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Allure of the Archive: Negotiating the Presence of the Past in Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton*

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Abstract:

Theories of the archive and the archive as metaphor have come to occupy a prominent place in literary studies. Following the creative and compelling theoretical formulations of authors and thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Caroline Steedman, broadly interdisciplinary conversation about the nature of the archive has been initiated. In many postmodernist novels the archive emerges as a metastatic concept, which while it retains its original sense of a collection of books or documents, accrues wider connotations. The archive becomes in such novels not only a place where cultural documents are stored but also a site where cultural meanings are negotiated. The present article purports to discuss Peter Ackroyd's novel *Chatterton* in the light of contemporary theoretical reconfigurations of the concept of archive.

Keywords: archive, historiographic metafiction, postmodernism, Romance, quest.

In the past few decades there has been an unprecedented proliferation in the number of novels which are woven around the theme of archive hunting. Owing to the poststructuralist study of the archive as a problematized and contested space, archival knowledge is increasingly being recognized as a discourse which is imbricated in the issues of the politics of power and identity. The 'archive'ⁱ is no longer seen as something neutral or innocent with the result that nothing is less clear today than the word 'archive'. That the postmodern novelists celebrating disintegration and fragmentation should find the trope of 'archive' so fascinating, therefore, should not be surprising. Among the novels in which archive features as a distinct character, as it were, there is a group of novels in which a lone researcher is shown to be sifting the debris of time to salvage a forgotten truth or a buried past like a knight errant in a medieval quest narrative. Following the terminology of Suzanne Keen, I classify this group of novels under the heading Romance of the archiveⁱⁱ.

In the present paper I intend to demonstrate how the quest for the apocryphal 'archive' is related to the desire to reclaim, as well as defend the notion of authorship which has so severely been undermined by the insistence of the poststructuralist theorists that the introduction of intertextuality into critical discourse has resulted in the 'death of the author.' But, while Keen argues that the Romances of the archive seek to "restore to history its glamorous, consoling, and admonitory powers" (Keen 61), I intend to show that despite the desperate endeavour of the fictional archive hunters to unearth the definitive historical truth by examining the material traces of the past, truth ultimately disappears into thin air just as they are about to be grasped. The alternative archives that the fictional researcher taps turn out to be as much a product of textuality as the one she seeks to revise. As such these novels could be subsumed under the rubric of postmodern metafiction, which not only self-reflexively point towards their own textuality but also towards literature and criticism as a whole.

It is not easy to define Romance. Barbara Fuchs is of the opinion that the category of Romance is a notoriously slippery one, and that critics are divided over its status as a genre or a mode. As a literary category, it has the connotations of something imaginary and unrealistic. The magical qualities and supernatural mechanisms that Romance espouses seem anachronistic in the context of the twenty-first century. Yet, the closing decades of the twentieth century witnesses a revival of this form. The critical censure that Romance seems to garner are predicated upon its archaic and idealized nature, so that the critic Gillian Beer claims that the history of the romance could be construed in one sense as a record of decadence (Beer 1). According to her, Romance has survived in its shallow character descriptions, its overly emphasised concentration on action and a predominance of dramatic, exotic settings. But a number of postmodernist novels that have espoused the narrative tropes of the Romance genre have since made their presences felt and give the lie to Beer's claims. Novels like David Lodge's *Small World: An Academic Romance*, (1984), Lindsey Clark's *The Chymical Wedding* (1989), A.S. Byatt's *Possession : A Romance* (1990) and Susan Sontag's *The Volcano Lover: A Romance* (1992) not only make explicit references to Romance in their titles but also appropriate the narrative tropes of Romance.

The postmodern afterlife of Romance, both as a genre and a narrative mode has been the topic of critical interest, which see in this revival not an antiquarian delight to resuscitate a lost anachronistic form, but rather an attempt to bring to the fore the competing ideological

undercurrents and inherent dualities of the form through a postmodern negotiation of it. The postmodern appropriation of the generic traits of Romance narratives has given rise to a hybrid construction that incorporates important characteristics of postmodernist fiction such as ambiguity, parody, paradox, contradiction, self-reflexivity and a reluctance to provide any coherent vision of the world. The facility with which the Romance is seen to blend with postmodernist fictional aesthetics in such novels as Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* and Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton* substantiates Diane Elam's claim that "romance should be considered as a postmodern genre, and that postmodernism is romance" (Elam 12).

By incorporating archival narratives, like, letters, diaries or memoirs the genre of archival Romance displaces and problematizes narrative authority. In traditional Romances the reader has to rely on the third person narrator who "remakes the rules of what is possible, what impossible. Our enjoyment depends on our willing surrender to his power. We are transported. The absurdities of romance are felt when we refuse to inhabit the world offered us and disengage ourselves, bringing to bear our own opinions" (Beer 6). In the archival Romances like *Chatterton* the self-reflexivity of the narrative draws attention to the fictionality of the text and to the presence of the 'author'. The semblance of universal omniscience and narrative truth that the author assumes is deconstructed and the text is revealed to be having a provisional existence. These archival documents which often constitute the narrative and on which the narrative authority of the text is dependent is shown to be spurious, ersatz or of dubious value.

Like the genre of historiographic metafiction, with which it overlaps, the Romances of the archive pay attention to the process of reading and to the role of the reader. The deliberately ambiguous endings of many postmodern Romances invite the reader to be a co-author and concede her much more hermeneutic agency. The theoretical insight that seems to distinguish the archival Romances is the decentred nature of any palpable truth in the sense of a metaphysical construct or *presence*. As such, the 'archive' becomes a potent metaphor for the unattainable object of desire. The only form of 'truth' that these novels posit is one of the plurality of interpretations. As Luisa Hadley comments: "In *Possession* and *Ever After*, the afterlife of the texts of the past is achieved through the process of reading texts, a process which brings the past imaginatively to life in the present" (Hadley 123).

The genre of Romance, as Northrop Frye notes, is characterized by a persistent nostalgia for another time which accounts for the idealization of the world it creates. But the nostalgic element in Romance can also serve to negotiate contemporary issues as it opens up alternative worlds, alternative realities. Barbara Fuchs's observes: "The idealization of romance is often achieved through a nostalgic purchase on the past. Romance values the antique and the exotic, and expresses a powerful longing for what came before." (Fuchs 7) Suzanne Keen connects this sense of nostalgia with the British loss or dispossession of the Empire. The loss of the major British colonies like India, Egypt Hong Kong, the Suez crisis and the utter face loss of the nation in the Falklands war inflect the thematic and motific concerns of the archival Romance. But instead of a naïve and recuperative nostalgia the archival Romance revisits the British Imperial past in a subversive way and insists on the "ambiguous, paradoxical, oxymoronic nature of that type of postmodernism which appears estranged from the experimental tendency of its aesthetic predecessor" (Gutleben 11).

Barbara Fuchs argues that one of the primary features of romance is the postponement of desire, a characteristics that the Romances of the archive also incorporate. In the latter, this desire works both ways: on the one hand the materialization of the archive within human-constructed spaces like library and museum indicates a desire to control the economy and shape of the archive, to assert a kind of mastery over the shape history can take; on the other hand, the desire to perpetually and agonizingly returning to the archive on the part of the researcher/quester is also accommodated in the narrative. Suzanne Keen aligns the desire for the archive the erotic desire and suggests that sex and physical pleasure is often the rewards awaiting the archival questers.

Jonathan Boulter, though not discounting the inflections of sexuality in the archival desire conceptualizes it in Lacanian terms. The 'archive' would in this argument be posited as the space inhabited by the other, "a trace always referring to another whose eyes cannot be met" (Derrida, "Archive Fever" 84). Jonathan Boulter argues,

[...] the archive – the phenomenal archive; the archive that is always the embodiment of a culture's desire – too is a function of loss, indeed has no meaning separated from loss. It is because something has been lost – or is always in danger of being lost – cultures, memories, records – that archives are needed. The archive grounds loss both in its initial *raison d'être* and in the manner by which loss is eternalized. (Boulter 181)

The 'archive' becomes a variation of the Lacanian *objet petit a*, an Imaginary object the search for which is predicated upon its very absence and which constitute the quester as a desiring subject. The palpable and corporeal voluptuousness of the 'archive' do not constitute the 'past' or the 'truth' about the past that the quester may penetrate; the archival traces are the symbolic energies of the dead reanimated by the imaginary desires of the living.

In *History and Criticism* the historian Dominick La Capra discusses the problematics of the 'documentary' model of knowledge, which relies on 'hard' facts derived from sifting of sources and tethered to the analytical procedures of hypothesis-formation, testing and explanation. Archival documents and supposedly unmediated sources, like bureaucratic reports, wills, diaries, letters, eye-witness accounts and so forth, are privileged in documentary research and archival sources are valued depending on the factual or referential propositions that might be derived from them. La Capra cautions against this type of "primitive positivism" which pays insufficient attention to the "precise process whereby complex texts undergo into specific use and exchange values" (La Capra, *History and Criticism* 20). According to La Capra, in archival research, the archive assumes a fetish character and the belief that the archival text yields the 'truth' on investigation is a "useful critical fiction" (La Capra, *Rethinking Intellectual History*, 31).

La Capra takes up from Freud's conceptualization of fetishism as a substitute for a lost object, the quest for which is actually the quest for full identity and narcissistic unity and comments,

The archive as fetish is a literal substitute of or the "reality" of the past which is "always already" lost for the historian. When it is fetishized, the archive is more than the repository of traces of the past which may be used in its inferential reconstruction. It is a stand-in for the past that brings the mystified experience of the thing itself-an experience that is always open to question when one deals with writing or other inscriptions. (La Capra, *History and Criticism* 92)

The archival desires of the fictional questers/researchers are animated by this lack, this lacuna in the historical narrative. However, the postmodern Romance of archive questions the possibility of filling up the gaps in history by suturing new pieces of archival documents, because, the underlying theoretical assumption of novels like Ackroyd's *Chatterton* is that,

since all archives are mediated by language, the possibility of any ultimate 'archive', of the 'truth' must remain as a useful metaphysical idea, never to be possessed.

Chatterton

Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton* is one of the most appropriate examples not only of the novels classifiable under archival Romance, but also of, what Linda Hutcheon calls, 'historiographic metafiction'. The most distinctive features of the Romance of archive that Suzanne Keen enumerates, viz., the prevalence of character-researchers, the corporality and 'round' psychology of the realistic novel, Romance adventure stories, in which 'research' features as a kernel plot action, a strong closure, climactic discoveries and rewards, discomforts and inconveniences suffered in the service of knowledge (actually part of the Romance plot, but so played up as to deserve separate emphasis), and settings and locations (such as libraries and country houses) that contain archives of actual papers and material traces of the past, are present in this novel. Also, while charting the course of the archival adventure the novel raises disconcerting questions regarding authorship, originality and historical truth. As is the case with many other archival Romances, *Chatterton* scrutinizes the ongoing debate about the uses of the past in depicting the hold tradition (in the Eliotian sense) has on the quester/researcher Charles Whychwood, who is situated at a remove from the past he investigates.

Thus, *Chatterton* becomes not only a literary revivification of the marvellous boy, whose career ended in apparent suicide at age seventeen, but an exploration of the art of fiction according to Peter Ackroyd. That art nervously celebrates what Ackroyd presents as a continuum, beginning with research, leading to imitation and a liberated imagination, and ending with forgery, plagiarism and death. (Keen 123)

Apart from being a writer of fiction, Peter Ackroyd is also a critic, a biographer and historian, a combination which makes him eminently competent to treat the character of the boy poet Thomas Chatterton within the cultural tradition to which his character harks back and the enduring, albeit ambiguous legacy of the myth of a tortured poet that his tragic death has engendered. The novel is not a biography of the poet Chatterton but a speculative take on the creation of the image of a poet. In his preface to the book *Thomas Chatterton and the Romantic Culture* Ackroyd recognises Chatterton as an artist "who found within himself the living presence of the past" (Ackroyd, *Thomas Chatterton and the Romantic Culture* 2) and

“who believed that the past, and the language of the past might be made to live again” (Ackroyd, *Thomas Chatterton and the Romantic Culture* 1). Through the fictionalized reinvention of the life and death of Chatterton and by fusing it with the present day narrative of a poet manqué Charles Wychwood, who is obsessed with the former, Ackroyd underscores in his novel the inherent fictionality of the recorded past, as well as the significance of artistic invention.

In its problematic and fluid depiction and appropriation of the past *Chatterton* approximates what Linda Hutcheon terms as ‘historiographic metafiction.’ By historiographic metafiction Hutcheon refers to “those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” and evince “the theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs” (Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* 5). Hutcheon comments on the postmodern historical metafiction’s negotiation with history thus:

[...] in arguing that *history* does not exist except as text, it does not stupidly and “gleefully” 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*. Even the institutions of the past, its social structures and practices, could be seen, in one sense, as social texts. (Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* 16)

Ackroyd’s novel is an intertextual and parodic reproduction of history which illuminates his ideas on the indeterminacy of historical discourses. The intertextual parody in historiographic metafiction, as Hutcheon puts it, “offers a sense of the presence of the past, but a past that can be known only from its texts, its traces – be they literary or historical” (Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* 125). In Ackroyd’s novels the awareness of the textuality of truth is always seen to be lurking. There is no truth outside language, and as such, no objective past. Therefore, the distinctions between past and present, real and imaginary, truth and fiction become nebulous.

Central to the metafictional concern of the novel *Chatterton* and to its story is the figure of the poet Thomas Chatterton. According to the official historical account of his life, he was born in Bristol in 1752 and died in London in August 1770 after taking arsenic. At the beginning of the novel Ackroyd provides a short and ostensibly objective biography of the

young poet's life and the circumstances of his death. This account is meant to resemble a biographical note from a book on literary history or an entry in a literary encyclopaedia. The narrative that follows offers two other versions of Chatterton's death. The three versions together compose a composite and a mutant version of the poet that is more of a *function* or an *effect* than a human subject. Again each of these versions intertwines with each other contextualizing, undercutting and commenting on each other. The questers and researchers situated in radically different ages engage in dialogic correspondences with one another and configure the mysterious figure of Chatterton into an emblem of intertextuality itself. The greatest plagiarist in the history of English literature becomes, for Ackroyd, as well as for the readers, an epitome of the process of writing itself whereby originality becomes suspect and literary traces a ubiquitous feature of all texts. Consequently, through the means of fiction, Ackroyd seems to deconstruct both the negative views about Chatterton's poetry as well as his mythical persona, thereby questioning the historical truth claims about the poet.

Ackroyd implies that historical narratives are merely different textual versions or (mis)readings of the truth, which contend with each other for domination. The fictional form provides a scope for laying out all these competing alternative histories, thereby exposing its own lies, telling stories that openly claim to be invented and inauthentic. The novel seems to be articulating in fictional form the questions that postmodernist philosophers and historiographers like Hayden White, Paul Ricoeur and Keith Jenkins also seem to grapple with. Greg Clingham rightfully asserts that "Ackroyd's novel conceptualizes the difference between then and now – repeats and defers the closure of history as a metaphysical system – by holding up a mirror to that trace and allowing us to see it more fully in operation" (Clingham 40).

Chatterton is a complex, postmodern novel, with a fragmented structure and multiple plots that echo and mirror each other. The novel's interrogation of the veracity of historical records is part of its problematization of all kinds of textual representation. In the novel there are several instances of the disruption of the truth claims of textual representation — the literary forgeries of Thomas Chatterton, a portrait representing an aging Chatterton and a notebook supposed to have been written by him (both of which turn out to be fakes), the novels of the fictional author Harriet Scorpe, which are apparently plagiarised from the novels of another obscure novelist, the late paintings of the Victorian painter Thomas Seymour, which turn out to have been the works of his apprentice, and finally, the famous

painting of Chatterton by Henry Wallis, which had for its model the Victorian novelist George Meredith. By means of these archival traces the novel challenges the reader's common and naïve trust in fiction's project of disclosing or revealing meanings that are already, in some sense, there. Instead of positing the 'archive' as a portals into reality Ackroyd foregrounds the linguistically mediated nature of 'archive' and interrogates the nature of language, of narrative closure, of representation by replacing the traditional doctrines of originality with the idea that imitation and intertextuality are, after all, common properties of all art.

Chatterton is set in three different centuries. In modern twentieth century London, Charles Wychwood, a young poet, discovers a portrait depicting an unknown middle-aged man, whom his friend Philip identifies as the Romantic poet Thomas Chatterton. Charles also comes by some documents and diaries at Bristol, which were supposedly written by Chatterton. The memoirs reveal that Chatterton did not die young, as official histories of English literature assume. Rather, he not only continued to live, but also contrived to write poetry impersonating famous poets such as, William Blake, William Cowper and Thomas Gray. The fugitive archival documents reveal to Charles that Chatterton ran a sordid trade as a literary hack with his partner Joynson, a bookseller from his native Bristol. Charles Wychwood deduces that Chatterton faked his suicide in order to further his ghostwriting career. Charles is an unsuccessful poet, who nevertheless nurtures the ambition of literary greatness. He is himself recruited to work as a ghostwriter for an elderly novelist, Harriet Scrope, who steals her plots from old and obsolete novels. Charles's wife Vivian, who works in an art gallery, is concerned about his indolence and his new-found obsession. The archival documents pertaining to Chatterton seem to hold for Charles the allure of a past that he has discovered for himself, a chance to rewrite the 'archive,' to reconfigure the history of the English literature along the lines of his own narrative and thereby, somehow compensate for his own sense of present failure.

An inveterately subjective and imaginative person, Charles literally and metaphorically lives off the past. While travelling to Bristol with Phillips on his search for the Chatterton papers, Charles consumes small pieces of the paperback volume of *Great Expectations*. Charles sustains on an imaginative reading of the past, and therefore, comes very readily to the fabulous hypothesis about Chatterton's surreptitious 'afterlife', which might not have occurred to a disciplinary scholar. Based on his hunch regarding the supposed

authenticity and provenance of the portrait and the dubious documents he forms his 'alternative' history of Thomas Chatterton's life. He comes to believe that Chatterton did not die; rather, he had staged his death so that he could write anonymously, posing as famous poets. A supreme ventriloquist, Chatterton had managed to hoodwink generations of reader and his forgeries have passed for real. He has not only manipulated the history of English literature but has also created the myth of the quintessential tortured poet, a precursor of the Byronic and Keatsian poetic persona. In a way Charles is configuring a counter-narrative to the 'archive' of English literature by questioning some of its gaps, metaphorically, the empty spaces amidst the books on its shelves. Charles claims to have found the missing link, the missing 'archive.' His archival search, therefore, speaks of alternative possibilities, of other meanings and pluralistic reading. But, the alternative 'archive' is also problematized in this novel, as I argue below.

In Charles's obsession with the 'archive' the reader could possibly witness what Ann Laura Stoler calls the turn from the "archive-as-source" to "archive-as-subject" (Stoler 44). One could possibly argue that for Charles the archive becomes "a metaphoric invocation of any corpus of selective collections and longings that the acquisitive quest for the primary, originary and untouched entail" (Stoler 45). Charles's delusions are actually an objectification of his urge to say something new and worthwhile. As a failed and unpublished poet, he identifies with Chatterton. He seems to have made the rehabilitation of the disgraced poet the goal of his life and through that seeks to validate his own life. The futility of his efforts becomes manifest as it is discovered (ironically by Harriet Scorpe, a plagiarist herself) that the portrait is a fake. Moreover, it is found out by Philip that the memoirs, supposedly written by Chatterton, were also forged by the deceased poet's Bristol publisher out of vindictive motives. Charles, however, does not live to see his fantasy discredited. Rather, his belief in the romance of the archive seems to affect Philip and Vivian, who despite their knowledge of the forgery, wish to keep the imaginary alternative archive of Chatterton's life alive. Philip assures Vivian that Charles's archival research, though it came to nothing in terms of discovering an alternative truth, will not go to waste.

The way to keep the dead and his fantasy alive is found to be through imaginative reading and imaginative re-appropriation of the 'archive.' Philip, who is a failed novelist, had always tended to leave off his writing because he felt that he could not be original, that his writings always contained echoes of other writers whom he has read. By the end of the novel,

however, when the categories of originality and origin have been subverted, Philip finds that he might have a suitable subject in the forged biography of the master forger. And moreover, he believes this might be his opening into an ‘original’ style. Charles’s ‘fake’ version of Chatterton’s, therefore, is not rejected in the novel, but, shown to have an afterlife in the imaginative recreation of his research by Philip.

The falsification of Charles’s theory about Chatterton, however, does not exhaust the possibility of other alternative narratives of Chatterton’s death. There is yet a third version of the story narrated from the authorial point of view and narrated alongside Charles’s own death. This version falsifies both the official version of Chatterton’s death as well as Charles’s fanciful reconstruction of Chatterton’s biography. According to this version Chatterton’s death was caused by an overdose of opium consumed to cure a venereal disease. This third version of Chatterton’s death undercuts both Charles’s theory as well as the version provided by the official histories of literature. Ackroyd suggests that epistemologically neither version can claim to be the ‘true’ one. The ‘true’ history of the event cannot be rendered unmediated by textuality, and, as such, Chatterton becomes an amorphous figure who might take any shape that is required of him. All these versions are actually part of the Chatterton myth, renegotiating and re-evaluating each other according to the proclivities of different ages. Thus, in the Romantic period Chatterton was construed as a prototype of the tortured poet who died young – a sort of younger version of John Keats. Even after his forgeries were detected and exposed Chatterton continued to wield considerable influence on the imagination of the Romantic age: Coleridge composed a “Monody on the Death of Chatterton” (1780), Wordsworth called him “the marvellous boy” in his “Resolution and Independence” (1807) and Keats dedicated *Endymion* (1818) to him. Even the romantic picture of Chatterton, as David Fairer shows, did not enter Romantic culture as a single myth. None of these versions of the poet are any nearer to capture in totality the myth of Chatterton, but, rather, as Nick Groom suggests, “it is this nostalgic and elegiac figment of Chatterton as past/passed that captivates poets, painters, and pop stars” (Groom 8). Other recuperative investments in Chatterton such as, the famously unreliable biography by John Dix (1837), or iconographic traditions depicting Chatterton, such as, Henry Wallis’s “Death of Chatterton” (1856) and Morris’s engraving (1782) conform to a popular eighteenth-century image of the Grub Street poet with the schematic and emblematic representations accentuating the myth of a genius who died too young.

In *Chatterton* Ackroyd emphasises on the issues of originality and plagiarism through the eponymous figure of Thomas Chatterton, who acts as the epitome of intertextuality. In an interview with Amanda Smith Ackroyd says, "The history of English literature, is really the history of plagiarism. I discovered that when I was doing [a biography of] T.S. Eliot. He was a great plagiarist [...] I see nothing wrong with it" (Interview with Smith 60). Catherine Barnard reads Ackroyd's undoing of the concepts of originality as an attempt to rehistoricize the binaries of authenticity and forgery and to assess the ideological import of such insistent return to the origin of writing.

Redefining writing as possession implies that one turns one's back on the Platonic binary opposition between original and copy, between truth and make-believe, while paradoxically reinstating it [...] Ackroyd's dizzying meditation on the demise on this ontological set of beliefs in his novel *Chatterton* jeopardizes this ontological contract. (Bernard 15)

In Part Two of the novel, Ackroyd shifts the narrative time to the mid-nineteenth century and depicts Henry Wallis painting his masterpiece, "The Death of Chatterton," with the young George Meredith for his model. This subplot involving a then relatively unknown George Meredith, his wife Mary and the painter Henry Wallis, a friend of Meredith who would later run away with Meredith's wife, is a brief fictional meditation on the nature of artistic representation. Wallis's painting is part of the Chatterton myth that accrued around Chatterton's poet-in-a-garret persona. The painting itself is a scrupulous study in realistic representational technique, for the accomplishment of which Wallis is seen, in Ackroyd's novel, to be intent upon stringent verisimilitude. He does the initial sketches in the very room which Chatterton lived in. Yet, the role of imagination in art is also emphasized when in a later chapter Wallis reconstructs the whole setting in his own studio and makes subtle changes to suit the overall "composition". The realism of art is merely the effect of artistic techniques, as Wallis explains to Meredith and Mary. Thus, Meredith comments on Wallis's method of painting that "the greatest reality is also the greatest fakery" (Ackroyd 139). This is a tacit acknowledgement of the re-producible nature of *reality*. For Meredith, the reality of art has got little to do with verisimilitude. He argues that poetic art, which creates with the help of words, has a reality which is not necessarily representational. Poetic art is real because it *creates* the reality it depicts. As he expounds to Wallis,

There is nothing more real than words. They are reality [...] 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. (Ackroyd 157)

In Chapter Ten there is depicted a chance meeting between Wallis and Agnes Slimmers, a fictional poet, when the latter emphasizes the role of originality and poetic spontaneity in poetry, thereby accepting, by implication, imagination and the imaginative subject as something autonomous. Her comments complement and also undercut Meredith's above quoted observations. If imaginative and subjective reality are the only realities, as Meredith claims in the novel, then the purest form of that imagination must be in the pristine realm of the 'self' as a Platonic idea. Poetry as an imaginative art, Agnes asserts, must be "direct and it must be inspired. It will be simple and it will be true [...]. It must come from the heart, where all our feelings start. [...] it must be real.[...] what is the reason for the imitation of an imitation?"(Ackroyd 160). Read against the postmodern narrative scepticism that informs the beliefs of Philip or Andrew Flint, Agnes's ideas seem, anachronistically, outdated and largely discredited. Fictional inspiration is continually betrayed by Ackroyd as derivative and repetitive.

The concept of originality in art is also acutely interrogated in the novel. The transposition of the multiple narrative strands helps Ackroyd to use one strand of narrative to comment on the other. From a poststructuralist and post-Freudian perspective the metaphysical concepts of unified subjectivity would appear as useful fictions and intertextuality and plagiarism would be accepted as the necessary conditions of creative writing itself. But, does this scepticism justify Flint's cynical views about the devaluation of imaginative literature in a postmodern world of simulacra? In the course of a heated debate between Charles and his writer friend Andrew Flint the latter avers,

[...] nothing survives now. Everything is instantly forgotten. There is no history any more. There is no memory. There are no standards to encourage permanence – only novelty, and the whole endless cycle of new objects. And books are simply objects – consumer items picked up and laid aside. [...] And poetry is no different. Poetry is disposable, too. Something has happened during the course of this generation – don't ask me why. But poetry, fiction, the whole lot – none of it really matters any more. (Ackroyd 150)

Flint's cynical, and self-confessedly anti-romantic views evidently draw upon the symptoms and tendencies of the trajectory of the postmodern that blurs the lines between reality and image, truth and representation, and original and simulation. In the postmodern world, when capitalism has arrived at a certain level of accumulation, commodities are seen to detach themselves from their original meanings and become fetishistic images, engendering a society of spectacle. As Baudrillard argues,

[There is] a plethora of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity. There is an escalation of the true, of lived experience; resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared. Panic-stricken production of the real, above and parallel to the panic of material production. (Baudrillard 17)

The shifting and contingent lines of culture have rendered literary works meaningless products – “a monument to human ambition and human indifference” with “a life of about three months” (Ackroyd 150). However, the use of pastiche, which is evident in *Chatterton's* incorporation of eighteenth century memoirs and depictions of Victorian society and culture, works precisely at this effect. Through interaction of the postmodern and archival Romance in *Chatterton* the rejection of the claims of “authentic” representation and “inauthentic” copy alike is foregrounded and the very meaning of artistic originality is forcefully challenged along with the transparency of historical referentiality.

The mystery of the artistic representation, however, remains inaccessible to any of the characters in this novel who has a stake in artistic creation. Realism is undercut by the betrayal of it by the means of Ackroyd's postmodernist narrative techniques, decentred narrative authority and scepticism to narrative voice. The only first person narrative in the novel, which is initially projected as Chatterton's memoirs, is later discredited, and the paratextual biographical note at the beginning of the novel is subverted by the authorial narrative at the end. Yet, poetry, as Charles says, never dies: “How else could Chatterton's forgeries become real poetry?” (Ackroyd 151). This is a question that Ackroyd's novel negotiates. The novel repeatedly insinuates that fiction is deceit, that all art is forgery. The reader is then provided with many possible narratives and is allowed to mark them as true or false. Within the fictional world of the novel these narratives are construed as true because they are false in a historical sense, and therefore fiction. Ackroyd plays between the reader's and the writer's fictions (and their realities). The novel rather appears to speak for a poetics of plagiarism. Plagiarism is the essential condition of poetry, because the idea of originality

itself is suspect and imitation of imitation is all is there to it. This Philip learns after Charles's death, when he undergoes a cathartic liberation from his romantic attachment to the myth of origins: "there is no real origin for anything. Everything just exists. Everything just exists in order to exist" (Ackroyd 232). But, this does not preclude the passion for and the search for the myth of 'origin', of 'originality', and thus, the search of the 'archive' would continue.

Postmodern fiction, Brian McHale claims, self-consciously contradict documented history "by flaunting anachronism and by integrating history and the fantastic" (McHale 96). The postmodernist metafictional narrative mode challenges "the concealed or unacknowledged politics and evasions of aesthetic representation by using parody as a means to connect the present to the past without positing the transparency of representation, verbal or visual" (Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* 98). The 'archive' of documented history and the contingencies of historical representations are triumphed over by art and the autonomy of the literary work. As such, the burning of the portrait of the Unknown Man towards the end of the novel comes to stand thematically and metaphorically for the ephemeral nature of art itself. It was this iconographic 'archive' that initiated Charles's quest and it vanishes, like some magical object, when the quester is dead. It is as if the 'archive' – the magical object of the quest – withers at the touch of indecent and prying hands. Stewart Mark, a modern day impersonator of Famous painters, whose bungled attempt at restoration destroys the portrait, rubs the paint with alcohol. The top layer fades revealing many new faces as the portrait seems to have been re-painted or retouched several times in its history. The palimpsest of a painting is an appropriate metaphor for the myriad-faced Chatterton myth – the Chatterton of the Romantics, the Chatterton of Wallis and the Chatterton of Charles's imagination. All these Chatterton's are 'fakes' just as the painting is, and just as 'true'. For the romance of the Chatterton myth to survive, therefore, it is necessary that the actual archival trace of it be obliterated, because the most powerful 'archive' is the one which is absent.

Notes:

ⁱ In the present study, the term 'archive' enclosed within single quotation marks refers to the metaphorised archive that stands in as a supplement for all kinds of cultural memory and storage agencies. In this sense it designates a set of institutional forms brought together by their function, a generic set of characteristics shared by different archives based on the idea of ordered accumulations of textual collections. When not enclosed within single quotation mark the term archive should be taken to mean particular, empirical or historical instantiations of textual collections that might be specified geographically, architecturally and

technologically. However, the idea of particular archives and the idea of 'archive' in its generic sense often overlap, the one contaminating the other.

ⁱⁱ Romance of the archive is an umbrella term, which designates the post-imperial British novels in which the search for hidden archival documents forms the crux of the plot. The search is configured in the form of quest Romance. Although Keen demurs to align the archival Romances with postmodernist fiction and argues that the majority of these novels end with the achievement of a physical archive, the three novels discussed in the present thesis are seen to be heavily inflected with postmodernist theories of fiction. The quests of the researchers are problematized, and through the continuous deferral of the object of quest a deconstructive reading of the ideologies of the quest itself is orchestrated.

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