

## THE DEATH OF THE AUTHOR: A READING OF PETER ACKROYD'S *CHATTERTON*<sup>1</sup>

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The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.

T.S. Eliot

I have been considering your Death, Tom.  
(his publisher to Chatterton)

### SUMMARY

Peter Ackroyd's novels are clear examples of the postmodernist trend Linda Hutcheon has called «historiographic metafiction». This mode of fiction recuperates the concern with plot and storytelling characteristic of 19th-century realist novels but critically, by addressing the issues that realist fiction takes for granted, such as the relationship between past and present, fiction and reality and representation, and the conception and condition of historical truth among others. Ackroyd's fourth novel, *Chatterton* (1987) problematizes the notion of authorial-theological meaning associated with realist fiction based on plot, by presenting three different narrative lines that correspond to three different versions of the death of the 18th-

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century poet Thomas Chatterton. The fact that in the end none of the three versions is privileged over the other two may be related to the Barthean conception of the modern author as 'scriptor', who refuses to impose a single unified meaning on the text—and thus, sacrifices himself—in favour of the text itself, and of the preceding texts it includes, without sacrificing storytelling.

An unsuccessful 20th-century poet called Charles Wychwood is attracted by the portrait of an anonymous middle-aged man during a visit to a Dickensian antiques shop in London. The revelation of the mystery of the man's identity leads to a greater mystery, the possibility that the 18th-century poet and plagiarist Thomas Chatterton might have faked his own death and continued writing under a series of assumed identities: Blake, Gray, Akenside, Crabbe, etc., and with it, the overwhelming realisation that the whole of the English literary tradition needs to be revised. This main plot is complemented by two other stories that take place at different chronological periods, one in the 19th century, around the figure of George Meredith, the poet that posed for the painting that immortalised Chatterton's death (Henry Wallis' *Chatterton*, Tate Gallery, London), and the other one in the 18th century on the last day of the life of Chatterton himself. In *Chatterton*, as in most of Ackroyd's novels,<sup>2</sup> the present and the past of the city of London intermingle and coexist.

Ackroyd's critical recognition as poet, reviewer, biographer and as one of the most accomplished British fiction writers of the 80s and 90s, is also accompanied by the recognition of the reading public, which has turned him into a popular, best-selling, prize-winning novelist. This popularity is no doubt the result of his abilities as a story-teller. He may be said to have recuperated the Aristotelian idea of plot as the first and most important dramatic element, defined as «a whole [...] which has a beginning, a middle, and an end» (in ADAMS, 1971: 52); he then peoples it with a variety of characters, and finally furnishes it with a profusion of details, literary and historical data, references to actual events, and realistic, scientific, technical or geographical, descriptions. Hence, his reliance on plot to provide the *telos* and artistic coherence of his fiction results in the creation of an alternative world in which the reader, like that of a 19th-century realist novel, can become absorbed. In this world, fiction and history, voices, conventions, styles and narratives both past and present, bear the same status and affect each other. By way of illustration, in

<sup>2</sup> For a checklist of Peter Ackroyd's production see Omega 1997.

*Hawksmoor* (1985), the life and work of a 20th-century detective called Nicholas Hawksmoor is permeated and eventually determined by the life and designs of an 18th-century architect and murderer called Nicholas Dyer; in *The House of Doctor Dee* (1993), Matthew Palmer finds that the house his father left him in his testament had belonged to the 16th-century magician John Dee, and will have to face the disturbing possibility of his being the very homunculus Doctor Dee had been trying to create all his life by alchemical means.

But Ackroyd does not write historical novels in the strict sense of the word; he makes use of history in order to explore the relationship between fiction and reality, or more precisely, between any structuring principle and our concepts of reality and truth. Linda Hutcheon calls this mode of fiction «historiographic metafiction»<sup>3</sup>, whose origins in Britain go back to the 1980s<sup>4</sup>, and whose appearance is motivated by «a longing for the return to the traditional relish in storytelling while simultaneously underlining the fact that this return is problematic» (ONEGA 1991: 31).

The aim of this paper is to read Ackroyd's *Chatterton* with a view to analysing the mechanisms at work in the recuperation of plot and storytelling characteristic of postmodern fiction. Through the use of three different (sometimes contradictory) plot lines, the novel creates a world that still keeps the illusion of reality allowing the reader to become absorbed in it while, at the same time, self-consciously displaying its own artificiality; in this way, the novel also points to the constructedness of any representation of the «real world».

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For any created world to keep the illusion of reality, and thus to be seen as ordered, coherent and closed, it must necessarily be the product of some structuring cause that, if the illusion is to be maintained, has to remain unnoticed, so that the reader is kept entirely, or at least willingly, oblivious of its existence. Art that conceals art, fiction that covers its own fictionality, is the basic aesthetic principle of mimetic realism, a mode of fiction that is teleologically conditioned by an author's vision or message and which is supported precisely

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<sup>3</sup> Hutcheon defines «historiographic metafiction» as «those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also claim to historical events and personages» (HUTCHEON, 1988: 5)

<sup>4</sup> See ONEGA 1993.

by that author's invisibility. If we examine *Chatterton* from a narratological point of view, it could be said that the position of the author it presents, as reflected in the mode of narration used, resembles the one the author occupies in mimetic realism. According to Genette (1983), the mimetic effect of a narrative is rendered by two textual factors: «the quantity of narrative information (a more developed or more *detailed* narrative) and the absence or minimal presence of the informer—in other words, of the narrator» (GENETTE, 1983: 166, emphasis in the original). The narrator in *Chatterton* is heterodiegetic, omniscient and omnipresent, that is, it has access to events throughout three different historical periods, and to events happening in different places in the same period<sup>5</sup> and to characters' minds, and shows no signs of its presence; therefore it could be better described as a transparent narrative voice. The illusion this narrative mode produces is that of immediacy and unmediated, direct access to a world that exists as an objective entity, independently of its representation. This narrative voice is associated with the existence of an invisible god-like author that, unobtrusive behind his/her creation (like the author in classic realism) transmits a single, unified meaning through his/her artistic creation.

This description of *Chatterton* would contradict its condition as self-conscious, metafictional novel. If we consider the terms 'self-conscious' and 'metafictional' to be synonyms, Robert Alter (in BURDEN 1979), Patricia Waugh (1984) and especially Brian Stonehill (1988) would coincide in pointing out that, in this kind of fiction, the author, or rather, a narrator-author figure, usually appears openly acknowledging his/her agency in the invention of the world the reader is introduced to. However, Hutcheon already contemplates the contradictory nature of novels like *Chatterton* in which a world that is aware of its own fictionality is presented, with the help of authorial unobtrusiveness, as an objective world for the reader to engage in. Hutcheon considers that this contradictory tendency is specific to historiographic metafiction, the only mode that «perfectly expresses what is for [Hutcheon] the defining characteristic of

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<sup>5</sup> A clear example of the latter, and perhaps a parody of narratorial omnipresence in view of what this analysis of the novel will try to demonstrate, is the reference to the actions of most of the 20th-century characters at the moment of Charles' death:

Charles died, and in the library Philip was writing 'Yes' on a memorandum; Charles died, and Flint was sitting with bowed head over a paperback copy of *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*; Charles died, and Harriet was holding up her cat in triumph; Charles died, and Pat was jogging around St. Mary Redcliffe; Charles died, and Mr. Leno was whistling while dusting a brass figurine of Don Quixote astride Rosinante. (p. 169).

the postmodernist ethos: its basic contradictory nature» (ONEGA, 1993: 48). Thus in *Chatterton*, the use of a transparent narrative voice, which apparently would convey the idea of an authorial univocal meaning of the text and the text's capacity for unproblematic report on reality, is undermined at a structural and at a thematic level through the coexistence of three narrative lines that correspond to different historical periods and contradict each other, and through the issues that consistently reappear in all three narrative lines of the novel, such as the relationship between past and present, fiction and reality and representation, the conception and condition of historical truth, the nature of art, and especially the notions of authority and originality, all of them closely related.

The novel overtly and self-consciously addresses the issues of authority and originality by presenting different narratives around the figure that gives thematic coherence to the three plot lines. At the beginning of the novel we are provided with the official version of Chatterton's death in the form of an encyclopaedia entry on the life of the poet: lack of success and, consequently, poverty would have led him to commit suicide at the age of eighteen. This version is maintained in the 19th-century narrative line of the novel, where the account of the historical painting of the death of Chatterton, with George Meredith as its model, is narrated in great detail. But this version will be contradicted in an overt way, in the 20th- and 18th-century narrative lines of the novel and in a more subtle, self-reflexive way already in the 19th-century narrative line itself.

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In the 20th century, the novel presents an even more romantic idea of Chatterton's death than his suicide at an early age. Charles Wychwood finds a painting that would demonstrate that Chatterton did not in fact die; that he had faked his own death to continue writing, in the same way as he had faked the medieval poetic style of the poems that brought about his fame and had invented an appropriate author for them, a medieval blind monk called Thomas Rowley. This idea will appear again in the novel as a possibility in a conversation between Chatterton and his publisher, Joynson (92), recounted in the papers Charles finds when he investigates into the origins of that painting in Bristol, Chatterton's birth town. According to this seemingly autobiographical account, Chatterton would have accepted his publisher's proposal to die for the world and started writing poetry in imitation of the style of other poets including his contemporary William Blake (92). This would turn Chatterton not only into the

precursor, but into the actual catalyst of the English Romantic movement as a whole.

From the point of view of the reader, there is some evidence that directly or indirectly encourages belief in Charles' idea. A few pages immediately before Charles reads the manuscript, the narrator tells us about the findings Charles' friend, Philip Slack, makes in the library where he works. In a catalogue on his desk he notices an announcement of a forthcoming publication by a certain Professor Brillo entitled *Thou Marvellous Boy: The Influence of Thomas Chatterton on the Writings of William Blake*, which deals with the actual extent of the effect of Chatterton's work on the English Romantic poet, a subject

which Blake scholars have seemed unwilling to address, for it assumes that Blake was influenced by the work of a forger and a plagiarist. But it would not be going too far to suggest that, without the work and the influence of Thomas Chatterton, Blake's own poetry would have taken a wholly different form. (72)

Thus, the plausibility of Philip's and the reader's shared secret knowledge of the actual relationship of Chatterton with Blake's poems is nearly confirmed by an outside academic source. In the same way, the reader discovers that it is actually possible to imitate the style of an artist so that the imitation looks «original» —originality defined as 'coming from its supposed origin'—, when we find that the Seymour paintings exhibited in Cumberland and Maitland, the art gallery where Vivien, Charles' wife, works, and the rest of his other recent paintings, are in fact fakes, the work of the painter's assistant. Moreover, as is stated in an implicit way, if the secret is never given away these paintings will become «original» for historical records and their true origin impossible to trace back, since in fact, it is impossible to infer an origin, an author, from his/her creation, as Harriet Scrope (the elderly novelist for whom Charles works as an assistant) suggests to Vivien unthinkingly, when she is thinking of an excuse to record in writing Vivien's donation of Charles' possessions to her:

'What if I should die tomorrow, and Charles's poems were found on my desk?' She looked towards Sarah for support, which was not forthcoming. 'Everyone would think that I had written them.'

The prospect horrified Vivien. 'But surely they would know they were somebody else?'

'Nobody knows things like that'. (185-86)

However, at the end of the book the reader will learn with Philip that both the painting and the papers Charles was given in Bristol are fakes, the work of

Chatterton's publisher in an attempt to destroy the dead poet's reputation and image as the precursor of Romantic poetry, and denounce him as a faker. Therefore, Charles' theory of Chatterton as primary cause of a whole tradition is shattered. As Philip will tell Vivien at the end of the novel, «if you trace anything backwards, trying to figure out cause and effect, or motive, or means, there is no real *origin* for anything» (232, emphasis in the original). It could be said then, that when the version of Chatterton Charles creates proves wrong, it destroys the bourgeois myth of origins and its reappropriation of the Romantic ideas of individuality and the creative power of the mind into the conception of the subject as individual source of meaning. Chatterton's idea of originality (as described in the pamphlet Philip gets in the church in Bristol) supports this interpretation: «Chatterton knew that original genius consists in forming new and happy combinations, rather than in searching after thoughts and ideas which had never occurred before» (58).

On the other hand, when Charles compares the biographies of Chatterton he notices 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» (127). The past cannot be recovered, only interpreted, and its textual traces (to borrow Hutcheon's words, 1988: 125), like the biographies or the manuscripts and the painting may already (necessarily) be a fictional representation of the past. Charles realises that «[k]nowing the past [is] a question of representing, that is, of constructing and interpreting, not of objective recording» (HUTCHEON, 1990: 74). Thus, his interpretation of Chatterton is also valid since, as he says, «if there are no truths, everything is true» (127).

There are other instances in the 20th-century narrative line that address the issue of originality from another perspective: that of the paintings in the art gallery. Two of the painters exhibited in the art gallery exemplify what a different conception of art would imply. Grandma Joel's paintings, characterised as 'Art Brut', portray «nothing but cramped handwriting, the same words repeated over and again» (109). Fritz Dangerfield —another representative of 'Innocent Art', 'Art Brut' or 'Naive Art'— repeated his images again and again and «[h]e did not speak, and he did not write except with an alphabet of his own invention» (116). Consequently, their work makes no sense at all, for «[w]here there is no tradition, art simply becomes primitive» (110). The rejection of a shared linguistic or, in this case, artistic sign system results in solipsism. Complete originality entails sacrificing intelligibility. In this sense, the reference to T. S. Eliot's «Tradition and the Individual Talent» the novel implicitly makes cannot be overlooked. For Eliot the poet is part of a community

that includes all the artists that precedes him and his work can only attain full meaning in relation to it: «No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone; you must set him for contrast and comparison among the dead» (1971: 784). His conception of art presupposes the existence of a kind of collective unconscious of art that is slightly modified every time a new work appears; hence, as Harriet and her friend Sarah realise, «[n]o one can start again», «so there's no choice. You have to carry it all around with you» (116).

Indeed, it is the refusal to accept the impossibility of being original that torments other artists in the novel. Harriet Scrope, a successful novelist that, nevertheless, finds herself incapable of writing her biography because that would imply acknowledging her borrowings from a 19th-century writer called Harrison Bentley. She does not absorb the past in the Eliotean fashion but exploits it for her own purposes, and her problems to relate to it properly show in a tendency to misquotation and misrecognition. She may be said to suffer a contradiction in terms from Harold Bloom's 'Anxiety of Influence', for she believes in originality as individual creation; therefore, when she decided to adapt the plots of a writer of the past for her novels she was cheating (she does not have moral scruples but is afraid of being caught). Ironically, the plots adapted from Bentley deal with the issue of originality in its two definitions. The first one concerns the conception of originality as 'creation', incorporation and recasting of elements from the past versus individual creation: «[the novel] had concerned a poet who believed himself to be possessed by the spirits of dead writers but who, nevertheless, had been acclaimed as the most original poet of his age» (69); the second one, around the conception of originality as 'coming from its supposed origin', as opposed to 'fake': «a novel in which a writer's secretary is responsible for many of her employer's 'posthumous' publications» (69). This plot will recur twice later on in the 'real life' of the novel one with the Seymour paintings and the other with Chatterton manuscripts, as mentioned above.

There is another character in the novel that suffers from anxiety of influence in a more «academic» way. Philip, who wants to be a fiction writer, is obsessed with the impossibility of being original. He has absorbed the past in such a way that, when he tried once to write a novel it «seemed to him to be filled with images and phrases from the work of other writers whom he admired. It had become a patchwork of other voices and other styles» (70). However, at the very end of the 20th century narrative line the reader will discover that Philip may in fact be the fictional author of the novel s/he is reading. Philip will manage to find a way to absorb the voices and styles of the past in a creative way when he contemplates writing a novel on Charles' theory of Chatterton, which (necessarily) «[he] must tell [...] in [his] own way» (232).



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The 19th-century narrative line starts in the middle of Chapter Nine when Charles takes his son, Edward, to the Tate Gallery to see Henry Wallis' portrait of Chatterton, with the writer George Meredith posing as the dead poet, and it covers half of Chapters Ten and Eleven. The narration of the process of painting the portrait also includes a love relationship between the painter and Meredith's wife, and finishes with the poet's being abandoned by his wife. Apparently, this story line should contribute to affirm the official version of Chatterton's death recorded in the encyclopaedia entry at the beginning of the novel, since that is the version Wallis' painting reproduces for historical records. However, the fact that it is not a real portrait of Chatterton but of Meredith posing as Chatterton problematises the official version of Chatterton's death as portrayed in the painting disclosing it as a representation, and thus encouraging the reader to examine any other version, official or unofficial, in the same light.

All through the process of painting, the topic that occupies the conversation between Wallis and Meredith is the issue of the relationship between art and reality. Wallis believes in the naturalness of such relationship; for the painting of Chatterton's death he only needs a model and a sitting at the actual room where the poet committed suicide because «[s]urely you have only to depict [reality]» (157). Wallis also reveals that his painting is based on Catcott's account of Chatterton's death, which he follows for realism's sake (137). But ironically, he has changed some details for the artistic effect—to Meredith's question: «Was I meant to be clutching some poison?», Wallis replies: «The phial looks better on the floor. It helps the composition» (156)—and is indeed using a model, as was usually the case with paintings of dead persons<sup>6</sup>. In showing the reader how the painting of the death of the poet is elaborated, the story calls our attention to the painting as such, as artistic creation, and not at what it depicts; although, as Hutcheon argues, postmodernism's emphasis on representation does not imply disregarding the referent but emphasising its nature as representation, that is, as interpretation of reality.<sup>7</sup> Thus, Wallis' 'faithful'

<sup>6</sup> As Harriet Scrope enquires when commenting on Sarah's book, *The Art of Death*:

'You don't know how they really died, do you? [...] 'They were painted from the imagination, weren't they?'

'They used models, as they were supposed to' (p. 34)

<sup>7</sup> "It is not that representation now dominates or effaces the referent, but rather that it now self-consciously acknowledges its existence as representation—that is, as interpreting (indeed as creating) its referent, not as offering direct and immediate access to it" (HUTCHEON, 1990: 34).

depiction of reality turns out to be a representation of somebody else's representation of the poet's death.

Nevertheless, Wallis' painting «will always be remembered as the true death of Chatterton» (157), as Meredith says. Unlike Wallis, who believes that art is a faithful replica of external reality, for Meredith, art cannot and does not reproduce reality but creates it: «The poet does not merely recreate or describe the world. He actually creates it» (157). In other words, Wallis' painting does not present but represents and thus fabricates the official version of Chatterton's death. Moreover, to a great extent the origin of the myth of Chatterton as the pre-romantic poet who committed suicide in his youth is in Wallis' painting, which is not a product of his imagination exclusively but rather incorporates both Catcott's and Meredith's interpretation of the death of the 18th-century poet.

At the end of the story, just before Meredith's wife abandons him, husband and wife visit a fair and Meredith comes across a painting of «a middle-aged man, without a wig, sitting beside a candle» (173) which calls his attention. It is the same painting Charles will find in the antique shop in the 20th century the fake portrait of Chatterton in middle age, which is, as it turns out, older than the 'true' painting for which Meredith has posed. The two poets, the model and the real thing, art and reality, have come so close together that it is impossible to separate them, in such a way that Meredith can be recognised in this painting of Chatterton (for which, paradoxically, another model must have posed, since it is a fake):

With trembling hands he held it up against the light which streamed in from the open doorway, and for a moment Mary saw Meredith's own face depicted there —lined and furrowed in a desolate middle age. (173)

In the same way, in the 20th-century narrative line, the connection established between Charles and Chatterton, reinforced by Charles' sudden death, will turn the painting of Chatterton's death into a representation of Charles' own death.<sup>8</sup> Both poets, Meredith and Charles, find the face in the fake portrait

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<sup>8</sup> In the eyes of his son, Edward, when he returns to the Tate Gallery to see Wallis' painting after his father's death:

Edward had not yet chosen to look closely at the man lying upon the bed but now, when he did so, he stepped back in astonishment: it was his father lying there. He was putting out his hand towards his son. Edward came forward,

of Chatterton familiar (11 and 173); the merging of their faces with that of Chatterton at some point in the novel<sup>9</sup> could be interpreted as a *mise-en-abyme* of the novel which, as shall be argued, presents several versions —like the several layers of paint Stewart Merk, Seymour's assistant, will discover in the fake portrait— of the death of the 18th-century poet, refusing however, to favour one over the others.

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The version of Chatterton's death offered in the last section of the novel, Chapters Thirteen to Fifteen (interspersed with the last events of the 20th-century narrative line), contradicts the previous ones. Chatterton did not fake his own death or commit suicide; he died accidentally, of an overdose of arsenic and laudanum he administered himself as a cure for a venereal disease he had contracted. The novel provides a «realistic» explanation for the early death of the poet which demythologises death, emphasising its sordidness and physicality, and contrasts with the romantic image of death Wallis' painting creates:

He vomits over the bed, and in that same spasm the shit runs across his thin buttocks —how hot it is— and trickles down his thighs, the smell of it mixing with the rank odour of the sweat pouring out of his body. (227)

His face is swelling, his eyelids bursting in the heat. (228-99)

Chatterton is suffocating now [...] His body is plucked up and then thrown down in derision, the bed swaying and groaning beneath his convulsions. (230)

However, the reader cannot make an innocent reading of this realistic version of the poet's death after Meredith's words: «the greatest realism is also the greatest fakery» (139), a comment on Wallis' artistic technique but also a warning for the naïve reader of this section of the novel. Therefore, in stressing the

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and held it for a moment before it fell away onto the wooden floor. He thought his father might be about to speak, but he could not raise his head and he only smiled. Then this picture faded. (p. 229)

<sup>9</sup> Meredith in the example quoted above; Charles not only in the eyes of his son, but also in the eyes of his wife when she faints in the art gallery at the end of the novel, perhaps because she now recognises her dead husband's face in the fake portrait of Chatterton (205).

realism of death, the version offered in this 18th-century narrative line seems to be self-consciously attracting attention to itself as a convention, as another artistic representation of Chatterton's death.

From the point of view of artistic conventions, the three versions of Chatterton's life and death the novel presents are not so different, even if they contradict each other at another level. Charles' version derives from a mimetic interpretation of the papers and the painting he finds; he fails to see that they are the product of somebody else's use of realistic conventions. Wallis' painting is based on an unproblematic reading of Catcott's account of Chatterton's death; it constitutes an artistic re-interpretation that also makes use of the conventions of realism, which history has promoted to the status of 'reality'—since, as Meredith says «the invention is always more real» (157). Finally, the version provided in the last section of the novel could be taken as a self-reflexive parody of realism itself. The novel's choice of presenting this story at the end would, according to the conventions of realism, give this version of Chatterton's death the status of truth in the 'real world' of the novel; a novel based on plot structures its materials teleologically, therefore the last events are to be taken as the resolution, the truth the novel has finally discovered. But in this case, although this version would contradict the other two at a thematic level, in fact it does not invalidate them, but gives them value by placing them at the same level it places itself. The novel is based on three plots (the 20th century narrative line includes the other two); each of them is solved and each of them presents a different version of the death of Chatterton, but none of them is privileged. When Chatterton is dying he has a vision of the painting that will immortalise him and at that moment two men join him in that image, Meredith and Charles:<sup>10</sup>

[...] he sees ahead of him an image edged with rose-coloured light. It is still forming, and for centuries he watches himself upon an attic bed, with the casement window half-open behind him, the rose plant lingering on the sill, the smoke rising from the candle, as it will always do. I will not wholly die, then. Two others have joined him —

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<sup>10</sup> Meredith dreams of Chatterton and the image in his dream corresponds to that Chatterton sees before dying:

'Have you passed Chatterton on the stairs again, George?' [Wallis] said at last.

'What was that?'

'In your dream. You told me how you saw Chatterton.' (156)

Charles has an apparition of a man with red hair while sitting beside a fountain: "He was sitting beside a small fountain, leaning his back against its round basin. [...] When he awoke he noticed that the leaves had been swept away, and a young man was standing beside him. He had red hair, brushed back." (46-7)

the young man who passes him on the stairs and the young man who sits with bowed head by the fountain— and they stand silently beside him. I will live for ever, he tells them. They link hands, and bow towards the sun. (234)

The ending of *Chatterton*, like that of *Hawksmoor*, is an attempt to reconcile opposites and resembles the expression of the yearning for unity associated with the modernists. This «contradictory yearning for mythical closure» (ONEGA, 1996: 208) present in all of Ackroyd's work, must be linked not only with T. S. Eliot's concept of tradition but also with Roland Barthes' (1990) conception of the literary work as 'text', the result of a change in our conception of language connected with the interdisciplinarity characteristic of our society. For Barthes the text is «a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture» (BARTHES, 1990: 146). The death of the author in *Chatterton*, as represented by the literal deaths of both Chatterton and Charles, which the title of this paper makes reference to, is in keeping with the conception of the novel that Barthes' famous essay of the same title introduces. Philip, the fictional author of *Chatterton*, is the Barthesian modern 'scriptor' that is «born simultaneously with the text» (1990: 45) after the author has died. The death of the author is the death of origin and of the 'theological' meaning of the novel in favour of a conception of the text as «a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash» (Barthes 1990: 146). Philip needed a story, a plot, to provide the *telos* for his narrative, but he already knew that «there were only a limited number of plots in the world» (70), so what he eventually does is to combine plots that derive from a multiplicity of origins and refuses to impose an ultimate, unified meaning on the text by not privileging any of the versions of Chatterton it presents. The final paragraph of the novel symbolises the only conception of unity that the text can provide, a conception that implies accepting multiplicity. Only the reader has access to the three versions of Chatterton's death and is able to contemplate (and accept) them at the same time, for «[t]he reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination» (BARTHES, 1990: 148).

In refusing to choose a single meaning for his text, this modern author — and indeed, not only the fictional author, Philip Slack but also the actual author of the novel, Peter Ackroyd— sacrifices himself, effaces himself from the text and undergoes «a voluntary obliteration of the self» (FOUCAULT, 1987: 126). Therefore, in *Chatterton*, the absence of the author, associated in mimetic realism with the unproblematic transmission of an authorial message, is the

sign of his own death, of the rejection of the bourgeois notion of the individual subject as creator of the text, but not at the expense of plot and story-telling.

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