The Invention of Dr Cake
Andrew Motion
Faber and Faber, 2003
HB, 142 pp, £12.99, 0 571 21631 5

Faking it further

BIOGRAPHY? Gothic melodrama? Metafiction? Nowhere does Andrew Motion's *The Invention of Dr Cake* disclose its genre. What is clear, however, is that his latest, slim book is written in the same spirit as his partly fabricated biography of Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, one of the most quicksilver characters in the circle around John Keats. But whereas *Wainewright the Poisoner*[1] capitalised on the currency of biography itself, the obeisance it pays to document and fact, *The Invention of Dr Cake* fakes it further: it is an elaborate and speculative game in the subjunctive mode. What if the consumptive John Keats hadn't died young in Rome; what if his first poems hadn't been savaged in *Blackwood's Magazine*; what if he had returned to England and assumed a new identity; what if he had returned to his calling and become a provincial medical practitioner like George Eliot's Lydgate? Motion (who has also written a thoroughly orthodox biography of Keats) writes in the conviction that biography tells us everything except what is really important to know about a life.

Much of the book (of which Motion presents himself as genteel editor) is given over to the memoirs of Dr William Tabor (1802–1850), a Finchley doctor and sometime poet, and his meetings with a kindred spirit, the Dr Cake of the title (1795–1844), who has latterly been in practice in northern Essex and now, desperately ill, is being cared for by his Irish housekeeper, Mrs Reilly. John Cake is in the terminal stages of consumption. Within half an hour of meeting him, Dr Tabor fancies the pale man facing him must be more than a provincial medical practitioner. He notices the Droeshout engraving of Shakespeare, 'the Presider', hanging on the wall, the shelves crammed with books and relics of an earlier life of travel. He mentions the Lakepoets and the Cockney School, and Cake becomes edgy. As he slips into melancholy reminiscence, Cake's retelling of his life makes it seem uncannily similar to that of Keats: born in 1795, studied at Guy's, worked as dresser to the great surgeon Astley Cooper (a common misbelieve tricked into the narrative by Motion to puncture the illusion of editorial omniscience). Soon Tabor is convinced Cake is Keats: 'Such was the doctor's power: to suggest by the merest phrase something magical in the world and in himself.' Cake has a secret, and he wants Tabor to keep it safe.

The book's period style announces a mystery. From the first chapter, when Tabor recollects the circumstances of Cake's funeral, and is startled by the blank nameplate on the coffin, something gothic — a bit of Beddoes — seems in the offing. But this is a buttoned-up book. If it resurrects Keats from the Piazza da Spagna it is only to bury him again: at no point is he anything other than a dying man, and all he can taste of his 'alternative' life are the merest sips. The caged linnet in Cake's house and the several goldfish swimming around in 'dreamy circles' in their bowl might seem further revelations, but they are specks of pure Keatsian sensation. The real mystery concerns the second and lushly derivative book of poems, *Hyperion and Other Poems*, published by a month before his own death by Tabor, whose papers Motion claims to have discovered in the archives of the Royal College of Surgeons. Is this Cake's work, done after his gift has gone, and published by Tabor who, realising it to be second-rate stuff, has selflessly discredited his own good name? Or is Tabor a poetaster whose taste is overridden by the dream of a talent he has never possessed? Is he, in short, protector or appropriator?

Clearly, *The Invention of Dr Cake* has offered Motion a liberating way to talk about ambition and fame. Purists will no doubt be offended; those who have read his conventional biography of Keats will be puzzled; and admirers of his poetry will be think it an exercise in a redundant genre — *The Invention of Dr Cake* is a meditation on

the nature of poetry, but written in prose. How is poetic talent related to worldly success, and ought one to live if the talent burns out? Can the poet be 'a humanist, physician to all men', as Keats wrote himself in a famous line, and not just a kind of song-sparrow? — questions that become more intricate when we realise that they are being asked by the current poet laureate, a career-writer whose present job relies, notoriously enough, on commission rather than inspiration.

And if that isn't enough to mull over, John Barnard has pointed out, in an article in the *Times Literary Supplement* (25 Apr 2003),[2] that Dr Cake actually had a real-life doppelgänger, not mentioned by Motion: Charles Turner Thackrah (1795–1833), one of the lights of modern medical practice and teaching in Leeds. His short life offers an intriguing and direct commentary on the very questions raised by Motion's fabrication. Ignoring his own penchant for literature and philosophy, Thackrah devoted himself instead to writing about social conditions in England and the need for reform. The age demanded it. Keats believed in progress too. The myth of the genius dying before his time was created by his admirers; he himself died convinced his life had been a failure.

Iain Bamforth

References

1. Motion A. *Wainewright the poisoner.* London: Faber and Faber, 2000.
2. Barnard J. Incurable romantics — the true story of Dr Cake, John Keats and Charles Turner Thackrah. *Times Literary Supplement*, 2003; **25 Apr:** 14.

diary

neville goodman

Spam, spam, spam, spam, spam ...

NINE days away: back to 326 e-mail messages that I didn't want, a signal to noise ratio of 1:20.

It didn't take long to get rid of them, but they're so annoying. Even with two filter systems, both of which learn as they go, stuff gets through. This time, the first filter caught 201. A handful of these were not spam, but were advertising from companies I've bought from. Another was an e-flyer for the *American Medical Directory & Physicians Guide*: I didn't correct the filter's logic on that one. The second filter caught another 75, but there were 50 in my in-box not identified as junk mail.

When the headers proclaimed 'Viagra at low price', it was a cinch to filter them. So next came 'Vlagra', 'Vi@gra' and 'V!agra'. Problem is that there are just too many ways of representing Viagra without properly spelling it out. Even spelling it out gets through (for a while): I've also been offered V*i*a*g*r*a. And it doesn't take much imagination when an e-mail offers a 'Peeens Xtnsn'.

Although there have been fewer recently, the most surreal junk headers string together unconnected, sometimes quite erudite, words. I guess there really is a Lewis Spivey somewhere, whose address was purloined to send me 'bronchiole phlox employer'. Eddie Keller started well with 'gettysburg eutectic gyrocompass', but the fourth word was 'fabuklous', which rather spoiled the effect.

Receiving junk mail is annoying, and viruses can cause real damage (although rarely to we higher breeds who use Macs), but I do worry about stolen e-addresses. I don't know if there is a Lewis Spivey; I do know there is a Mike Fitzpatrick out there, who certainly did not send me the message that purportedly originated from him — and from his correct e-mail address. It consisted only of a zip attachment: are there really people out there who open these things?

Junk mail does, although, allow a celebration of something in the NHS that works: despite NHS e-mail addresses being fully public, junk mail doesn't get through. Or hasn't to me.

Meanwhile, I have been made an offer, and I think it unfair not to let others in on it. It seems there's some poor chap in Africa who is legally entitled to $27 million, but needs to move it out of the country. All he needs is a bank account in the UK, and 15% of the recovered sum can be mine. I don't want to be greedy, so just e-mail me your details if you're interested. Then, u 2 kn b r1tch.