METAFICTIONAL GAMES IN *CHATTERTON*

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And then we´ll decode Chatterton
O lovely delusion
(*Chatterton,* 57)

Peter Ackroyd´s celebrated fourth novel, first published in 1987 and entitled *Chatterton,* continues the line already opened and established by his previous novels *The Great Fire of London* (1982), *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983) and especially *Hawksmoor* (1985). They all pose questions for readers of fiction as well as for readers of history concerning the meaning and the scope of these two terms. They also deal with the issue of the recapture of the past from the present and the echoes of that past that pervade the present.

The aim of this paper is the study of Ackroyd´s *Chatterton* as a metafictional work, as a novel self-conscious of its own procedures and of the subject-matter it deals with. The most appropriate critical study of a novel whose main concern is with the issue of plagiarism and forgery might be one that would adapt, copy or interpret previous studies of it. Due to a lack of a substantial and specific critical corpus on Ackroyd´s novel, however, I will have to content myself with adapting, copying and interpreting the novel itself and with quoting from some critical references to it, and I am conscious of it.

Central to the metafictional concern of the novel and to its story is the figure of Thomas Chatterton. The official historical account of his life tells us that he was born in Bristol in 1752 and died in London in August 1770 after taking arsenic. His father, who died a few months before Chatterton's birth, had been a schoolmaster at Redcliffe, Bristol. Early in his age, Chatterton's intellect became engaged by "old material, music folios, a black-letter Bible, and muniments taken by his father from a chest in the Church of St Mary Redcliffe" (*Encyclopaedia Britannica,* 15th edition, vol. II, p.781). Thomas Tyrwhitt, in the preface to his edition of the Rowley-Chatterton poems, wrote: "he discovered an early turn towards poetry and English antiquities, particularly heraldry" (in Chatterton 1969: viii).

Chatterton devoted his short life to the writing of poetry, most of which he wrote under the name of Thomas Rowley, a fifteenth-century monk from Bristol that he, himself, had created. In the poems of the "Rowley sequence," Chatterton managed "to create an authentic medieval style from a unique conflation of his reading and his own invention" (*Ch* 1). "In April 1770, he left Bristol and came to London, in hopes of advancing his fortune by his talents of writing, of which, by this time, he had conceived a very high opinion" (Tyrwhitt, in Chatterton 1969: viii). Being later discovered, his medieval poems were rejected, which forced him, in London, to write elegies and satires to avoid starvation. He was as convincing writing elegies about a personage as when writing satires against him, such was his capacity of impersonation and adaptation. "But all these exertions of his genius brought in so little profit, that he was soon reduced to real indigence" (Tyrwhitt, in Chatterton 1969: x). Despondent of the lack of success in what he considered to be his "truest poetry," he eventually committed suicide. Up to here, we have a summary (and inevitably an interpretation) of the historical account of Chatterton's life that the novel offers in its very first page, and in relation to which the subsequent deviations from it are to be seen.

The "spectre" of this great plagiarist, whose method we will study in more detail later on, appears to be of the greatest relevance in the recreation of the present London society we are offered in the novel. Every member of this society is related in one way or another to the production or trade of art. Charles Wychwood is a poet who has not published anything yet and who is married to Vivien, at present working at an art gallery where Cumberland and Maitland deal in paintings. Philip Slack, Charles's best friend, works at a library and is described as an "avid reader." Andrew Flint, an acquaintance of both, is a novelist who has just published his latest novel, *Mean Time,* and is at present writing the biography of George Meredith. Charles occasionally works for yet another novelist, Harriet Scrope, who has got a friend, Sarah Tilt, who is preparing a book on the images of death in English painting, *The Art of Death..* Another artist is Steward Merk, a painter who has been producing forgeries of the paintings of Seymour, a recently dead famous artist. Everything in this microcosm moves around texts and their producers, and is integrated in the macrotext that the novel itself constitutes. Most of these artists turn their eyes to the past or to previous works in the production of

their new creations. They borrow plots, adapt styles, produce fakes or commit forgeries.

This contemporary narrative line and the eighteenth-century narrative line plot concerning Chatterton are placed together with a third line, that of the actual historical fact of George Meredith's posing for the painting "Death of Chatterton," produced by Henry Wallis in 1856. This painting stands as a very important text which, though intending to "depict" the death of the unfortunate poet, cannot help but offer an interpretation of it, conditioned as it is by several factors such as the painters's own vision, the model for Chatterton or the Romantic mythologization of the poet. A painting that will suffer further reinterpretation in the future and that will acquire new meaning in Charles Wychwood's hallucinations and in his son's, Edward's, dream.

These three stories are knitted together by "a causality of occult coincidences," according to David Lodge (1988: 15); coincidences that by being so occult and intricate reveal themselves as overtly and consciously constructed by the narrative voice, an extradiegetic heterodiegetic narrative instance (in Genette's terms) whose omniscience enables it to put in contact the three narrative lines. On one occasion, however, we are offered an intradiegetic homodiegetic narrator. In chapter six, it is the "I" of Chatterton himself who tells us the story of his life in the manuscripts Charles Wychwood has been given in Bristol. (We will later learn that it is not Chatterton who is writing about himself but a jealous editor of his time who decided to "out-trick the trickster" (*Ch* 221) and fake Chatterton's life).

Nevertheless, the main voice in the text of *Chatterton* is that of an omniscient narrator, master of the three story lines. Through this heterodiegetic narrator clear narrative parallelisms are drawn between the different story lines. In this regard, the account of the death of the two poets, Charles Wychwood and Thomas Chatterton, deserves special attention. In dying, both poets repeat the same movements and gestures (*Ch* 169, 230). The settings and circumstances of their deaths are also similar. Yet, the most striking parallelism comes through the narrative account itself. Both deaths are narrated with an immediacy nowhere else achieved in the novel. The omniscient narrator allows itself an insight into the minds of the two characters, whose last thoughts are narrated in free direct discourse, direct discourse shorn of its ortographic cues. The narrator seems to stop reporting their thoughts and let the characters speak in their own voices. This creates the illusion of pure mimesis in the representation of speech, though stylization cannot be avoid.

> He could see her outline as she bent over him, and she was encircled by light . . . . At that instant of recognition he smiled: nothing was really lost and yet this was the last time he would ever see them, the last time, the last time, the last time, the last time. Vivien. Edward. I met them on a journey somewhere. We were travelling together. (*Ch* 169)

> Chatterton is suffocating now, something is sitting on my chest and exulting, its head thrown back, I am the horse he rides. His body is plucked up and then trown in derision . . . . But he is suddenly quiet. No pain now the Arctic frost protects me from the dazzling sky and look my limbs are covered with snow. (*Ch* 230).

This narrator does not overtly flaunt its own status as narrator and, therefore, as producer of an enunciation or teller of a story. On the contrary, the narrator apparently seems to try to reduce its role to that of the narrative function and reduce to the minimum all other functions (directing function, function of communication, testimonial and ideological function, as studied by Genette, 1980: 255-257), while at the same time undermining its own voice.

The narrator, however, does not hide himself. There is no pretense of presenting an unmarked narration. How else could the three story lines be knitted together? Sometimes the presence of a narrator telling and, therefore, constructing, is easily felt in the novel. In the last pages, Edward Wychwood has a dream in which he sees his father as Chatterton (or as George Meredith, or as both) in Wallis's painting. The painting comes alive.

> He [Edward] saw that two other people entered the room. They were standing beside the body and the woman had put a handkerchief over her mouth and nose. He could hear them talking. What mischief is this, Mr Cross? I smell the arsenic, Mrs Angel, he is utterly undone. (*Ch* 229)

Not even in his unconscious could Edward know about the druggist who sold Chatterton the arsenic or about Chatterton's landlady. These two, Mr Cross and Mrs Angel, are clearly characters in Chatterton's story retaken by the narrator in the twentieth-century plot line.

If the narrator does not appear to be visibly engaged in the act of composition, the presence of the author in control behind the three narrative lines is shown by the intricacy of the plot and by the internal structural organization of the text. David Lodge sees Ackroyd cutting "abruptly backward and forward betweeen the story of Chatterton, the story of Wallis and the Merediths, and the story of the fictitious characters in modern London" (1988: 15). The presence of the author is also perceptible in Part One, where different epigraphs are used to introduce diverse episodes in the first five chapters and

then they are assimilated in the narrative by the voice of a character or of the narrator itself.

Before the actual story/stories start, the author presents in pages 2 and 3, four scenes concerning what Denis Donoghue (1988: 9) has called "the four lives" the novel presents; those of Chatterton, Meredith, Harriet Scrope and Charles Wychwood. These scenes, except the first one (Chatterton's), will be repeated in the story at a later stage (Harriet Scrope's on page 35, Charles's on page 47 and Meredith's on page 138), with slight variation in the narrator's enunciation but keeping the characters' exact words. In other words, the text quoting or misquoting itself, choosing four scenes to introduce, to sum up and mainly to represent itself.

It is precisely the topic of "representation" that constitutes the main concern in *Chatterton* and it is one of the issues most frequently questioned by Postmodernist writers. *Chatterton* is a novel which self-consciously weaves an intricate web of texts in such a way that anywhere in the story the reader is bound to find a construction, be it visual or narrative.

The text that gives birth to the detective-like story of Charles Wychwood's investigations is that of a painting, a portrait of an adult man painted in 1802 by someone called George Stead, a work made up in the novel for its purpose of proposing the possibility of Chatterton faking his own death. To give force to this hypothesis, Charles also finds some manuscripts, initially thought to have been written by Chatterton himself and relating how he decided to fake his own death in order to continue forging the poetry of some of the greatest Romantic poets. Charles discovers in the manuscript some lines traditionally attributed to Blake and that leads him to conclude that "half the poetry of the eighteenth century is probably written by him [Chatterton]" (*Ch* 94). The man represented in the portrait is not Thomas Chatterton; he is not the author of the manuscript, either. Both texts are fakes, which according to their actual owner, an old homosexual descendant from a former publisher of Chatterton's works, Joynson, does not mean that they are not real (*Ch* 219).

Both texts are "representations" but representations that are questioned as such. As Linda Hutcheon states in *The Politics of Postmodernism,* "the very word representation unavoidably suggests a given which the act of representing duplicates in some way" (1988: 32). That is also the case here: there is a "given" that is represented in the portrait and a "given" (a story) for the narrative representation of the manuscripts. The status of both "givens" is not questioned. It is the sort of mimetic assumptions about representation that are challenged, "its transparency and common-sense naturalness" (Hutcheon 1988:32).

Charles Wychwood finds two texts, the portrait and the manuscripts, and he, as reader, chooses to interpret both of them as mimetic representations. He willingly suspends his disbelief and enters the story he himself has constructed with the two texts. When we, readers, discover with Philip Slack that the portrait and the manuscript are part of a joke Old Joynson decided to play on Chatterton's memory by faking "the work of a faker and so confuse for ever the memory of Chatterton" (*Ch* 221), we are forced to wonder how many traces of the past are real or fabricated.

Characters in the three story lines show a concern with what is real and what is not real, or rather with man's inability to distinguish between the two. Sarah Tilt encourages Harriet Scrope to buy a Seymour since "he's one of those realists" (*Ch* 35) she seems to like. To which Harriet replies: "But . . . who is to say what is real and what is unreal?" (*Ch* 35). In the last part of the novel, when Chatterton interrogates Daniel Hanway, "compiler of miscellanies" (*Ch* 192), epodist and hack, about the real poets, he retorts: "Who am I to say who is real and who unreal?" (*Ch* 215). The deepest debate the novel offers on this topic is given in the nineteenth-century plot in the talks George Meredith and Henry Wallis hold during the painting of "Death of Chatterton" and that we will analize in greater depth later on.

All the comments, debates and questions about the status of reality and about man's capability to know the real from the unreal appear in the novel to be related to products or works of art. The almost suffocating textuality reflected in *Chatterton* seems to point to a frightening hypothesis: nothing can be known to man unless it is represented, and through representations given a meaning. Man cannot apprehend reality except through his own representations of it. These representations are shown to be, in *Chatterton,* not mimetic reflections or showings but interpretations. There is no way in which something can be represented as it "is" because man's knowing of it will already be perverted by many different factors such as context, language, ideology, and cultural assumptions. The representation will inevitably constitute a further barrier or frame to the thing itself; it will be self-defeating and conditioned by the chosen system of representation.

The question of representation is inherently related to the status and nature of literature itself. Far be it from me to give a definition of literature, unavoidably a problematic and questionable task. The debate has long been established and it is still far from reaching a definite conclusion. Nevertheless, since the old Platonic-Aristotelian debate, literature has been thought of as a representation, or a game of representations. *Chatterton* plays on this belief, which results in it being more than a game of representations. Instead it is a labyrinth of representations that renders the represented, not as inexistent

but certainly as rather irrelevant compared to the representing or the act of representation itself.

Chatterton continues, without resolving (how could it?), the old debate of the relation between art and life. In opposition to the Realistic tradition which finds it essential to present a reproduction of reality as objectively and accurately possible, Ackroyd's novel focuses on the difference between art and reality and instead of hiding it, exposes this disparity. This is done, in the first place, by presenting itself as a narrative representation of many other representations, either visual or verbal.

At the same time, *Chatterton,* through the use of parody, attacks the Realistic belief in the possibility of offering a totalized and truthful vision of reality by means of narrative representation. The transparency and naturalness of these realistic systems of representation are questioned in a novel in which everything turns out to be a representation, frequently an overtly fictional one, and in which representation is de-naturalized.

The focus of representation here is Thomas Chatterton, "the greatest plagiarist or the greatest poet." This representation does not limit itself to just one system or field but expands and turns to be a representation of him in history, biography and art. As they stand in the novel, all these systems of representation "self-consciously acknowledge [their] existence as representations, that is, as interpreting [indeed creating] its referent, not as offering direct and immediate access to it" (Hutcheon 1989: 34).

The first representation of Thomas Chatterton the novel offers in its very first page is his representation in history: a historical account of his life and death, an account that the novel itself sets out to question through other representations. Thomas Chatterton's representation in the portrait and in the manuscript that Charles Wychwood finds suggests a new theory: Chatterton did not die when he was eighteen but went on writing and faking the poetry of popular eighteenth-century poets. Manuscripts and portrait turn out to be forgeries but they manage to keep their power as representations and to cast a doubt on the truthfulness of the historical representation. In the last part of the novel, another representation of this figure is offered. This time it is a narrative representation of the last moments in Chatterton's life and once again more doubts are cast upon the historical account: Chatterton did not commit suicide but killed himself by accident when trying to cure himself of V. D.

The result would be the same: he died at the age of eighteen in London in 1770, but the implications are important. The representation of Thomas Chatterton in history led to the English Romantic Movement's considering him as a symbol of the tragic fate of genius. As David Lodge points out, "If Chatterton died of a quack remedy for the clap, the Romantic cult of the marvellous boy who perished in his pride seems rather foolish" (1988: 16). Something that did actually happen, the Romantic admiration of the figure of Thomas Chatterton, is shown to be in this narrative representation of his death as unfounded as the other hypothesis that has Chatterton living on to adulthood.

One more representation, in art this time, of the death of Chatterton is provided in the nineteenth-century story line and gives one more deviation of the historical account of his death. Here, we are referring to the painting *Death of Chatterton* by Henry Wallis having as its model George Meredith, the nineteeth-century novelist who considered himself primarily a poet. The process of creation of this representation of Chatterton is recreated in detail in the novel and offers an interesting debate between the painter and the model about the real versus the ideal in representation, both in words and in paint. Wallis intends to make a representation of Chatterton's death on canvas as realistic as possible. And for that purpose he has Meredith dressed in clothes of Chatterton's period, he chooses as the setting the very same room in London where the young poet died and he carries out some other "poor attempts at realism" (137), like dropping bits of paper on the floor of the room because in Calcott's account of Chatterton's death we are told that pieces "of torn manuscript were found beside the body" (*Ch* 137); attempts that Meredith is eager to describe as attempts at "verisimilitude" and not at "realism".

Previously to this scene, the two men have been debating about the status of reality and its representation, of fiction and its truth. Wallis asserts to Meredith that he wants him as a model, himself, his face, and the debate continues:

> "My face, but not myself. I am to be Thomas Chatterton, not George Meredith."
> "But it will be you. After all, I can only paint what I see..."
> Meredith laughed and raised himself from the sofa on which he had been lounging. "And what do you see? The real? The ideal? How do you know the difference?... When Molière created Tartuffe, the French nation suddenly found him beside every domestic hearth. When Shakespeare invented Romeo and Juliet, the whole world discovered how to love. Where is the reality there? . . . . Of course there *is* a reality."
> "Ah! The tune has changed!"
> "But, I was going to add, it is not one that can be depicted. There are no words to stamp the indefinite thing. The horizon." (*Ch* 133)

The discussion is continued in more interesting terms later on:

> Wallis was at that moment trying to fix the colour of the smoke . . . .
> "But how can you experiment with what is real? Surely you have only to depict it."
> "As you do? But what about your phial of poison, which miraculously changed its position?"
> "But the phial was a real object. *That* did not change..."
> "And I am in the same boat. Do you know that phrase? I said that the words were real, Henry, I did not say that what they depicted was real. Our dear dead poet created the monk Rowley out of thin air, and yet he has more life in him than any medieval priest who actually existed. The invention is always more real . . . . But Chatterton did not create an individual simply. He invented an entire period and made its imagination his own: no one had properly understood the medieval world until Chatterton summoned it into existence. The poet does not merely recreate or describe the world. He actually creates it. And that is why he is feared." (*Ch* 157)

Just as the poet creates, the painter does, and despite, or maybe because of, Wallis's attempts at realism, his representation of the death of Chatterton is a creation, a limited and mediated interpretation of many other representations: Calcott's account, the Romantic mythological representation, etc. And the real Chatterton that Wallis is painting is in fact George Meredith, who calls himself "a model poet" since he is "pretending to be someone else" (*Ch* 2, 141).

Henry Wallis not only reinterprets previous representations of the death of the poet, he also creates, as he himself might unconsciously admit, "the true death of Chatterton" (*Ch* 157) which "will always be remembered" in posterity through his representation of it. Wallis has created a master and totalized representation of the death of Chatterton whose power and limitation are questioned self-reflexively in the novel itself.

The twentieth-century poet, an unpublished one yet, Charles Wychwood, dies from a brain tumour. At the moment of his death, as Linda Hutcheon has noticed, "Charles identifies with his obsession, Chatterton, and feels he is living out — in dying — Wallis' representation of his death" (Hutcheon 1989: 97).

> His face was turned to the wall but, with difficulty, he moved it so that he might look at his last room on earth: and he coud see it all, the garret window open, the dying roseplant upon the sill, the purple coat thrown across a chair, the extinguished candle upon the small mahogany table. And he seized with terror as the others stood around him: "No!" he shouted. He was ready to plead with them. "This should not be happening. This is not real. I am not meant to be here. I have seen this before, and it is an illusion!" (*Ch* 169)

Charles Wychwood's death constitutes an iconic imitation, in a world of imitations, of the death of the eighteenth-century poet, yet, ironically, it is a limited one. Charles is living out "the true death of Chatterton" (*Ch* 157) or what is considered to be so nowadays but that, in fact, is nothing but its representation by a nineteenth-century painter with realistic ideals. How different is Wallis's representation of the death of Chatterton from the narrative representation of that moment that *Chatterton* offers in its last pages! Wallis depicted beautifully Chatterton's death and the result is a portrait (reproduced on the cover of the Abacus edition of the novel), in which the poet seems to have reached at the moment of his death the serene grandeur that fate had denied him during his life. The verbal representation of Chatterton's death is narrated in Part Three:

> a birth pain, my bowels ripped open to find the child, oh mother, mother. Chatterton is being tossed up and down the sodden bed, the agony rising from him like mist into the attic room. Hold on oh hold on until this fit is past but my hands are nailed to the bed, my flesh being torn from me as I curve and break. His face is swelling, his eyelids bursting in the heat. I am a giant in the pantomime oh god save me from melting, melting , melting. (*Ch* 228-229)

Played in contrast, the limitations of these two representations, and indeed of any representation, are clearly shown. *Chatterton* self-consciously acknowledges both of them as mere interpretations, deconstructing the transparency and naturalness of the powerful (because it has conditioned all subsequent representations of the death of Chatterton) and master visual representation of the death of Chatterton constructed by Henry Wallis in 1856. The novel also self-consciously questions the validity of its own representation, in narrative, of the death of the poet offered in Part Three. In this context we could agree with Josipovici that the modern novel, in general, seems to draw attention to "the rules that govern its own creation in order to force the reader into recognising that *it is not the world* " (Josipovici 1971: 298, my italics). Thus *Chatterton* 's self-conscious study of different means of representation and its rendering them as partial works to posit itself as being *not the world,* not reality.

Wallis states that the portrait is just a depiction of what he sees and the result is a painting which reflects a scene in which everything has been carefully arranged and deliberately constructed: the plant,

the candle, the coat, the position of the model, etc. The very particular and indeed partial vision of the death of the Bristol poet ironically becomes, as Wallis himself foresees, "the true death of Chatterton" (*Ch* 157). Why should this representation "be always remembered as the true death of Chatterton"? Why not Ackroyd's narrative representation or Joynson's faked manuscripts? All of them are partial, constructed and limited, but so is man's knowledge of the past.

Chatterton's self-consciousness and its own methods of construction of representations and its main concern with a historical figure, make it a good exponent of that particular novel genre that Linda Hutcheon named as "historiographic metafiction" in her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988). By this term she meant "those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" and whose "theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs . . . is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past" (Hutcheon 1988: 5).

The various representations of the historical personage of Thomas Chatterton work to make the reader aware of man's incapacity to recapture the past in a conclusive and teleological way. We, as readers, cannot avoid posing such questions as: what can we know of the past now? and, how can we know it? Indeed, is it not through those traces of the past which have reached the present? Historiographic metafictional novels render the issue of man's recapture of the past a very problematic one by showing the constructedness and partiality of its traces.

Historiographic metafiction, insists Linda Hutcheon, argues "that *history* does not exist except as text, it does not . . . deny that the *past* existed, but only that its accessibility to us now is entirely conditioned by textuality. We cannot know the past except through its texts: its documents, its evidence, even its eye-witness accounts are texts" (Hutcheon 1988: 16; emphasis in the original).

Chatterton acknowledges the existence of the past in general and of Thomas Chatterton the poet in particular. Its narrative focuses on this figure and on the various representations of him that allow us, in the present, to have a knowledge of him, but by presenting itself as one more representation in a maze of representations, it works to question the ontological status and the claim to mastery and totalization of some other texts that have, in the past, chosen this figure as their subject of representation.

The historical account offered in the first page, the portrait and the manuscripts discovered by Charles Wychwood, Wallis's painting of the death of Chatterton and the narrative of Part Three, are all texts in which different semiotic codes, mainly those of linguistic and visual representations, have already been granted a meaning. The past is there, its reality is not questioned but we cannot get to know it directly, only through the different discourses and representations which it has been incorporated into. All these representations will be, unavoidably, constructions, particular visions of past events. Constructions whose production and interpretation will be conditioned by many different factors, like those of context of production and reception of the text, those of the system of representation chosen, those of ideological and cultural assumptions, etc.

The existence, in the past, of the actual historical figure of Thomas Chatterton is not doubted or questioned in Ackroyd's novel but there is a clear problematization of the ways in which we have acquired and maintained our knowledge of him. We can only know Thomas Chatterton through the texts that, in the years subsequent to his death, have "represented" him. By highlighting the mimetic limits of representation and self-consciously presenting itself as just another text, *Chatterton* questions the possibility of man's unproblematic knowledge of Chatterton, in particular, and of the past, in general. History's claim to truth is, thus, problematized. History is not truth, but "truths" in plural. The traces of the historical past, the traces of Chatterton's life and death, are shown to be inevitably textualized and therefore partially and mediately constructed. In no other way can man get to know the past.

Historical texts do not, normally, cast any doubt about their claim to truth. They present themselves as transparent, natural, trustworthy accounts of the past. *Chatterton,* concerned with fakers and forgery, works to present historical writing as a kind of fake, showing, as Michael Neve suggests "the inevitable presence of fake in historical recapture" (1988: 54). Documents, the portrait of Chatterton and his manuscripts, thought to be real, at least by Charles Wychwood and by the reader who has willingly suspended his/her disbelief, turn out to be fakes. Historical accounts and biographies of Chatterton are discovered by Charles to be offering different "truths," or no truths at all. He has been studying Chatterton's historical figure after he got hold of the supposedly real manuscripts. Chatterton becomes his obssession and he is eager to write one more text about "the marvelous boy." He starts writing the preface, but then

> Charles stopped, uncertain how to continue with the preface. He could not remember whether all this information came from the documents themselves, or from the biographies which Philip had lent him. In any case he noticed that each biography described a quite different poet: even the simplest observation by one was contradicted by another, so that nothing seemed certain. He felt that he knew the biographers well, but that he still understood very little about Chatterton. At first

> Charles had been annoyed by these discrepancies but then he was exhilarated by them: for it meant that anything became possible. *If there were no truths, everything was true.* (*Ch* 127, my emphasis).

For Charles, then the manuscripts, the historical texts, the biographies, his own preface, all have the same claim to truth. For the reader of *Chatterton,* the truth of all these texts, and also of all the others retextualized in the novel, becomes provisional, unnatural and opaque. Everything is to be believed and to be questioned. The partiality, provisionality and constructedness of texts is recognized but so is the dependence of man on them in his compulsion to provide meaning to his present experience and to the past he is a product of. *Chatterton* 's own narrative and its capability of representation is put into question from within but it also consciously acknowledges the existence of the historical and literary traces of the past.

The significance of Thomas Chatterton as the chosen subject of representation in Ackroyd's *Chatterton* is double. On the one hand, he is a historical figure whose traces have reached our time. On the other hand, he is, above all, a literary figure and quite a peculiar one. The Thomas Chatterton as first-person narrator in the manuscripts found by Charles says of himself: "nothing enthralled me so much as Historical works" (*Ch* 83) and this leads him to take his great decision: "I will perform a Miracle... I will bring the Past to light again." He then invents a priest, Rowley, whom he will present as author of the medieval poems Chatterton himself writes, and these poems are creations, interpretations of the past that not only acknowledge but also use and incorporate previous literary works.

> My method was as follows: I had already around me, in Volumes taken from my Father's shelves or purchas'd from the Booksellers, Charters and Monuments and such like Stuff; to these I added my Readings from Ricat, Stow, Speed, Holished, Leland and many other purveyors of Antiquity. If I took a passage from each, be it better so short, I found that in Unison they became quite a new Account and, as it were, Chatterton's Account. Then I introduc'd my own speculations in physic, drama and philosophy, all of them cunningly changed by the ancient Hand and Spelling I had learn'd; but conceeved by me with such Intensity that they became more real than the Age in which I walked. I reproduc'd the Past and filled it with such Details that it was as if I were observing it in front of me: so the Language of ancient Dayes awoke the Reality itself for, tho' I knew that it was I who composed these Histories, I know also that they were true ones (*Ch* 85)

As Elisabeth Wesseling has written, this novel "suggests that Chatterton, the forger of medieval poetry, exemplifies the account of origination of literary works in the poststructuralist terms of intertextuality and not in the romantic terms of creation *ex nihilo* " (Wesseling 1991: 136).

Charles Wychwood writes in his preface on Chatterton: "Thomas Chatterton believed that he could explain the entire material and spiritual world in terms of imitation and forgery" (*Ch* 126). A few pages before Cumberland reads from the catalogue of his exhibition of Art Brut: "Gradma Joel, known only as Grandma, was a prolific and versatile artist despite her mental instability . . . . She wanted to explain the entire material and spiritual world in terms of imitation" (*Ch* 109-110). The popular novelist Harriet Scrope has "adopted" the plots of two of Harrison Bentley's novels as vessels "for her own style" (*Ch* 102). Steward Merk stands as another good imitator whose idea of producing art seems to be that of producing perfect imitations, forgeries and fakes of other famous painters.

None of the artists the novel presents escapes the influence of predecesors. All of them are marked by what Harold Bloom named "the anxiety of influence". Chatterton, Steward Merk, Harriet Scrope, Charles Wychwood, they all strive to avoid idealization of those artists that produced their works before them. They even conceal and veil those influential works they have appropriated. Nevertheless, as Bloom wrote,

> nothing is got for nothing, and self-appropriation involves the immense anxieties of indebtedness, for what strong maker desires the realization that he has failed to create himself? (Bloom 1973: 5)

In *Chatterton* there is not only a poignant recognition of the existence of the literary past, but also a sense of inevitable indebtedness to it and impossible escape from it; "the present feeds off the past and, vice versa, the past is resuscitated by the present" (Wesseling 1991: 136). Both are powerfully felt in the three narrative lines and in the novel as a whole. Present representations are shown to come from past ones through a process of continuity and difference, through a process of installing and diferring, past literary works, styles, traditions and conventions. This recognition forms the basis of Ackroyd's aesthetics. The author feels indebted to past literary works whose influence he cannot escape and he does not veil. In his latest novel, *English Music,* published in 1992, Ackroyd appropriates the works of

several English writers, among them Lewis Caroll, John Bunyan, Thomas Malory, Samuel Johnson and Daniel Defoe, and recreates them through the imagination and readings of a boy living in the late Victorian period. Joshua Reynolds's words that open *English Music* could be appropriated by Ackroyd to express his own aesthetics:

> Invention, strictly speaking, is little more than a new combination of those images which have been previously gathered and deposited in the memory: nothing can come of nothing. (Joshua Reynolds, *Discourse II,* in Ackroyd 1992)

As David Lodge has written,

> Mr Ackroyd's fiction has always been characterized by the writer's effort to think himself back into the past by a dazzling feat of stylistic imitation -which would be a charitable way of describing the forgeries perpetrated by the young Chatterton. "The truest Plagiarism is the truest Poetry", declares Ackroyd's Chatterton, and on one level the novel can be reread as an exploration of that paradox and an implicit defense of Ackroyd's own self-consciously intertextual methods. (1988: 15)

Thomas Chatterton's method of recapturing and recreating (or rather creating) the past is through assimilation of past works and the adding of new and personally acquired knowledge. Ackroyd's method of recreating the past in *Chatterton* is very much alike. He adopts past literary styles, quotes poems, rewrites history and opens the past to the present. *Chatterton* ' s metafictional element stands ultimately as a perfect recognition of the textuality of history and, at the same time, by adopting and questioning from within those representations of the past, *Chatterton* questions itself. It turns the mirror on itself and realizes that even mirrors distort reality.

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