

“Reality is the invention of unimaginative people” – the Counterfeiting and Imaginative London of Peter Ackroyd’s *Chatterton*

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ABSTRACT

Peter Ackroyd’s most ambitious literary-historical project is to compose a biography of London, to reconstruct the city through the texts it has created, allowed to be created, incited or inspired. His fictional London, though always diverse and heterogeneous, has several idiosyncratic features such as intertextuality, metafiction, irrationality, supra-temporality and a focus on the unofficial or marginal aspects of its history. This article tries to explore the various roles of the city within the narrative and meaning structure of Chatterton (1987), arguably the author’s most metafictional novel to date. The article is especially interested in how the city is used to develop the novel’s arguments concerning the theme of the authenticity, originality, and ethical limits of artistic creation.

KEYWORDS

London, the city, metafiction, intertextuality, forgery, imitation, imagination

Although *Chatterton* (1987) is Ackroyd’s only London novel which does not feature a murder or at least a mysterious death likely to be caused by the hand of another person, there is an underlying aspect of the story which could be, from a certain viewpoint, classified as criminal, as it revolves around one of the most famous cases of forgery in the history of English literature – Thomas Chatterton’s creation of the pseudo-medieval *Rowley Poems*, soon followed by the young forger’s untimely death. However, unlike in *The Lambs of London* which is all set in the past and where William-Henry Ireland’s Shakespeare forgeries are thematically linked with Mary Lamb’s matricide and thus made the decisive component of the plot, in *Chatterton* the eponymous poet’s acts serve as both a trigger and a unifying element of the novel’s multiple plotlines, which take place in several different yet shown as parallelly interconnected time periods. The novel thus exemplifies what Nick Bentley denotes as a “concentration on alternative, marginalized and often competing perspectives on official histories,”¹ which, combined with Ackroyd’s rather “disrespectful” treatment of real historical personages often results in what Richard Bradford labels as an “iconoclastic brand of historical fiction.”² Moreover, the theme of forgery, plagiarism, imitation and copying winds like a red thread through the novel and allows the author to add another much more crucial dimension to the story, a postmodern philosophical and metafictional one, concerning issues such as the very possibility of authenticity and originality of artistic creation, the often indistinct borderline between inspiration and imitation, and, consequently, the moral and ethical limits of exploiting other people’s work for one’s own purposes.

The second common denominator of all of the novel’s plotlines is the capital city, the only place where such fates could happen: in 1770 Thomas Chatterton comes to

1 Nick Bentley, *British Fiction of the 1990s* (London: Routledge, 2005), 12.

2 Richard Bradford, *The Novel Now* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 83.

London in hope of gaining recognition as a poet and writer; about thirty years later Samuel Joynson forges Chatterton's manuscripts and his son paints a mock-portrait of the middle-aged Chatterton in order to prove that the poet had faked his own death and by doing so to trick a rival bookseller; in 1856 George Meredith poses for his friend Henry Wallis who is to paint his famous *Death of Chatterton* and who later has an affair with Meredith's wife; and more than a century later Charles Wychwood accidentally gets hold of the faked portrait in an obscure London antiquity shop, which stirs his curiosity regarding the identity of the portrayed person and as a result causes a series of actions that bring together people whose interests in Chatterton, if any at all, are differently motivated and not always sincere. However, this London is, as is usual in Ackroyd's work, primarily a literary city, a milieu fundamentally intertwined with writing: Chatterton attempts to make his name in literary circles by writing poems and satires; Meredith muses on the nature of literature and writing while sitting for Wallis; Charles Wychwood is an unpublished poet who still believes in his talent and the power of imagination; his friend Philip Slack works as a librarian but nourishes an ambition to write a novel; Andrew Flint, Charles's and Philip's schoolmate, is a bestselling author of popular novels who is about to write a biography of George Meredith; and the elderly, mean and spiteful novelist Harriet Scrope unsuccessfully tries to compose her memoirs, for which she hires Charles as her "interpreter." In *Chatterton*, literary London with all its ambitions, rivalry, intrigues and other deceitful practices thus comes to life in full and from three different temporal perspectives.

It is not only the motifs of crime, intertextual playfulness and London as a setting and theme that connect *Chatterton* with other of Ackroyd's fictions. The novel also anticipates *The Lambs of London* through the theme of forgery, the character of the gifted yet underestimated and misunderstood youthful forger and the speculative reworking of his fate; it follows the tradition of multiple parallel plots established in *Hawksmoor* and later reemployed in *The House of Doctor Dee*, and like in *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*, *The Lambs of London* and *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein* it features real historical personages and events mixed with fictitious ones. In terms of the main protagonist, his marital relationship and his literary quest, *Chatterton* bears a strong resemblance to *The Great Fire of London*: both Charles Wychwood and Spenser Spender are pleasant yet somewhat peculiar personalities who become obsessed with, if not possessed by, a famous writer. The first is determined to solve the mystery of Chatterton's death and write a study which would "correct" the history of early nineteenth century English literature, the latter to make Dickens's *Little Dorrit* into a feature film. Both strive to understand and capture the spirit of the writers they are concentrating on; both have complicated relationships with their wives; and they both, though for different reasons, end up tragically. However, what differentiates *Chatterton* is its strong metafictional focus – more than in all of his other novels Ackroyd here reflects on the nature of writing, its motivation, purpose, and goal, but also its limitations. Rather than as an alternative rendering of the past, Ackroyd makes use of his literary and criminal London as a backdrop for an in-depth exploration of the ethical concerns each creative process necessarily entails.

The Necessity of Imitation

Forgery and plagiarism are the cornerstones of Ackroyd's literary London in *Chatterton*, as each of the novel's main protagonists are directly or indirectly associated with some act of imitation, borrowing, or even the outright stealing of someone else's creative work.

The principal protagonist in the novel is Thomas Chatterton, the notorious teenage forger of late-medieval English poetry supposedly written by the fabricated Thomas Rowley, a fifteenth century monk endowed with extraordinary poetic genius. Unlike what he does with William-Henry Ireland, Ackroyd does not change any of the basic historical facts concerning Chatterton's family background, life and work, but toys with the most mysterious aspect of the young poet's story – his death by arsenic poisoning at the age of only seventeen, around which he builds three speculative theories. The first is that when Chatterton sees that the true origin of his poems might be soon exposed and that he will be seen as a forger and imposter, forever despised and condemned, he decides to save his literary career. With the help of Samuel Joynson, a Bristol bookseller and friend, he fakes his own death, after which he continues imitating poetry, but this time in the guise of his contemporaries, both living or recently deceased. This theory suggests that the authorship of certain works of poets like Charles Churchill, Mark Akenside, Thomas Gray, Oliver Goldsmith, William Cowper, George Crabbe or even William Blake are thus to be attributed to Chatterton, as a result of which "our whole understanding of eighteenth century poetry will have to be revised."³ For the sake of this argument Ackroyd makes up a study by imaginary American professor Homer Brillo in which the scholar elaborates on the assumption that Chatterton had a decisive influence on the English Romantic poets, most notably on Blake's poetic vision. The second theory indicates that Chatterton actually dies in 1770 but has a severe dispute with Joynson before his death, accusing the bookseller of abusing him and his poetry. When the letters containing these accusations are published by a rival bookseller, Joynson, who up to that point has been making profits on selling Chatterton's poetry, needs to blacken the forger's name, so he fakes the manuscripts in which Chatterton admits to having forged his own death, by which he deprives him of the aureole of a tragically lost marvellous prodigy. In order to support this, and partly as a hoax, Joynson's son then paints a mock-portrait of the poet in his early fifties.

The third one speculates on the very circumstances of the forger's death: rather than a desperate suicidal act of a broken and disappointed man, it is presented as an unfortunate coincidence. "No one can touch me now [...] there will come a time when I will astonish the world,"⁴ claims Ackroyd's confident and optimistic Chatterton soon before, having drunk too much brandy, he overdoses on arsenic in an attempt to cure the venereal disease he has recently caught from his landlady. This theory, unlike the above two completely made up ones, is at least partly based on historical evidence. Chatterton really was confident and optimistic concerning his chances as a published writer, and Mrs Ballance, his cousin with whom he lodged for about two months after his arrival in the city, even described him as "proud as Lucifer."⁵ Yet, it was true only at the beginning of his London stay, as in the last few weeks, hungry and shabby, he was rather desperate and "at last in actual need."⁶ Similarly, it is probable that he was suffering from some venereal disease (due to his worsening financial situation he later moved to "29 Brooke Street in Holborn, then a neighbourhood of dubious character, the haunt of prostitutes and pickpockets,"⁷) the cure of which must have been enormously unpleasant and painful, but there is no evidence that he caught it from his landlady,

3 Peter Ackroyd, *Chatterton* (New York: Grove Press, 1987), 127.

4 Ackroyd, *Chatterton*, 207, 216.

5 Linda Kelly, *The Marvellous Boy: The Life and Myth of Thomas Chatterton* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), 32.

6 Kelly, *The Marvellous Boy*, 36.

7 Kelly, *The Marvellous Boy*, 34.

Mrs Angel, or that he killed himself accidentally while attempting to alleviate his suffering with arsenic.

Two other real historical personages, although their personalities and relationship are substantially fictionalised for the sake of the narrative, feature in another parallel plotline which takes place more than eighty years later – the poet and novelist George Meredith and the painter Henry Wallis. The Pre-Raphaelite painter is working on his masterpiece, *Death of Chatterton*, which depicts the corpse of the eponymous forger, who according to another famous representative of the English Pre-Raphaelite Movement, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, was “‘the day spring’ of English Romantic poetry,”⁸ in the same posture as it was found in the morning after the night of his death, and as he needs a live model he asks Meredith to pose for him. While impersonating the dead poet Meredith experiences how strange it is to pretend to be someone else, to become a forgery himself, which prompts him to muse thoughtfully on the ambiguous relationship between realism and imitation, authenticity and copying, inspiration and stealing, immortalisation and a loss of one’s self in the process. Ironically, he is unable to recognise that his own marriage is based on pretence and emotional fakery and only too late does he understand how self-absorbed and dismissive to his wife he has been. By the pastiche-imitation of the conventions and voices of the Victorians, Ackroyd is faking a “contemporary authenticity, even while calling into question the notion of authorial authority and authenticity.”⁹

In the contemporarily set plotline, the theme of plagiarism is most forcefully explored through the character of Harriet Scrope, a successful and recognised elderly novelist. The beginning of her career back in the 1950s hides a dark secret. As an achievement of an excellent and meticulous stylist, Scrope’s first novel was appreciated only by narrow academic and critical circles but never reached any popularity with the reading public. Not only did the novel take her a long time to write, but its content had very little to address any other mind than her own. Aware that the time for highly subjective experimental fiction had long been over, she understood that she needed a strong story which, however, she found herself incapable of conceiving. Desperate that her writing was at a deadlock and being stressed by critics’ and her friends’ expectations, it occurred to her to borrow a plot from some other source. She found this source in three books by much forgotten late nineteenth-century novelist Harrison Bentley which she happens to come across in a second-hand bookshop and whose plots she used in her three novels “as a plain, admittedly inferior, vessel for her own style.”¹⁰ She changed details such as names, jobs, social environment and relationship patterns, leaving only the basic plotlines which she “wrapped up” in her stylistically precise narratives. These three novels became a stepping stone for her subsequent career, as they removed her writing block and helped her create her own stories. “The experience of employing a plot, even though it was the invention of some other writer, had liberated her imagination; and, from that time forward, all her novels were her own work.”¹¹ Her plagiarism could be easily taken as an unfortunate yet tolerable, if not forgivable, act of a young, fledgling writer, if it were not for the facts that not only has her conscience not troubled her at all since her plagiarism, but that she is ready to do something similar if given a chance, such as stealing the Chatterton papers from Charles. The selfish, arrogant and disdainful Scrope worries only about her good

8 Kelly, *The Marvellous Boy*, 116.

9 Alan Robinson, *Narrating the Past: Historiography, Memory and the Contemporary Novel* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 50.

10 Ackroyd, *Chatterton*, 102.

11 Ackroyd, *Chatterton*, 103.

name and reputation, and opportunistically makes use of other people as instruments for achieving her own goals. This makes her different and also ethically more contentious than the novel's other imitators and forgers.

An interconnected story is that of the famous and recently deceased painter Joseph Seymour and his last assistant Stewart Merk. Seymour's paintings have long sold well and their price has even risen since his death, with his late works being especially the most appreciated and demanded. What nobody knows is that old Seymour suffered from arthritis in his hands and therefore all his late-period pictures were painted by Merk, who had learnt to imitate his master's style and technique. The commercially most profitable paintings are those made by an unknown imitator and should therefore be virtually worthless. When Sadlier, an experienced Seymour dealer, discovers that they are fakes, Merk, to Sadlier's surprise, reveals his role in the case. Yet, for the sake of business they throw away all moral scruples and eventually agree on keeping the truth a secret, as Sadlier has fifteen more late-period "Seymour" paintings in stock which he has been waiting to sell when the painter's death will drive up the prices. Moreover, Harriet Scrope is a great admirer of late-period Seymour work and she is planning to purchase one soon in order to give more style to her flat. And so, ironically enough, the pretentious plagiarist and copyist will own and boast of a forged artifact.

The felonious, fraudulent, or at least morally dubious London in *Chatterton* is essentially a literary city, and so the theme of plagiarism and forgery is intertwined with that of writing. However, the metafictional aspect of the novel does not focus on specific writers and their works, like for instance the Lambs in *The Lambs of London* or George Gissing in *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*, but rather generally *Chatterton* evolves around the question of the originative and ethical limits of creative writing. Most of all, in a true postmodern spirit, the novel challenges the modern idea of originality and authenticity, according to which many great poets and writers of the past, including Shakespeare, might be seen as plagiarists and imitators. "The truest Plagiarism is the truest Poetry,"¹² exclaims the novel's Chatterton, and, no matter how exaggerated this statement seems, Ackroyd is far from dismissing it as completely illusory when he lets Charles suggest in emotionally infused enthusiasm that Chatterton "was the greatest poet in history."¹³ *Chatterton* thus can be taken as a contribution to the ongoing discussion concerning the question of narrative authority, problematising the notion of the author as the source of originality and meaning, provoked some twenty years prior to the novel's publication especially by Roland Barthes's influential essay "The Death of the Author" (1967). Barthes notoriously argues that poetics should consist of suppressing the author as a source of originality and theological meaning and substituting him/her with language which acts and performs instead. He sees the text as a "space of many dimensions, in which are wedded and contested various kinds of writing, no one of which is original: the text is a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture." Each writer can therefore only imitate, copy and compile from the already existing, "combine the different kinds of writing, to oppose some by others so as never to sustain himself by just one of them."¹⁴ Despite Ackroyd's widely known dismissive attitude to postmodern theories and theorising, *Chatterton*, to a considerable extent, seems to read as a fictional rendering of Barthes's key ideas.

12 Ackroyd, *Chatterton*, 87.

13 Ackroyd, *Chatterton*, 94.

14 Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader* (Third Edition), edited by David Lodge and Nigel Woods (Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd., 2008), 313–316.

Several characters in the novel muse on the impossibility of ever coming up with something original in literature: "I never know what is mine anymore,"¹⁵ sighs Meredith when Wallis suggests that he should appropriate the effect of light by putting it into a poem; later on, Meredith stresses the dominant role of language in the writing process, expressing a persuasion that language alone rather than the author or outside reality shapes the text: "There is nothing more real than words. They are reality. It is just as everything I do becomes an experiment – I really don't understand why and, please God, I never shall – and until it is completed I never know whether it will be worth a farthing,"¹⁶ he says, admitting to being subject to language rather than authoritatively mastering it as a tool for expressing his ideas, and, in consequence, lacking narrative control over what he writes. "[N]ovelists don't work in a vacuum. We use many stories. But it's not where they come from, it's what we do with them,"¹⁷ argues Harriet Scrope self-apologetically to Charles who, without intending to soothe her, sincerely assures her that naturally "everyone copies."¹⁸ The theme is, however, most articulately voiced by Philip Slack. When he discloses that Scrope borrowed her plots from an earlier novelist he is surprised but does not condemn or criticise her, in fact seeing the world of literature as an immense intertextual web of texts and stories whose permutations and combinations generate new ones: "Philip believed that there were only a limited number of plots in the world (reality was finite, after all) and no doubt it was inevitable that they would be reproduced in a variety of contexts."¹⁹ This view has also been affected by his own experience with writing a novel, a project he soon abandoned because he could see in his style too much influence of those writers and works he admired. As a result, his novel gave the impression of a "patchwork of other voices and other styles,"²⁰ one in which he did not recognise himself, one which therefore was of no use for him in coping with his "sense of insufficiency and loss" resulting from his bewildering experience in a "world in which no significant pattern could be found."²¹

Philip thus represents, though intuitively and unconsciously rather than eruditely, Ackroyd's mouthpiece opting for indulgence in pastiche, parody, imitation and genre and discourse mixture, as these are strategies which Ackroyd himself also employs in his fiction.²² To write inevitably means to cross the threshold into the world of words and voices, to enter a magnetic field whose lines of force are other texts and stories. Therefore, it is absolutely legitimate, if not unavoidable, to borrow and imitate as long as this borrowing and imitation are not aims in themselves, but mere devices through which the author discovers one's own voice. In *Chatterton*, Ackroyd presents an ingenious defense of this process: "The poet does not merely recreate or describe the world. He actually creates it,"²³ notes Meredith, proving a point that in his forged poems, Chatterton invented a whole historical period and its poetics and, in effect, influenced and significantly

15 Ackroyd, *Chatterton*, 134.

16 Ackroyd, *Chatterton*, 157.

17 Ackroyd, *Chatterton*, 104.

18 Ackroyd, *Chatterton*, 106.

19 Ackroyd, *Chatterton*, 70.

20 Ackroyd, *Chatterton*, 70.

21 Ackroyd, *Chatterton*, 232.

22 On a dialogue from *Milton in America* which paraphrases or echoes similar conversations in *English Music* and *Chatterton*, Gibson and Wolfreys show how Ackroyd deliberately plagiarises himself "in games of 'postmodern' self-reflection", 158–159.

23 Ackroyd, *Chatterton*, 157.

shaped the Romantic poetic sensibility; by loosely using Bentley's plots in her early novels Scrope establishes herself as a recognised writer, without which none of her later works would have ever seen the light of day; through retelling Charles's theory and investigation from his perspective, Philip might eventually be able to find his own voice and style as a novelist; and, last but not least, through the story of Thomas Chatterton, Ackroyd conceives a novel whose multiple levels of meaning by far transcend the limits of the traditional historical narrative.

There is one more criminal, or rather mock-criminal, aspect of the novel's narrative structure, which is its employment of the parody of the traditional narrative of detection. The parallel between finding out the identity of a person from a painting and the process of solving a criminal case is suggested by Charles, who is determined to "investigate that picture" and to "solve the mystery,"²⁴ teasingly calling Philip "Holmes". Yet, it is Charles who sees himself as a modern personification of the detective genius, even though this label would be more fitting, or at least slightly less farfetched, for his friend. Among other things, Philip is more rational, organised, and patient enough to collect and scrutinise different pieces of evidence to be able to see the problem from different points of view. Moreover, Philip is the one who actually "solves" the case, though not because he sees himself as a detective but out of sheer curiosity and thanks to simple common sense rationality. Not only does he recognise who the portrayed man is supposed to be, he keeps looking for more information about and references to Chatterton even after Charles believes he has unravelled the mystery. In his own imagination Philip is already "enjoying the admiration of the world,"²⁵ but he is also willing to listen to the real owner of the manuscripts. Charles, on the other hand, has only one characteristic in which he might resemble the most famous detective personages – his eccentricity and peculiar habits like eating pages of books rather than reading them – otherwise he is a perfect example of an anti-detective: he is a dreamer, easily excitable, impulsive, overenthusiastic, impatient, credulous, deluded and prone to be driven by wishful thinking rather than rational analysis. As a result of Charles always misses crucial clues and jumps to conclusions without any sufficient evidence which as it accumulates leads his "investigation" completely astray. No matter how likeable Charles appears as a person, his absolute incompetence as a detective allows these parts of the novel to be read as a parody of classical narratives of detection and in consequence makes the reader sceptical and suspicious of his versions and interpretations of the findings. Therefore, it is rather the reader whom Ackroyd puts into the role of his literary investigator, though one whom he simultaneously repeatedly confuses by providing deliberately misleading or speculative clues.²⁶

The reflective, theatrical, theoretical, intertextual and supra-temporal city

Lawrence Phillips notes that "within the modern tradition of representing London [...] there is a constant pull towards both the tropic (image, memory) and the discursive

24 Ackroyd, *Chatterton*, 17.

25 Ackroyd, *Chatterton*, 60.

26 For a more detailed analysis of the novel as a parody of famous detective narratives see Berkem Güreñci Sadlam's Ph.D. thesis "*The Mystical City Universal*": *Representations of London in Peter Ackroyd's Fiction* (Modeler East Technical University, 2007), 49–63.

(narrative, history) in creative tension with the physical presence and lived experience of the city,"²⁷ a tendency clearly identifiable in Ackroyd's fiction. As in his other London novels, the city in *Chatterton* is not only a physical but also mental space, a reflection of its inhabitants' psyches and minds, of their hopes, wishes, aspirations, as well as anxieties, worries and despairs. As a result, all of the main protagonists, fictitious and real historical, show a specific attitude to or relationship with the urban milieu and topography. It is also a city of eccentricity and excess, peopled by a number of peculiar and obscure characters such as comic Dickensian antique shop owners, the Lenos (whose name may immediately remind a reader of the famous Victorian music-hall comedian Dan Leno), or oddly behaving regular public library visitors. Charles Wychwood and Harriet Scrope are both writers and eccentric personalities, so the city for them is to a large extent a product of their imaginations, or at least material their imaginations can tailor into a world of their own. Thus Charles keeps addressing almost everything he sees, from dogs to buildings. Harriet, "the most accomplished example of Dickensian-cum-music-hall character" who with her "striking inborn capacity of the London 'monopolylinguist' to assume different roles and voices" reminds one of "a cross-breed of Dan Leno's 'Mother Goose' and Punch's Judy,"²⁸ seeks the calming effect of walking the streets, in the process talking to random passers-by in an extravagant Mockney (mock-Cockney) accent, but also renaming the streets metaphorically in order to reflect her perception of these places: "In the course of these long and erratic journeys she had renamed all the familiar streets around her, and now it was through The Valley of Bones, Tarts' Paradise and The Boulevard of Broken Dreams that she made her way."²⁹ The city of their mind is thus a half-real and half-imagined place, a dreamland of its kind, a world that needs to have been animated or otherwise transformed into a more appealing one resembling that of their literary works.

In terms of the city's potential, Ackroyd identifies with Virginia Woolf's belief that the "delightful thing about London was that it was always giving one something new to look at, something fresh to talk about. One only had to keep one's eyes open."³⁰ Two more related yet dissimilar attitudes to the city are personified by George Meredith and Thomas Chatterton. An avid observer of life in all its variety, Meredith sees the city as an incessant, infinitely diverse and mutable *theatrum mundi* which never ceases to amaze and puzzle him. Insecure about the value of his poetry, a feeling caused by the gloomy discussion with Wallis about the impossibility of originality of art and its transience, even the city-as-stage of fashionable Oxford Street offers for him a spectacle of a low sort:

In the gathering darkness the faces of those he passed seemed more vivid, and in all their clothes and their movements they seemed to showing him their histories, beseeching him to understand them. The city had become one vast theatre – not the theatre of his imagination, either, but that of Astley's or the Hippodrome, tawdry, garish, stifling, real.³¹

Although Meredith resolutely refuses any responsibility for what kind of theatre he sees around him, the opposite is in fact the case, as his current mood and state of mind are the true directors of this performance. It is for this reason that when in doubt about his potential of creating what he takes as serious art, the passers-by in Oxford

27 Lawrence Phillips, *London Narratives: Post-War Fiction and the City* (London: Continuum, 2011), 6.

28 Susana Onega, *Peter Ackroyd* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1998), 35.

29 Ackroyd, *Chatterton*, 29.

30 Virginia Woolf, *The London Scene* (London: Snowbooks Ltd., 1975), 82.

31 Ackroyd, *Chatterton*, 135.

Street remind him of ridiculous and pathetic characters from a popular music-hall performance. When a few moments later he is amused by the screaming of two small boys playing in the street, he suddenly feels more vigorous and finds himself walking towards his house "with lighter tread."³² No matter what is actually happening in such theatre, its interpretation and meaning always originate in the eyes and minds of its audience. The theatre of the streets is ultimately the theatre of their dwellers' imaginations, in which they alternately, yet most of the time simultaneously, assume the roles of actors, directors and spectators. Who is watching is also being watched, who is interpreting or directing is also being interpreted or directed.

For Chatterton, London becomes a symbol of his career as a writer, a place of countless opportunities, a promised land of a bright future. Bored and annoyed with the provinciality of his native Bristol, all his thoughts are pinned on London where his "Genius might blaze and consume all those who saw it,"³³ and when he finally gets there he is "lost in a Maze of Admiration long before [he is] ever lost in the Maze of the Streets."³⁴ For the young aspiring poet, the bustling city represents all he could have ever hoped for – a thrilling life, success, and social status, which is why he enjoys being a part of the city's very texture:

He has lodged here for five weeks and each day he has felt the same exhilaration, waking above the city and then descending into it, wandering lost through its courts and alleys, savouring its smells, feeling the excitement of its crowded thoroughfares and then, at night, walking back to Brooke Street by the light of the flares and to the sound of the fiddle or the barrel-organ. He is seventeen years old and this is his new world.³⁵

Such a London, however, is not a real city, but an abstract, projected one, as the idealistic and inexperienced boy is yet not able to distinguish between the two substantially different experiences of seeing the city from above and the actual walking of its streets. As Michel de Certeau (93) comments on the first, "the panorama-city is a 'theoretical' (that is, visual) simulacrum, in short a picture, whose condition of possibility is an oblivion and a misunderstanding of practices,"³⁶ it is a voyeuristic, totalising construct of the city as a homogeneous, lucid and therefore graspable and controllable entity, a text that can be easily read and comprehended.

He opens the window wide, breathing in the air. He can hear the sound of the cattle bellowing in Smithfield, and already the carriages are hurrying down High Holborn, but these noises delight him. They accompany the rush of his own pride and ambition as he faces the summer day, and in a strong melodic voice he sings out across the rooftops the latest comic song from the Vauxhall Gardens.³⁷

On the other hand, the practices of walking the streets show that all one can get down on the ground are heterogeneously inconsistent and fragmentary images which can never compose any coherent whole. This in effect transforms the complacent, detached

32 Ackroyd, *Chatterton*, 135.

33 Ackroyd, *Chatterton*, 88.

34 Ackroyd, *Chatterton*, 88.

35 Ackroyd, *Chatterton*, 191.

36 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 93.

37 Ackroyd, *Chatterton*, 191.

voyeurs into vulnerable walkers “whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban ‘text’ they write without being able to read it.”³⁸ Chatterton is soon to understand this difference when he encounters the physical manifestation of the city’s misery and indifference to the suffering of those affected by poverty and other unfortunate strokes of fate, and to realise his previous self-delusion. “When I first came to London I thought I had entered a new age of miracles, but these stinking alleys and close packed tenements seem to breed monsters. Monsters of our own making...,”³⁹ he notes after visiting a poverty-stricken East End area and experiencing what brooding and ghastly shapes the city in reality can assume.

The novel’s London is also a vast and dense intertextual and palimpsestial network⁴⁰, “the textual universe extending out in an infinite mass of associations that lie beyond any form of comprehension,”⁴¹ a world of texts and stories and their ongoing interactions, one in which the works of the past crucially influence and affect authors of the present regardless of their will, liking, awareness or acknowledgement. Obviously this is a concept that makes the issue of originality and authenticity even more problematic, as, in accordance with Barthes’s claim, it presents each new work as at least partly shaped by what has been written already. “Think of them all around us, watching us, Blake, Shelley, Coleridge [...] And Meredith. All of them influencing us,”⁴² notes Charles Wychwood to Flint when he is trying to demonstrate how the said poets were themselves influenced by Chatterton, suggesting that such influence is impossible to avoid. Charles is the most outspoken proponent of this view, since he sees it not only as inevitable, but also as natural and even beneficial for the sake of the creative process. At the same time, he is aware that it can be frustrating and intimidating by many aspiring writers, showing for instance his familiarity with Harold Bloom’s theory. “It’s called the anxiety of influence,”⁴³ he explains to Harriet Scrope when she contemplates on how writers keep borrowing from other writers, though in her case it is not motivated by an interest in the general mechanisms of artistic creation, but by the need of seeking justification for her own borrowings from Harrison Bentley.

Through the use of the supra-sensual, *Chatterton* dramatises this invisible yet all-encompassing world of shadows and voices. First of all, there is the ghost-figure of Thomas Chatterton that several of the novel’s protagonists come into contact with: it saves young Meredith, desperate from the fact that his wife has recently left him, from suicide by poisoning by “standing over him and forbidding him to drink;”⁴⁴ Wallis is certain that his painting will be a triumph as he feels it has “been infused with the soul of Chatterton – a soul not trapped but joyful at its commemoration;”⁴⁵ it twice appears to Harriet Scrope, as if it were trying to warn her against stealing the findings of Charles’s research and investigation from Vivien and Philip; and, most importantly, it twice reveals itself to Charles during his attempt to solve the mystery of the portrait. Ackroyd here

38 de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 93.

39 Ackroyd, *Chatterton*, 211.

40 Barry Lewis, for instance, shows the novel’s numerous quotations from and references to different works of T.S. Eliot, 46–50.

41 Alex Murray, *Recalling London: Literature and History in the works of Peter Ackroyd and Iain Sinclair* (London: Continuum, 2007), 7.

42 Ackroyd, *Chatterton*, 77.

43 Ackroyd, *Chatterton*, 100.

44 Ackroyd, *Chatterton*, 70.

45 Ackroyd, *Chatterton*, 170.

makes an allusion to the notorious story of Coleridge's composition of *Kubla Khan*: Charles dreams the preface to his book which is meant to elucidate the true circumstances of Chatterton's faked death. Suddenly Charles sees "the entire pattern of Chatterton's life,"⁴⁶ but when he is later writing it down he is interrupted by a telephone call, after which he finds himself unable to resume his work. At this point he sees the ghost-figure lying on the bed; a few days later he reads this preface to Vivien, Philip, Scrope and Flint in a restaurant symptomatically called the *Kubla Khan*. This is followed by an argument about the eternity and transience of literature during which Charles gives a passionate speech to the pragmatic and sceptical Flint about what really drives people to write: "It is a dream of wholeness, and of beauty. All the yearning and all the unhappiness and all the sickness can be taken away by that vision. And the vision is real."⁴⁷ It is after this speech that Charles sees Chatterton's ghost again, just before he dies of a brain tumor. However, the exact cause of Charles's death is much less important than the urgency of his message – it is the vision, the imaginative, alternative rendering of reality that constitutes the very essence of quality art. It is no accident that Ackroyd labels those who were most successful in capturing the spirit of London in their works "Cockney Visionaries."⁴⁸

Such a world is also a supra-temporal one, defying the traditional, linear concept of time, one in which the past, the present and the future coexist and intermingle to such a degree that they are no longer distinct and distinguishable, suggesting thus that "history is unknowable, and in being unknowable it can never be given teleological or epistemic closure."⁴⁹ Charles's soul leaves this world in order to join those of Chatterton and Meredith in the intertextual one; Chatterton lives on through his masterful forgeries and mysterious death, inspiring new people to study his life and write his biographies, yet each such biography seems to describe a "quite different poet,"⁵⁰ as they simultaneously always reflect the personalities of their authors; and Wallis's painting immortalises not only its author, the portrayed person, the model, but all those whose lives were somehow affected by it, including Charles, whom his son Edward still sees in the painting, thanks to which he believes that his father "would never wholly die."⁵¹ It is a psycho-physical world in which not time but visions, ideas, beliefs and dreams are the true measuring criterion of value and durability.

The imagination never dies – conclusion

The London of *Chatterton* possesses all the typical features of Ackroyd's (semi-)fictitious construction of the urban world: it features real historical as well as made up characters and events. The main protagonists Thomas Chatterton and Charles Wychwood are loners, both willing and forced, enclosed in themselves not only due to their eccentricity, but mainly because they are endowed with the capacity, determination and devotion to pursue their vision even against the tide of their surrounding's conventions and expectations.

46 Ackroyd, *Chatterton*, 127.

47 Ackroyd, *Chatterton*, 152.

48 Peter Ackroyd, *London: The Biography* (New York: Anchor, 2003), 751–760, and *Albion: The Origins of the English Imagination* (London: Vintage, 2004), 307–314.

49 Murray, *Recalling London*, 37.

50 Ackroyd, *Chatterton*, 127.

51 Ackroyd, *Chatterton*, 230.

There is a crucial narrative constituent of a mystery which includes elements bordering on the irrational – mystical, occult and supernatural. The plot revolves around a crime, or at least a morally dubious act, which, however, is a mere device and pretext for the exploration of “more serious” themes such as the principles and ethical limits of artistic creation. Metafiction and intertextuality are at the heart of the city’s texture – the theme of writing together with that of the relationship between the city and the texts it has created, allowed to be created, incited or inspired substantially determine the novel’s plot and character construction. In terms of temporality it defies traditional chronology; the parallel plots as well as the different time periods become intertwined, affecting one another on both physical and mental levels and certain patterns of events, acts and ideas cyclically recur across centuries. As a result of the above, the city assumes several different roles, from that of the physical setting, *locus delicti*, and literary milieu to that of the reflection of its various protagonists’ minds, their hopes, worries, despairs and self-projections.

Although the role of the city within the narrative framework of *Chatterton* is indeed essential, it is different from that which it plays in *Hawksmoor* and *The House of Doctor Dee*, the two other Ackroyd’s London novels with parallel yet historically different plotlines. In the latter two novels, London at first seemingly serves as a setting or platform for committing murders and carrying out occult practices respectively, but eventually it turns out that the city is in fact their main protagonist and they end with passages, openly celebratory in *The House of Doctor Dee*, in which the story smoothly transmutes into a testimony of the city’s indestructible spirit and eternity. *Chatterton*, on the other hand, elaborates on what the ending of *The House of Doctor Dee* only mentions: the power and timelessness of imagination. “Reality is the invention of unimaginative people,”⁵² Harriet Scrope remarks, and, accordingly, every page of the novel demonstrates Ackroyd’s conviction that in the realm of artistic creation, imagination has a higher value-status than anything else, and one’s belief in an imaginative vision takes precedence over the moral and conventional norms of the outside world.

[Charles’s] belief had been the important thing. So the papers were imitations and the painting a forgery – yet the feelings they evoked in Charles, and now in Vivien, were still more important than any reality. ‘You know,’ [Philip] said softly, ‘they don’t have to be forgotten. We can keep the belief alive.’ He looked at Vivien, and smiled. ‘The important thing is what Charles imagined, and we can keep hold of that. That isn’t an illusion. The imagination never dies.’⁵³

Acts of imitation, forgery or plagiarism are legitimate and justifiable as long as their purpose is not only to imitate and plagiarise, but to become a stepping stone for one to achieve something larger that by far transcends this act. Chatterton’s forgeries allowed the young man to discover the poet in himself, but also helped to launch the Romantic espousal of medievalism and possibly even to shape its poetics, as “[t]o Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley and above all Keats [...], Chatterton was a source of inspiration not only as a symbol but as a poet;”⁵⁴ Scrope’s plagiarism set her imagination free and she found her own style in her best mature later works; and the fake Chatterton manuscripts and painting helped Charles to make sense of his life which, in consequence, might help Philip fulfill his ambition of writing a novel. Rather than a key character, this novel’s London is thus an inexhaustible power field of creative energy, one which

52 Ackroyd, *Chatterton*, 39.

53 Ackroyd, *Chatterton*, 231–232.

54 Kelly, *The Marvellous Boy*, xvii.

incessantly generates new imaginative and prophetic visions. *Chatterton* is a distinctive and original contemplation on the very nature and ethics of art which is ironically and symptomatically based on the pastiche of other texts, stories and voices, a fact that more than effectively proves its author's point.

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