Savage*, 116, 121, 123.

⁹ Thomson, ‘Macpherson’s *Ossian*’, 258.

holistic assumption that he had discovered chips off an old block which, like ancient pots from shards of pottery, could be painstakingly reassembled. By calling the Gaelic ballads ‘fragments’, he dignified them with the classicising term *fragmenta*, and treated them as parts of a dismembered tradition in need of re-membering into what the preface to *Fragments* calls ‘one Work of considerable Length, and which deserves to be styled an heroic Poem’.¹⁰ Like the scattered limbs of Osiris in the Greco-Roman tradition, the reassembled *membra disjecta* of Ossian’s ballads might be expected to engender a renaissance, this time in Scotland, just as the rediscovery of ancient Greek and Roman texts in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries had enabled an earlier renaissance called the Renaissance. Now that Gaelic was in danger of dying out as a result of the invaders’ linguicidal policy of making English the language of instruction in Scottish schools, Macpherson’s ‘translations’ could be praised as a timely attempt to save an endangered species of poetry from extinction.

The theoretical framework for such ambitions derived from contemporary understandings of epic poetry. Macpherson attended the University of Aberdeen at a time when its staff included Thomas Blackwell, the author of *An Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* (1735). Blackwell observed that civil upheavals had been the seedbed of epic poetry not only in Homer’s Greece and Dante’s Italy but most recently in Milton’s England, where *Paradise Lost* (1667) had emerged from a civil war. In traditional hierarchies of literary ‘kinds’, epic was the pre-eminent genre. Politically, it celebrated the nationhood of an emergent state, and identified national security with a hegemonic family: what Virgil’s *Aeneid* had done for Augustus Caesar, Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* (1596) had been designed to do for Elizabeth Tudor, reaffirming her self-legitimizing genealogy as a descendant of King Arthur and therefore the rightful ruler of England. Scotland’s position in universal history was distinctly anomalous, since although it had experienced turmoil in abundance it appeared not to have produced a Homer. There were two ways of remedying this deficiency. One was to write the missing epic, as William Wilkie (‘the Homer of the Lowlands’) attempted to do when, taking as his model Alexander Pope’s translation of the *Iliad* (1720) into heroic couplets, he published a nine-book epic on the Fall of

¹⁰ Mossner, *Forgotten Hume*, 85.

Thebes called the *Epigoniad* (1757), whose heroes were the descendants (*epigones*) of warriors who had participated in an earlier and unsuccessful siege of that city.¹¹ The other was to discover that ‘lost’ Scottish epic which, it stood to reason, must once have existed. This was also the preferred option. Since societies of the Enlightenment could no longer believe in either the supernatural ‘machinery’ or clapped out classical mythology which featured so prominently in the defining examples of the genre, the rediscovery of a Gaelic epic would avoid the problems of inventing one. As the vehicle of northern mythologies, it would revitalise poetry in a manner anticipated by William Collins in his ‘Ode on the Popular Superstitions of the Highlands of Scotland, Considered as the Subject of Poetry’ (1749), which Collins had given to John Home by 1750. Ossian would emerge as the Homer of the north, his Gaelic language comparable to Homeric Greek, that vivid language of the passions out of which epic arose. After producing English versions of Ossianic poetry declared Homeric by Blair, Macpherson completed the circuit by translating *The Iliad of Homer* (1773) into ‘Ossianic’ prose-poetry.¹²

Blair admired Macphossian as poetry, although he also wanted it to be revisionist history.¹³ Macpherson claimed that the fragments he had collected were vestiges of an oral tradition going back to the third century AD, and a legacy of those indomitable Caledonians who had resisted the Roman invasion of Britain.¹⁴ The legendary chief of the Fenians (called ‘Fionn’ by the Irish) was actually ‘Fingal’ (Finn the Gael). The nationalist aim of *Temora*, as set out in the ‘Dissertation’ which precedes it, is to remove from Scottish culture the stigma of derivativeness from Ireland.¹⁵ Gaelic texts discrepant from Macpherson’s ‘translations’ were denounced as ‘spurious fifteenth-century Irish versions’ of those earlier Scottish ballads.¹⁶ From an Irish perspective, therefore, Macpherson was guilty not of forgery but of appropriation. Charlotte Brooke’s *Reliques of Irish Poetry* (1789) – a title designed to attract readers of Thomas Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) – is in this respect a counter-Macphersonian act of reclamation, despite her ‘absolute silence on the Ossian controversy’.¹⁷

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 68–77.

¹² Stafford, *Sublime Savage*, 85.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹⁴ Smart, *James Macpherson*, 102–03.

¹⁵ Haugen, ‘Ossian and the Invention of Textual History’, 312.

¹⁶ Colgan, ‘Ossian: Success or Failure?’, 346.

¹⁷ Greene, *Makers and Forgers*, 11; O’Halloran, ‘Irish Re-creations of the Gaelic Past’, 87.

In England the political potential of Macphossian as the lost epic poetry of an heroic but oppressed people could be diffused by discrediting it as a forgery. Published in Edinburgh, and in the language of the invader, Macphossian was far too politicised a text to be assessed in eighteenth-century London solely in terms of those aestheticising criteria which weighed the ‘beauties’ of a literary work against its ‘defects’ before passing judgement on it. James Boswell told David Hume that the English had been ‘exceedingly fond’ of *Fingal* until they learnt ‘that it was Scotch’, whereupon ‘they became jealous and silent’.¹⁸ Samuel Johnson thought that because the Scots ‘love *Scotland* better than truth’ and certainly ‘better than enquiry’, they would never admit to the fraudulence of anything which flattered their vanity as much as Macphossian did.¹⁹ The vehemence of such remarks leads Richard B. Scher to argue that those English men of letters who sought to discredit Macphossian – Johnson, Thomas Percy and Horace Walpole – did so because they ‘felt threatened by the sudden ascent of their Scottish counterparts’.²⁰ Their strategy certainly succeeded in England, where for the next couple of centuries Macphossian would be remembered by the arbiters of taste only as a literary forgery, and deployed in support of the Scotophobic view that ‘the Teutonic nations’ have manifested ‘immemorially’ a higher ‘respect for truth . . . than that acknowledged by the Celts’.²¹

Post-colonial readers figure Macpherson as ‘a post-Culloden Highlander’ whose retrieval of a national epic offered some consolation for the ‘cultural apocalypse of Culloden’.²² Yet this subaltern interpretation of Macphossian and its supporting ‘dissertations’ as a declaration of independence, designed to appeal to ‘all who feel themselves subjected to an alien cultural hegemony’, is qualified by the fact that Macpherson not only defended the 1707 Act of Union in his *History of Great Britain* (1775) but published in 1776 a book on *The Rights of Great Britain Asserted against the Claims of America*.²³ Moreover, Howard D. Weinbrot argues, Macphossian achieved cult status among English readers precisely because its constituent poems were so ‘unrevolutionary’ as to be ‘wholly unthreatening’ to a nation

¹⁸ Mossner, *Forgotten Hume*, 89. ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 94.

²⁰ Scher, ‘Percy, Shaw and the Ferguson “Cheat”’, 234.

²¹ Hewlett, ‘Forged Literature’, 321.

²² Gaskill, ‘“Ossian” Macpherson’, 119; Crawford, ‘Post-Cullodenism’, 18.

²³ Gaskill, ‘Ossian in Europe’, 666.