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Rolls, Alistair & Gulddal, Jesper. "Pierre Bayard and the ironies of detective criticism: from text back to work" Published in *Comparative Literature Studies*, Vol. 53, Issue 1, pp 150-169, (2016)

Accessed from: <http://hdl.handle.net/1959.13/1319992>

PIERRE BAYARD AND THE IRONIES OF DETECTIVE CRITICISM:

FROM TEXT BACK TO WORK

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Abstract

Pierre Bayard is a polarizing figure in contemporary French criticism: on the one hand, he is brilliant, innovative and daring; on the other hand, he seems to delight in deception and sleight of hand, particularly in the way that he revisits, and arguably transvalorizes, theoretical discourse reminiscent, *inter alia*, of poststructuralism and deconstruction. In this paper, we wish to reveal the double-sidedness of Bayard's new detective criticism in order to see how his new solutions to classic crime texts carry within themselves clues to their own undoing as well as alternative solutions that can be deemed to have been sown consciously or unconsciously into the weave of Bayard's analysis. This is the irony of Bayard's criticism: it references the work by reverting to a study of the text while keeping both, work and text, in view and, effectively, by being both, that is, by exposing the textuality of canonical literary works and presenting his criticism as transparently readable, even as 'easy reading', he offers his ideas as works, which the reader can read as such but can also *reread*, à la Pierre Bayard, as text.

Rather surprisingly, there has not been much scholarly response to Bayard's prolific excursions into literary criticism. To date, Bayard has written some twenty-one monographs, including sixteen in Éditions de Minuit's famous 'Paradoxe' collection, which has been marketed with huge success to a general as well as an academic audience. While he is a Professor of French Literature at Paris VIII, his work, which he sees as primarily concerned

with the “undecidability” of literary textⁱ and its relationship to psychoanalysis (he is also a practicing psychoanalyst), strays beyond the typical parameters of literary analysis as practiced in France, taking on a comparative edge that would see it equally at home in the French discipline of *la littérature comparée*. Reaction to his works tends to be limited to praise for their ability to reach out to the broader public and, thereby, to take literary criticism to the masses. Warren Motte, for example, finds “particularly refreshing”, even “ludic” this ability to “[pique] the interest of readers well beyond the limited circle of those who habitually consume French criticism and literary theory” and thus to “expand the horizon of possibility of critical writing in significant ways”.ⁱⁱ This playful aspect of Bayard’s criticism is also picked up by Philippe Roger, who notes that “[i]f there is something ‘generational’ about Bayard’s work, it might be just this: his distaste for academic ‘seriousness’ and his belief in a calculated disorientation (of the reader) as the best compass by which to charter his own critical journey”.ⁱⁱⁱ Jack Abecassis, for his part, lauds the presentation of Bayard’s arguments in their “attractive and readable package full of levity and playfulness, always skirting the line between humorous irony and serious argumentation”.^{iv} If Bayard the ironist has a sincere ambition, it is, for Abecassis, for “culture to be more inclusive and creative”; in other words, again we have Bayard painted as a champion of the common reader, a vulgarizer of complicated and alienating literary theory.

This juncture of the critical and the popular is also the juncture of our own undecidability here. While our focus is on the irony that we see at the heart of Bayard’s broader critical project, the more specific testing ground that we have chosen is his detective fiction criticism, and in particular his essay *Qui a tué Roger Ackroyd ?* (1998; 2000 for the English translation, *Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?*^v). In this essay Bayard sets himself the not inconsiderable task of pitting himself against Poirot, and by extension in this case, Christie herself, in the framework of the novel in which both protagonist and author were arguably at

the height of their powers and that marked their entry into the detective fiction canon. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) was, of course, the novel in which the narrator, Dr James Sheppard, famously broke all the rules by turning out to be the murderer. Bayard takes this scandal one step further by arguing that the real murderer of Roger Ackroyd is not in fact Dr Sheppard, but his sister Caroline.

The power of this rereading, which Stephen Knight classifies as a “reverse reversal”, praising it, but not without a degree of caution, as “sensational” and “puzzling”, lies not only in its radical conceit, which consists in undoing the authorial solution of a crime fiction classic, but also in the way that it undoes the conceit of the original text itself, giving a reactionary edge to its critical originality.^{vi} For *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* made Christie a star relatively early in her career (although one of her earliest novels, its marks its perversity from the outset by having Hercule Poirot, her new detective hero, emerging from retirement to solve the case) by virtue of its own sensational twist, which sees the narrator revealed as the murderer in what has now become a classic case of the infringement of the rules of crime fiction fair play. Bayard debunks Christie’s solution, and in so doing produces a suspect from among what might otherwise be considered the usual suspects, hence Knight’s reference to a “reverse reversal”. While manifestly fundamentally opposed to it, Bayard’s undoing of a crime fiction classic is therefore strangely aligned to Knight’s project, which is to allow crime fiction texts to speak for themselves and thereby to address the tendency of traditional crime fiction scholarship to focus on the broad-brush-stroke survey, and reaffirmation, of the canon.^{vii} Knight, by allowing the text to speak for itself, (re)places *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* in the ‘mainstream’ of crime fiction and celebrates its radical departure from narrative norms; Bayard, for his part, reveals how the text speaks another truth, one that it speaks between the lines, or perhaps in spite of itself, and as such posits departure (from the stability of the official version of events) at the heart, or unconscious centre, of the crime

fiction mainstream. Bayard's approach is more obviously iconoclastic, certainly, than Knight's, but both seek to challenge the orthodoxy of their respective fields (Bayard's, literary analysis in France; Knight's, Anglo-Saxon crime fiction scholarship); while Knight focuses on what the text says, and as such tackles the canon (both literary and critical) head on, Bayard refocuses what it says, applying the lenses of other canons (psychoanalysis, literary theory). This is the interdisciplinary aspect of Bayard's criticism. What will interest us here is the way that his reading of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* asserts itself into the critical and crime fiction mainstreams (by popular acclaim but also through the assuredness of its claims), as a reprise of the text, almost a sequel to Christie-Poirot's original investigation, and thus sets itself up as an object of its own analysis: its study of undecidability, it seems to us, sows within itself the seeds of its own undecidability and, consciously or unconsciously, other solutions beyond the alternative that it is consciously promoting.

In recent years the author who first rose to prominence with his detective fiction re-solutions (in addition to the aforementioned essay on Christie, he had also re-solved Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*) has taken further, bolder steps into literary criticism; or rather, he has appeared to go further. *Le Plagiat par anticipation* (2009) saw authors no longer influenced by their historical predecessors but plagiarized by them *in anticipation*; and, more recently, in *Et si les œuvres changeaient d'auteur ?* (2010), readers were asked to consider works anew from the perspective of a change of authorship (Leo Tolstoy's *Gone with the Wind*, T. E. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and so on). The aim of both books appears to be to expand the limits of comparative textual analysis.^{viii} This gradual crescendo in Bayard's audacity has provoked some of his more platitudinous critical reception. For Sophie Létourneau, *Et si les œuvres changeaient d'auteur ?* serves as a reminder that the author is not the sole arbiter of meaning when it

comes to understanding his or her characters.^{ix} Bayard, she continues, or at least his narrator, his alter, or barely alter, ego, “sets out to accomplish the task that Barthes and Foucault did not have the courage to pursue—since the author is a trap, you might as well choose the one that suits you best”.^x A perverse reader might interject here to question how Bayard’s restoring to the throne of an author, albeit a different one, could be construed as going further than Barthes’s famous unseating of him. And when Létourneau praises Bayard’s conception of what he terms the imaginary author (*l’auteur imaginaire*), suggesting that the act of reading can now (finally) be considered a creative one,^{xi} it is tempting to point out that this is an extension of Barthes’s writerly text (*le texte scriptible*). Liedeke Plate certainly moves in that direction: “Barthes, of course, already theorized this moment when the reader looks up from the book as integral to the act of reading, for instance in *S/Z* (1970).”^{xii} For Plate, concepts such as Bayard’s ‘unreading’ (*la non-lecture*) seem all too familiar: “I am struck by how much his theory of unreading is haunted by the idea of rereading.”^{xiii} In light of this, it is tempting to add the words ‘disingenuous’ and ‘duplicitous’ to ‘ludic’ and ‘refreshing’. Furthermore, Bayard’s whole vulgarizing mission has the potential to be dismissed as a bowdlerization of Barthes, perhaps even as plagiarism without the anticipation.

In “From Work to Text”, one of his seminal essays on the nature of the text, which is always already *to be produced* and thus alive (to new possibilities, new actualizations, as meaning, of its virtual potential for meaning-making), as opposed to that of the ‘work of literature’, which is *produced* (and thus closed, its meaning deemed to coincide transparently with the fixed sequence of words that constitute it), Barthes predicates the change from the understanding of literature as a body of works to its renewal as the study of text on the interdisciplinary connections made possible by the emergence of new disciplines, including psychoanalysis.^{xiv} It is ironic therefore that Bayard’s comparative approach to literary undecidability, despite its focus on textual plurality, should give emphasis to the terminology

of classic literary studies, systematically preferring, for example, the word 'work' (*œuvre*) to the word 'text' (*texte*).

In his own essays, and certainly in *Qui a tué Roger Ackroyd ?*, two notions of plurality appear to emerge: first, there is a fundamental plurality, of the Barthesian type, which is to say, one "that accomplishes the very plural of meaning";^{xv} and second, there is a plurality of a more restricted kind that sees one truth emerge from behind that visible at the surface, in the lines on the page. This second scenario, which corresponds to the discovery of the unconscious meaning beneath consciously articulated narrative in an act of psychoanalytic criticism, appears nonetheless to depend for its legitimacy on the liberation of the literary text as instituted by theorizations of textuality based on a plurality of the former type. As Bayard himself notes, "most of the time in literature we are faced with something that is theoretically incomplete, and whose richness springs from that very incompleteness".^{xvi} Motte, who cites this passage in his study of what he terms Bayard's 'wormholes', sets up and enhances an inherent undecidability as to what this something might best be termed in the sentence that immediately precedes this discussion of incompleteness: "In *Comment améliorer les œuvres ratées ?*, for example, Bayard invites his reader to imagine that the infelicities one may encounter in canonical literary works can be palliated or indeed remedied, that one can in effect rewrite those texts in strategic fashions."^{xvii} In this passage, Motte uses the words 'work' and 'text' interchangeably, perhaps because he is uninterested in the distinction on which poststructuralism and deconstruction are predicated; on the other hand, his shift from one term to the other may be self-conscious, even ironic. In this way, we should argue, Motte is offering a *mise en abyme* of Bayard's own ostensibly indiscriminate use of these twin terms, and more especially of the latter's preference for the *œuvre*, or work. Our argument here is that if Bayard's preference for this term is so pronounced it is because his own move is fundamentally self-conscious and ironic: his work is very much that, an

œuvre, a critical exegesis that presents itself, in marketing terms (including the classic white covers of any number of prestigious, or canonical, French literary series), as text in the most readerly sense, what Barthes, at his most ironic, calls literature;^{xviii} and as such, we readers again find ourselves in the presence of something incomplete. When Roger notes therefore that “Bayard’s reader must be prepared to rewrite him in just the same way he rewrites Sophocles or Agatha Christie”,^{xix} it is because of the irony on which Bayard’s critical project is predicated.

This project, whose particular comparative strategy, or intertextuality, is deployed to reconfigure the relationship between works and their authors, dehistoricizing them with an emphasis on mobility and interchangeability, is first and foremost a textual one, much as it was for Barthes, who, for Graham Allen, “remains the most articulate of all writers on the subject of intertextuality”.^{xx} While Allen’s study of intertextuality was first published in 2000, and thus at a time when many of Bayard’s more daring forays were still to come, it seems unlikely that his assessment of the intertextual pantheon would be swayed by comments such as those of Létourneau. Indeed, it is difficult to unseat Barthes’s iconoclasm when it was itself, as Allen notes, an “ironic strategy”.^{xxi} For, like the Yale-School of deconstruction that follows in its wake, Barthes’s poststructuralism is based on a theorization of the text that “begins by describing the traditional notions of work and text but ends by practically reversing the relations usually ascribed to them”,^{xxii} according to which the text transcribes and codifies the thinking, or ‘work’, of a particular scholar.

This ironic approach is perhaps nowhere more clearly on display than in the opening pages of *S/Z*, in which Barthes gives as an example of the transparently meaningful readerly text (*le texte lisible*) the work of literature, and against which he opposes the writerly text (*le texte scriptible*) in the form of, for example, an advertisement whose hermeneutic code has to be actively broken by the reader in order for its mysteries to be understood. What he of

course reveals in due course is that the literary work, or 'text', is in fact the hallmark of the writerly text. Again then, Barthes's irony, which is foundational in terms of its critical legacy, is from the outset only a reflection of the irony of text itself, which purports to convey meaning but always sets puzzles.

In light of this, to read Bayard's return to the work as reactionary would surely be to underestimate him. And the corners into which he backs himself are (and, we should argue, that this move is a self-conscious one) critical spaces into which others have already preceded him, and not always unironically. The most obvious charge one might lay against Bayard is that he wants to have his cake and eat it. In *Qui a tué Roger Ackroyd ?*, for example, he sets about exposing the problems inherent in believing Poirot's solution to *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. By tracing the history of this famous breaking of long-established crime-writing rules, he effectively unseats the detective novel's status as the ultimate non-writerly text: on the one hand, the detective novel, especially in its whodunit format, sets itself out as a writerly text in the clue-puzzle mould of hermeneutics, which is to say that the reader is invited to participate actively in the investigation; on the other hand, of course, nowhere are the reader's powers so effectively extinguished as in the detective's final unveiling of the truth, in the course of which the reader's solution is either disproven or authenticated. In either case, the authorial power wielded, quasi-vicariously, by the detective, is absolute and the text held up as consummately readerly.

By daring to overturn Poirot and Christie's solution, Bayard thus takes a problematic that is classically Barthesian and rolls it out on the most provocatively challenging of literary testing grounds. At the same time, however, he creates a significant conundrum: using psychoanalysis as his starting point, he breaks down the surface layer of truth in the novel and undermines it with any number of problems, replacing the narrator's omnipotence with "the creative act of reading";^{xxiii} and yet, from this position of the text as always already

plural, via the dismantling of Poirot's investigation and its exposure as a delirious interpretation, and thus misreading, Bayard moves into place his own truth. Playing on the fickle nature of this term, he entitles his last three chapters "La vérité" [the truth], "Rien que la vérité" [nothing but the truth] and "Mais toute la vérité" [but all the truth]. This last chapter title is apocopically deprived of the question mark that the reader might expect, as if in line with Bayard's interpretive castration of the detective and his own production of a truth in which, ultimately, he believes. Indeed, in the light of his own re-resolution of the case, Dr Sheppard's confession to what for Bayard is the untenable Dictaphone-hypothesis, which sees Sheppard forced to devise and construct a timing device for a Dictaphone on the spur of the moment and in between visits to his patients on the very day of the murder, is cast provocatively and self-consciously as "an ironic gesture made at the detective's expense".^{xxiv}

While there is nothing paradoxical about a critic's firm belief in his or her own actualization of an instance of meaning from the virtualizing tendency of textual meaningfulness (the strength of a reading depends, after all, on its formulation as truth, without which all readings would indeed be equal), Bayard's trifold pronouncement of truth appears decidedly heavy-handed, as if the number three itself stands as a figure of undecidability. On the one hand, the legal expression 'the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth' emphasizes, in triplicate, the very singularity of the truth, in this case, the unconscious truth of the primal scene (in this case, the act of murder that we readers do not witness) that lies beneath the surface of a narrative styled by Bayard as a paranoid delirium; on the other hand, three is one number beyond the plurality offered by Bayard's re-resolution, in which one truth replaces the other. It is as if, Bayard's (ironic) take on the traditional French tripartite structuring of the academic essay does both less and more than meets the eye: one alternative truth is advanced in an argument predicated on plurality; and at the same time, a third way is also suggested, a line of flight beyond the one-in-place-of-the-other model of plurality manifestly offered.

It is interesting that one of the key arguments that Bayard builds against Caroline Sheppard is intertextual in nature, for intertextuality, as previously suggested, is itself an ambivalent term, if not an auto-antonym. Indeed, this term, coined by Julia Kristeva in 1978 in *Semiotike* as an expression of the text's continuous and near-infinite breaching of the borders of the literary work, which sees all text interconnected,^{xxv} has come over time to stand for the way in which one literary work references the influence of another, identifiable if not specifically identified, literary work. In other words, a term created to express foundational plurality now designates a much more limited plurality, according to which one text lies behind another, holding the key to the latter's 'true meaning'. In Caroline Sheppard's case the intertextual reference is to Rudyard Kipling's cutely lethal mongoose, Rikki-Tikki-Tavi. For Bayard this clue, and its correct interpretation by the reader, is an example of what Michel Riffaterre would term an intertextual trace, which is predicated on the ungrammaticality of the source text, whose lacunae function as signposts (he calls them connectives) pointing to texts beyond the perimeters of the source text.^{xxvi} These external texts, Riffaterre's compulsory intertexts, fill the void, creating grammaticality in the source text.^{xxvii} The danger with Riffaterre's model of intertextuality, however, is that it comes close to a having-your-cake-and-eating-it conundrum similar to the one that confronts Bayard: Riffaterre takes as his starting point a notion of literariness founded on the reader's awareness of the text as only partially present; what strikes the reader is in fact the text's otherness as absence. Although Riffaterre's intertext—which is perceived “more or less consciously”^{xxviii}—cannot be located at the surface level of the written text, he suggests that it can be known, that it can be located, in other words, on the surface of another 'text'; its otherness, then, can be located *in other words*.

This theorization of intertextuality is denied in the same volume of intertextual criticism by John Frow, for whom “the identification of an intertext is an act of

interpretation” and thus a “theoretical construct formed by and serving the purposes of a reading”.^{xxix} This is a markedly different conceptualization of the trace, or “tracings of otherness”,^{xxx} to that proposed by Riffaterre; certainly, the latter’s take on reader response, predicated as it is on the definability and localization of the trace, is a far cry from Barthes’s understanding of the text as radically plural, which is to say, as a deferral of meaning that extends ungrammaticality, or that sense of textual incompleteness, beyond the surface and into the non-definable space of the intertext.^{xxxi} In Barthes’s scenario therefore, the only intertextuality, which is nonetheless also necessarily present as absence to text(uality) (“in which every text is held”, he writes^{xxxii}), lies in an act of production, or a reader response predicated on plurality as infinite deferral, infinite opening. In Riffaterre’s scenario, on the other hand, the reader responds to this absence by finding the right answer, that required by the text and, presumably, the author, which is perceivable as such because it is coded at the level of the text. Furthermore, he insists that readers can only plug these gaps with intertexts that they have already read. He then insists that the intertext, once discovered, solves the text and makes it grammatically whole. Reader response, which for Barthes and Frow, is dependent on textual plurality is therefore used here to close down textual plurality, hence what for the deconstructionist would be the oxymoronic edge to the title of Riffaterre’s essay—“compulsory reader response”.^{xxxiii} Riffaterre’s conclusion is interesting from this perspective:

In a response rendered compulsive, and facilitated by this familiar model [of tropes], as soon as the reader notices a possible substitutability, s/he automatically yields to the temptation to actualise it. The intertextual drive, therefore, is tropological rather than psychoanalytical, a reader response dictated by the tantalising

combination within each connective of the enigma and the
answer...^{xxxiv}

It is just possible to capture a glimpse of irony in the final words of a study otherwise styled in deadly earnest. In opposing the tropological and the psychoanalytical, Riffaterre is manifestly, which is to say that he appears to be, extolling the reader's conscious response to connectives that speak of a clear ungrammaticality at the surface level of the text and whose solution is equally clearly signposted in that text and locatable in the signed intertext; he is not, by the same token, advocating a more nebulous, unconscious intertextuality, according to which a gut feeling or resonance causes the reader to deploy the text's natural intentionality towards otherness. The connectives are real and clearly defined, therefore, as is the intertext. And yet, something here causes us to reflect back on Riffaterre's title, with its paradoxical appeal to the text's eliciting of an obligatory response (in a connective) that is nonetheless dependent on the reader's (ability to make the) connection. The *trouble* (in that French sense of a feeling of unease) lies in the double meaning of the word tropological. While made clear, that is to say, signed or 'connected', in this context by the foregoing reference to "the ubiquitous mechanism of tropes",^{xxxv} this term is also a reference to the non-literal, or what is not written on the page. In this sense, the necessarily implicit appeal to biblical hermeneutics causes another message to emerge, albeit a critical rather than a strictly moral one:^{xxxvi} if the word tropological functions textually as one thing and intertextually as another, then its auto-antonymy must somehow reflect back on the text.

In this light, Caroline's intertextual relationship to the mongoose may be construed as textually open where it is presented as text-specific: her curiosity, her compulsion to "[r]un and find out" can just as easily mimic the tendency of the text always to locate meaning elsewhere as it does to its capacity to hide true meaning beneath textual signposts.^{xxxvii} In an

essay which is predicated at least in large part on textual plurality, a model of intertextuality closer to a Barthesian-Derridean deferral of meaning necessarily suggests itself. Intertextuality of the latter type hinges on an understanding of textual difference that is not only constructed in relation to an absent Other but which is always also a mode of auto-differentiation. Arguably therefore, the intertextual trace in Bayard's essay signals the posing of questions as much as the discovery of answers.

Is it possible that Riffaterre and Bayard say one thing only to 'mean' another? There is a sense of this in *L'Affaire du Chien des Baskerville* (2008) in which Bayard explains in detail how Arthur Conan Doyle had meant to kill off his famous detective at the Reichenbach Falls so as to be free to devote himself to 'more serious' writing. Faced with an appalled, even violent, public backlash, Conan Doyle resurrected Holmes only, according to Bayard's thesis, to cause him to fail in his discovery of the murderer in the case of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Bayard exposes how Holmes's single biggest failure is to allow himself to give credence to a supernatural legend before constructing a fanciful theory of a man murdering with the help of a gigantic hound. The truth discovered by Bayard is more prosaic; it sees Stapleton, Holmes's designated murderer, transformed into victim. For Bayard, Charles Baskerville's death can best be dismissed as an accident, and the only real murder in the novel is itself entirely occulted: Stapleton is murdered, it transpires, by his wife Beryl, whose hatred of her husband is cast as a figuration, in the text, of her author's hatred of his famous detective. The role of author-in-the-text played by Watson, on the other hand, is raised only to be cast aside with suspicious disdain: in the middle of an essay spanning some 166 pages, a short seven-page chapter, entitled "Le Récit pluriel" [the plural narrative],^{xxxviii} points out that the Holmes stories are narrated by Doctor Watson, whose lack of understanding necessarily colours them. Bayard even goes as far as to note that we should not judge Holmes too harshly given that Watson "[mène] l'enquête tout au long du roman" [leads the investigation

throughout the whole novel].^{xxxix} The gothic atmosphere of the novel, which conjures the tale of the beast and provides the very atmosphere that initially seduces Holmes and leads him to put aside his famous logic, is provided by none other than Watson. The inference that is not actualized by Bayard is that the hatred of one author—Conan Doyle—is echoed *en abyme* in the novel by that of another, long-suffering writer—Watson. The inference is nonetheless there to be made; Watson's role in Holmes's failure is virtually present in the plurality of the text. Indeed, that his 'true criminal' is (once again) a young woman rather than a combination of the two doctors, Mortimer and Watson, who respectively pose and recount the mystery, can almost be read as a provocation to the reader not to follow Holmes's error and to believe a tall story in the face of a more logical, more prosaic solution.^{xl} Our suggestion here is that to read Bayard ironically, or to read Bayard's/z irony, is, if not to replace his actualization of meaning, in the form of his re-solution, with a more foundational, Barthesian plurality of meaning, then to suggest another meaning, or re-re-solution, lodged covertly against the manifest one. With a view to reconsidering his analysis of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, we propose to revisit Bayard's discussion of the conclusion of that other famous, and famously problematic, Poirot novel, *Curtain*, which he includes as a cameo in *Qui a tué Roger Ackroyd* ?

In Christie circles *Curtain* is arguably as notorious as *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, and this for two reasons: first, it is the novel in which Poirot exacts justice himself by becoming a murderer, and then only after Hastings has also turned killer, albeit unwittingly; second, it is the novel that Christie initially planned to have published only after her death. Indeed, Bayard begins his review of Poirot's last case by pointing out the parallel decisions made by Christie and Poirot to make posthumous revelations; for Poirot, too, only explains his last case after his death, in a letter that he leaves for Hastings.^{xli} For Bayard, the principal ramifications of Poirot's letter to Hastings are that we are all capable of murder.^{xlii} The

similarity to *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, which justifies Bayard's chapter on *Curtain*, lies in the fact that in both cases the narrator is guilty of murder, albeit, in Hastings's case, a murder that he is not aware he has committed. The difference between them, he notes,^{xliii} lies in the fact that in *Curtain* the author of the key murder is Poirot himself. Whether or not this may prove to be more a similarity than a difference is something to which we shall return.^{xliv} Let us first consider the idea that anyone is capable of murder. This suggests that all the red herrings in crime fiction are potential connectives to a parallel text in which their 'virtual' guilt can be actualized, as in the case of Caroline Sheppard in Bayard's re-solution.^{xlv} To this end, we shall ask whether Bayard is not himself guilty of lying by omission in his description of the murder scene in which Hastings is allegedly the protagonist and Mrs Franklin the victim, and whether, following this same digression, his detective criticism is not elevated to the status of detective fiction.

Bayard begins by reminding us that it is with *Othello* on his mind that Hastings turns to Mrs Franklin's bookcase-table, which makes his oversight in causing Mrs Franklin's death all the more forgettable. In order to emphasize how the fatal line is itself clouded in Hastings's account, Bayard quotes at some length from the scene in Mrs Franklin's bedroom, which sees the cast, all except for Hastings (and Poirot "who always retired before dinner"^{xlvi}), head outside to look at some shooting stars. He breaks his lengthy quotation to point out the return to the bedroom of Hastings's daughter Judith and then resumes it to show how Hastings's desire not to be seen crying by his daughter causes him to turn the revolving bookcase-table.^{xlvii} The crucial omission, Bayard reveals, is that Hastings does not disclose his failure to re-turn the bookcase-table back to its initial position. This point seems rather an insubstantial one, however, or at least one that might have been made more economically. It certainly seems unnecessary for Bayard to provide a quotation of some thirteen lines to make it. As we shall now argue, this long passage has a desensitizing effect on the reader; it lays the ground

for a second lengthy quotation in which Bayard will indulge in his own sleight of hand, thereby hiding a parallel truth in a passage ostensibly designed to make another, more manifest point. His use of lengthy description therefore serves the detective-fiction tactic of crowding the reader's critical field of vision with red herrings.

This impression is reinforced by Bayard's next surprising pretext to quote at length, which is a reference to the way that Christie's description of the events is drawn out, thereby replicating the length of time taken by poison to work as a method of murder. In a critical move that disavows its own reflexivity, Bayard distracts the reader from his own overly extensive quoting by highlighting this same tendency—to labour the point—in the author. The inset quote that follows is nine lines long, of which three and a half pertain to the taking of the coffee cups from the now revolved bookcase-table, and a further five and half extend to the point where Judith is once more called upon. This reference to Judith does not mark the end of the scene in Christie's chapter, however; indeed, it continues for two more pages. Are we being called on to see something else that Hastings has missed? The lines on which Bayard concludes his review of Hastings's act of murder and lying by omission read as follows in the original: "Mrs Franklin drank her coffee and then demanded her 'drops'. Judith got them for her from the bathroom as Nurse Craven had just gone out."^{xlvi} Are not the drops just as likely to be the cause of death as the coffee? Tropologically, then, which is to say, through the systematic establishment of a series of connectives to an alternative text *and* non-literally, insofar as he is ostensibly confirming Hastings's guilt in a book that is nonetheless devoted to another Poirot case, he indicates Judith as the murderer. The irony is that by his own act of lying by omission, or by presenting an alternative truth but failing to highlight it, and thus screening his own proof, Bayard is either disproving Hastings's guilt and pointing to Judith's unconsciously (thereby making this textual analysis psychoanalytical *as well as* tropological) or quite deliberately (provocatively and, of course, ironically) placing another

young female murderer at the centre of one of his re-solutions; and in either of these cases, one must consider the ramifications of this *mise en abyme* for the larger re-solution in which it appears. Is the case for Caroline Sheppard's guilt reinforced by the case against Judith? Or does the case against Judith stand as the most significant case of 'getting away with it' in Bayard's war against literary miscarriages of justice? If this is so, then his cases against Caroline Sheppard and Beryl Stapleton are the consequence of an ironic strategy of inversion. Tropologically, Bayard convicts Caroline and Beryl because he is testing his readers, simultaneously tempting them to and preventing them from seeing Judith's guilt purloined in the middle of *Qui a tué Roger Ackroyd ?* and Watson's role in Holmes's downfall in *L'Affaire du chien des Baskerville*. And at the same time, psychoanalytically, he is disavowing Judith's guilt, symbolizing it but also veiling it under the case made overtly (in this study dedicated to *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*) against Caroline.

The fact that Beryl Stapleton's conviction in the subsequent case against Sherlock Holmes revisits the investigative procedure deployed in the case against Caroline, as well as underlining the battle waged by authors against their readers, as epitomized by Conan Doyle's resurrection of Holmes, extends this ironic strategy of saying the opposite of what is meant and lying by omission across Bayard's *œuvre* (which, in its entirety, can be read as a most unstable *texte*). As he notes a propos of Poirot's, and thus Christie's, unreliability:

A la fois par son statut de texte posthume et par la double révélation que les deux détectives se sont transformés en criminels, la dernière enquête de Poirot jette une lumière étrange sur l'ensemble de l'œuvre. [Both by its status as posthumous text and the double revelation that both detectives have been transformed

into murderers, Poirot's final investigation throws a strange light over the whole work.]^{xlix}

This *mise en abyme* works on two levels: reflexively, it allows Poirot's case-specific investigation as metonym for a broader praxis to be mapped back on to Bayard's own works, with the result that the improvements that can be made to Christie's works are always already extendable to his own; in terms of the critical/creative nexus, of course, it reinforces the status of Bayard's own broader work as a literary corpus subject to the writerly rereading of so many French and other readers. Thus, we shall briefly investigate the potential of these words to reflect back on, and activate further rereading of, *Qui a tué Roger Ackroyd* ?.

Bayard remains focused in his study *en abyme* of *Curtain* on the damage brought by Poirot's posthumously revealed status as murderer to his moral authority as narrator. Certainly, the notion of a double text emerges in *Curtain* alongside the double revelation that Bayard mentions: on the one hand, *Curtain* closes with the death of the authority figure, the absolute master of meaning-making in Christie's fictional world; at the same time, however, it also ends with an extraordinary demonstration of piety on his behalf, which sees him asking God's forgiveness. Given the reflexive nature of the novel as text—including a final letter that allows the author to linger palimpsestuously, and thus textually, after his death—but also as work, and indeed the closing of a broader *œuvre* that begins and ends in the same spot, at the country manor of Styles Court,¹ it is appropriate that we ask whether it is to a religious deity that Poirot appeals, as opposed, say, to his author, Christie, whom he has betrayed or who has chosen to punish him by driving him to murder (perhaps because he has displeased her, as Holmes did Conan Doyle), or his readers, in whose hands, via those of Hastings who holds the letter up for our consideration, the burden of proof ultimately lies at this reflexively staged end-point. The continuation of the text in the death of the work, which is embodied in

Poirot's posthumous letter, appeals to Barthes's ironic notion of *achèvement*, which term in French denotes the completion of a work as well as the extinction of life, and which in Barthes's terms signifies the passing on (into a textual after-life) of the responsibility for meaning-making from the author to the reader; indeed, this is picked up in the full title of the novel, *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case*, whose use of a colon posits Poirot's final word (on the case) after the curtain as well as allowing it to coincide with the same curtain's fall on the *œuvre*. Similarly, the very name 'Styles' recalls those objects, stiles, that serve as so many *limina*, simultaneously containing and breaching the fields of Middle England.

In such a textually aware work, Poirot's role as author grows in equal measure to his subcontracting of the role of detective to Hastings, whose function is generally confined, like Watson's, to observing and recording. And Poirot's death is not the only death of the author in the novel. In addition to being replaced as author at the end by Poirot, Hastings is also challenged as patriarch by the hatred felt towards him by his daughter Judith. Rebellion against authority is therefore plural in *Curtain*, as is poisoning: Nurse Craven is feeding Mrs Franklin drops; Poirot is doping himself with sleeping tablets to the point of being immune to their effects (as his letter will arguably immunize him against death itself); Hastings attempts to poison Allerton; Poirot drugs Norton; Mrs Franklin expresses fears that Dr Franklin will poison himself; and finally, Mrs Franklin is herself poisoned. We should suggest that the relative importance of this one death, Mrs Franklin's, lies in the attention it brings not to one specific act of table-turning but to table-turning more generally. And it is in this sense, that Bayard's act of lying by omission affords another, more important, rereading: if Poirot kills Norton, perhaps he has killed before.

It is Poirot's letter that explains to Hastings why he allowed the inquest into Mrs Franklin's death to carry a verdict of suicide; in the same way, it is this double-edged letter that reveals that had Poirot not quelled the suspicion of murder then suspicion would

necessarily have fallen on Dr Franklin and, more importantly, Judith. The letter therefore shows Hastings this other truth, sowing the seed of doubt where otherwise it did not exist. And so it is with the rest of the case that Poirot slowly builds against Norton. Things seen in binoculars, conversations that occurred out of Hastings's earshot—all of these are fed to Hastings by Poirot across the duplicitous threshold of the letter, just as the confession that Poirot extracts from Norton is produced behind closed doors. Poirot repeatedly mocks Hastings's love of the rules of the game; he stresses the way that Norton kills at one remove à la Iago, and it is thoughts of *Othello* that pass through Hastings's mind and blur his eyes as Judith enters the room where Mrs Franklin will be poisoned, and Iago's words again that father and daughter recite seemingly in an unconscious pact that eyes should remain blurred to the truth until the end: "Not poppy," Judith says in her beautiful deep voice, "nor mandragora, nor all the drowsy syrups of the world".^{li} So many poisons predicated on this slippery, ambiguous negative: said but not said, seen but not seen. And ultimately not suspected, not at least by anyone other than Poirot.

Thus, the other great unsaid that can be read tropologically into and out of Bayard's omissions is Poirot's potential guilt in the murder of Roger Ackroyd. For, if the great detective has himself created the vicarious modus operandi that is Norton's precisely by framing Norton, an innocuous man who was after all only in too many places at too many wrong times (and by doing so via a letter held up for the reader by the reader-turned-detective, and thus, once more, vicariously), is he not just as likely to be the master-manipulator behind Dr, or Caroline, Sheppard's murder? (The letter that he writes to Hastings in *Curtain* and in which he confesses to his guilt has, after all, as its model that which he demands that Sheppard write.) Evasively, however, and above all ironically, Bayard states Poirot's guilt obliquely making room for the reader to infer from the description of his guilt in *Curtain*, which he builds into his study of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, that he may also

be guilty in the latter novel. Thus, he captures him in his weaving of the ungrammatical and the unsaid.

In conclusion, it appears that Bayard's search for truth has led both to an incompleteness of the previously complete work, and thus to a renewal of engagement with the latter's textuality, *and* a new imposition of truth, or recompletion of the text. All of this takes place, as has been shown, in a critical text that apes its object of study in an attempt to become work alongside it, in an apparent bid for closure. Nowhere is this paradoxical meeting of current and counter-current more telling than in these instances of lying by omission where Bayard's paragraphs extend beyond their manifest purpose, thereby outliving themselves, and this by any number of lines. This is, of course, a good example of Derrida's 'living on', in the light of which Bayard's treatment of detective fiction stands at the intersection of the critical and detective genres, problematizing itself therefore with irony and reflexivity aforethought:

What are we doing when, to practice a 'genre', we quote a genre, represent it, stage it, expose its *generic law*, analyze it practically? Are we still practicing the genre? Does the 'work' still belong to the genre it re-cites? But inversely, how could we make a genre work without referring to it {quasi-} quotationally, indicating at some point, 'See, this is a work of such-and-such a genre'? Such an indication does not belong to the genre and makes the statement of belonging an ironical exercise. It interrupts the very belonging of which it is a necessary condition.^{lii}

Here we are at the heart of deconstruction, at a point of hesitation between binaries—truth and the unknowable, completion and incompleteness and, of course, work and text.

Bayard has thus opened up a conversation about works and texts, work and Text. In his detective criticism, the author of *Comment parler des livres que l'on n'a pas lus ?* uses quotation as both a connective to a solution that he knows and to another that he at least claims *by omission* not to know; in other words, he opens the door to intertexts that he has not read. This is the power of his critical dinner-party causerie: by debunking Dr Sheppard's role in the murder of Roger Ackroyd, he posits Caroline as true murderer; he indicates Judith's role as murderer in another case, between the lines; and finally, he alludes to Poirot's less delimited role as murderer of the possibility of truth itself. As an analytical praxis, this coincides with Ross Chambers's take on "the conversational 'method'—which prefers an ongoing exchange of views to the satisfactions of concluding—[and which] is ideally suited to that aim precisely to the extent that what it lacks is method: its nature is to end without concluding"; for, if Bayard's conclusions open up as much as, and even as, they foreclose meaning, it is because his aim (if not his method, which is both rigorous and self-eschewing) is the same as Chambers's, whose interest is also "in preserving the life of the texts of the past".^{liii}

In terms of his detective criticism project, Bayard's success lies in his comparative approach: by taking detective fiction out of its specific, and limiting, critical context, by forging connections with the literary canon and other critical schools (including subjecting literary characters to psychoanalysis), as well as bridging the gap between academic scholarship and public connoisseurship, he creates a praxis that hesitates between criticism and fiction. His less obvious success, which we hope to have exposed here, is his suggestion of alternatives to his own alternatives and his highly discreet, partially repressed and arguably ironic embodiment of textual undecidability.

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ⁱ Philippe Lançon, "Bayard m'a tuer", *Libération*, 17 January 2008, accessed online 27 April 2015 at: http://www.liberation.fr/livres/2008/01/17/bayard-m-a-tuer_62817. Unless otherwise indicated all French quotations given here are translated by the authors.

ⁱⁱ Warren Motte, "Pierre Bayard's Wormholes," *Studies in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Literature* 35.2 (2011): 268.

ⁱⁱⁱ Philippe Roger, "Five French Critics," *New Literary History* 44.2 (2013): 207.

^{iv} Jack I. Abecassis, "Pierre Bayard and the Death of the Reader," *Modern Language Notes* 125 (2010): 962-3.

^v Pierre Bayard, *Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?: The Mystery Behind the Agatha Christie Mystery*, trans. Carol Cosman (New York: The New Press, 2000). We shall henceforth refer to the French version, *Qui a tué Roger Ackroyd ?* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1998).

^{vi} Stephen Knight, *Secrets of Crime Fiction Classics: Detecting the Delights of 21 Enduring Stories* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2015), 104-05.

^{vii} Knight, *Secrets of Crime Fiction Classics*, 3-4.

^{viii} See, for example, Jesper Gulddal and Alistair Rolls, "Mobile Criticism: Pierre Bayard's Irreverent Hermeneutics," *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 52.1 (2015): 43-7.

^{ix} Sophie Létourneau, "L'autorité en question : Pierre Bayard," *Critique* 768 (2011): 405.

^x Létourneau, "L'autorité en question," 410. Unless otherwise specified, translations from the original French are the authors' own.

^{xi} Létourneau, "L'autorité en question," 410-11.

^{xii} Liedeke Plate, "Unreading, Rereading, and the Art of Not Reading," *symplokē*, 1-2 (2009): 264.

^{xiii} Plate, "Unreading, Rereading, and the Art of Not Reading," 265.

^{xiv} Roland Barthes, "De l'œuvre au texte", in *Le Bruissement de la langue* (Paris: Seuil, 1984), 69-77. The text referred to here is "From Work to Text", in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 155-64.

^{xv} Barthes, "From Work to Text", 159.

^{xvi} This quotation is taken from Pierre Bayard, *Peut-on appliquer la littérature à la psychanalyse ?* (Paris: Minuit, 2004), 144. The translation here is by Warren Motte who quotes it in his own article, "Pierre Bayard's Wormholes," 274.

^{xvii} Motte, "Pierre Bayard's Wormholes," 274 (our emphasis).

^{xviii} As Motte himself highlights ("Pierre Bayard's Wormholes," 269), Bayard's "work verges towards the novel in certain ways".

^{xix} Roger, "Five French Critics," 207.

^{xx} Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (London; New York: Routledge, 2003), 61.

^{xxi} Allen, *Intertextuality*, 62.

^{xxii} Allen, *Intertextuality*, 61.

^{xxiii} Bayard, *Qui a tué Roger Ackroyd ?*, 146.

^{xxiv} Bayard, *Qui a tué Roger Ackroyd ?*, 158.

^{xxv} For Still and Worton this interrelationship can simply be defined as *textuality*, which, not without a certain irony, they distinguish from *textness*, which is a text's tendency to present itself reflexively, as text. The irony here, of course, lies in the fact that these two opposed terms function as two sides of the same coin. Judith Still and Michael Worton, ed., *Textuality and Sexuality: Reading Theories and Practices* (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 1993), 4-6.

^{xxvi} Michel Riffaterre, "Compulsory Reader Response: The Intertextual Drive," in *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices*, ed. Michael Worton and Judith Still (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 1990), 56-78. In Riffaterre's essay ungrammaticality, or the way in which the text fails to make complete sense or leaves the reader feeling that something is missing, points to an intertext that is otherwise not explicitly signalled. In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* Kipling's text is referenced; on the other hand, its ramifications in terms of explicating the text are not spelled out, and, while it is not within the remit of the present article to pursue this intertext in detail, we should consider that the revelation of the source of the intertextuality insufficient in this case to restore complete, or even sufficient, grammaticality to Christie's text.

^{xxvii} This provides comfort for critics like Tilottama Rajan, for whom Barthes and Kristeva's model of intertextuality is fundamentally deconstructive, and "'merges intertextuality with textuality,' in effect reducing the former to the latter". Tilottama Rajan, "Intertextuality and the Subject of Reading/Writing," in *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History*, ed. Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 63.

^{xxviii} Riffaterre, "Compulsory Reader Response," 56.

^{xxix} John Frow, "Intertextuality and Ontology," in Worton and Still, 46.

^{xxx} Frow, "Intertextuality and Ontology," 45.

^{xxxi} Barthes, "From Work to Text," 158-60.

^{xxxii} Barthes, "From Work to Text," 160.

^{xxxiii} It is important to note that from the opposing viewpoint of the Constance School of reception aesthetics, there is nothing oxymoronic to the idea of a compulsory response; Iser, for example, argues that the reader response is always "prestructured by the written text", cf. Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader* (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 32.

^{xxxiv} Riffaterre, "Compulsory Reader Response," 77.

^{xxxv} Riffaterre, "Compulsory Reader Response," 77.

^{xxxvi} Barthes himself appeals to hermeneutics of the biblical kind in "From Work to Text", thereby flagging Riffaterre's disingenuously, or ironic and only partially, non-biblical use of the term 'tropology' to denote the study of a textual trace "always found at sentence level" ("Compulsory Reader Response," 56). In this way, we are suggesting that Riffaterre's non-biblical use of this term is always already also biblical, or perhaps intertextually biblical, which is to say, biblical in another text.

^{xxxvii} Rudyard Kipling, *The Jungle Books* (London: Penguin, 1987), 118.

^{xxxviii} Pierre Bayard, *L'Affaire du chien des Baskerville* (Paris: Minuit, 2008), 71-77.

^{xxxix} Bayard, *L'Affaire du chien des Baskerville*, 74.

^{xl} For a more detailed case against Mortimer and Watson, in the light of Bayard's re-resolution, see Alistair Rolls, *Paris and the Fetish: Primal Crime Scenes* (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2014), 97-104. Bayard himself is dismissive of such claims; at the time of his own study he notes, for example, that Mortimer has twice been wrongly accused—by Christophe Gelly and again by François Hoff (*Qui a tué Roger Ackroyd ?*, 153n). Interestingly, he considers the case against Mortimer to be baseless because Mortimer would have no reason to shed light on his crime. This argument seems rather perverse in the light of Bayard's predication of his own case on Conan Doyle's desire to have his detective publically defeated. Mortimer's role here would be to stand as Conan Doyle's literary intermediary, which seems motive enough for him to take his own murder case to Holmes.

^{xli} In fact, *Curtain* was published in 1975; Christie died on 12 January of the following year.

^{xlii} Bayard, *Qui a tué Roger Ackroyd ?*, 140.

^{xliii} Bayard, *Qui a tué Roger Ackroyd ?*, 140.

^{xliv} For further elements in a case against Poirot as murderer in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, see Alistair Rolls, "An Uncertain Space: (Dis-)Locating the Frenchness of French and Australian Detective Fiction," in *Mostly French: French (in) Detective Fiction*, ed. Alistair Rolls (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), 19-51.

^{xlv} Arguably, while being the sine qua non foundation of his essay, this virtual aspect of all textual cases against literary murderers is one of the strongest elements works against Bayard's alternative solution. His case against Sheppard is predicated on textual incoherence and a breakdown in evidence; his own case seems equally to be built on an absence of clues in the novel.

^{xlvi} Agatha Christie, *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case* (London: Harper, 2013; first published in 1975), 152.

^{xlvii} Bayard, *Qui a tué Roger Ackroyd ?*, 143.

^{xlviii} Christie, *Curtain*, 156.

^{xlix} Bayard, *Qui a tué Roger Ackroyd ?*, 144.

¹ Poirot's first case is *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), and it is to the same country house that he returns, to die, in *Curtain*.

^{li} Christie, *Curtain*, 155.

^{lii} Derrida, "Living On," 86.

^{liii} Ross Chambers, "Four Ways to Meddle with Subjectivity: French Lyric Poetry since Baudelaire," *Australian Journal of French Studies* 51.2-3 (2014): 217.