

**REWRITING LITERARY HISTORY: PETER ACKROYD AND  
INTERTEXTUALITY**

Pro Gradu  
for Prof. Rissanen  
and Dr. Shackleton  
University of Helsinki  
Department of English  
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Ukko Hänninen

URN:NBN:fi-fe19991260

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**Abbreviations:**

*Chatterton - (C)*

*Dan Leno & the Limehouse Golem - Dan Leno (DL)*

*Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories - Savile*

*Notes for a New Culture - Notes*

*The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde - Last Testament (LT)*

*The Picture of Dorian Gray - Dorian Gray*

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1. The thesis**

The central argument in my treatise is that in his novels Peter Ackroyd rewrites English literary history while imposing his intertextual view of art on us. Ackroyd uses the works of earlier writers as material for his own novels; he takes up his subjects from the history of English literature. This reflects the poststructuralist or postmodern thinking in which art is seen to mirror other art (texts), not life or 'reality'. Ackroyd breaks away from the realist convention by foregrounding the intertextual position of his novels as well as thematizing intertextuality as such. While doing so, Ackroyd deconstructs three myths: (1) the 'truth' of history writing, (2) the Romantic idea of original, individualistic genius, and (3) the myth of 'realistic' fiction, which he exposes as a convention.

In place of these myths, Ackroyd reconstructs his own ones. He emphasizes the inevitable textuality of our knowledge of the world and history, and stresses the intertextuality of all writing. According to this logic, pastiche, or imitation, is no longer seen in negative terms but, together with parody, becomes the essence of true 'poetry'. Unlike other poststructuralists, like Roland Barthes (1977), who have insisted that the introduction of the concept of intertextuality into critical discourse has resulted in the 'death of the author', or the rejection of the concept of originality (Hutcheon, 1988), Ackroyd defends authorship and, through his

intertextual view of art, goes so far as to redefine 'originality'. Thus, in his novels Ackroyd may be said to give his own contribution to literary theory, while at the same time re-examining the literary canon. Ackroyd's fiction is literary criticism written in the form of novels - his works are postmodern metafiction that not only point towards themselves but also towards literature and criticism as a whole. The paradox in Ackroyd's writing is that in re-examining the literary past and in imitating others, he is not actually imitating anybody (cf. Miller, 1989: 95).

## 1.2. Methodology

As for the critical method, I am relying on several poststructuralist and postmodern theorists. I shall be using Kristeva's notion of 'intertextuality' (e.g. in Plett, 1991), Bakhtin's idea of 'dialogism' as well as David Cowart's (1993) theory of literary symbiosis. I shall also refer to T. S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (in *The Sacred Wood*, 1920), Harold Bloom's (1975) 'anxiety of influence', and the deconstruction theory of Derrida and others (e.g. "Structure, Sign and Play", in *The Structuralist Controversy*, 1972). I shall also make use of Linda Hutcheon's theories of parody and historiographic metafiction (*The Politics of Postmodernism*, 1989) as well as Liisa Saariluoma's theory of the postindividualistic novel (*Postindividualistinen romaani*, 1991), especially her notion of intertextual 'self'. I shall also refer to Peter Ackroyd's own writings, biographies and essays, *Notes for a New Culture* (1976) in particular. These, I hope, will not only provide valuable insights into Ackroyd's fiction but will also help to place his own poststructuralist thinking into a wider intellectual context.

## 1.3. The choice of material and the organization of the paper

Most novels by Ackroyd (with the exception of *Hawksmoor* (1985) and *The House of Doctor Dee* (1993)) move in the world of English literary history. *The Great Fire of London* (1982) reinvents *Little Dorrit* by Charles Dickens; *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983) is written in the form of a diary as if by Oscar Wilde himself; *Chatterton* (1987) reinterprets the life and death of the poet, Thomas Chatterton, and *First Light* (1989) clearly alludes to the works of Thomas Hardy. *English Music* (1992), moreover, is no less than a collage of English literature and culture; *Dan Leno & the Limehouse Golem* (1994) bases its crime plot on the

writings of Thomas De Quincey; and the most recent novel, *Milton in America* (1996), gives an alternative account of John Milton's later years. The question is, therefore, which ones to choose as the material of analysis here within the scope of this treatise.

My solution is to focus on three novels by Ackroyd which I think emphasize different aspects of his use of intertextuality in relation to the English literary history: *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (chapter 2) is a good example of Ackroyd's extraordinary gift as an imitator and a literary stylist, but at the same time it exemplifies his poststructuralist practice of blurring traditional genre boundaries. *Chatterton* (chapter 3) self-reflexively thematizes imitation and intertextuality but it also questions the truths of history writing as well as proposes an alternative to the literary canon. It also deals with the 'anxiety of influence' and redefines the Romantic myth of 'original genius'. Finally, *Dan Leno & the Limehouse Golem* (chapter 4) explores these issues of art and tradition even further and extends the intertextual view of art to life itself, at the same time as it mocks the myth of 'realistic' fiction. *Dan Leno* also serves to illustrate the ways how Ackroyd uses earlier stories as the basis of his own fiction.

In addition to these, I will also refer to Ackroyd's other novels as well as other contemporary fiction, whenever that seems relevant. I have structured my paper chronologically, since this enables us to trace the development of Ackroyd's writing and makes it easier to detect the ongoing patterns in the texture of his verbal art.

#### **1.4. A note on vocabulary**

Before finally moving on to the actual discussion, it is necessary to comment on two central terms of this paper: (1) 'intertextuality' and (2) 'postmodernism'. These terms are used differently by different theorists, and consequently are not without some conceptual ambiguities. Hence their brief elaboration here.

##### **1.4.1. Intertextuality**

There are basically two "schools" of intertextuality: The first is the more practical and traditional one which delimits itself to the study of the relationship between a text and its pre-text(s). According to this view, the intertextual relationship

becomes interesting only when the connection can be clearly verified and pointed out in the text, and this textual relationship usually takes the form of an allusion, quotation, annexation, etc. The dialogic interplay between a text and its pre-text may understandably create problems for interpretation, but then again this narrower view of intertextuality provides a sound, practical method of analysing these questions.

The second view is the more theoretical one, associated with poststructuralism and theorists such as Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida. It posits the wider view of intertextuality which says that all texts are intertexts. Intertextuality is the basis and requirement of all communication, and all (communicable) texts and discourses are always built upon existing cultural codes and norms. Texts are seen as 'mosaics of citations' or 'echo chambers', wherein the question of origin loses its importance. Textuality itself controls discourses more than subjects themselves (cf. Plett, 1991: 1-4).

In this paper I am using both views: the first is applied to my practical textual analysis of Peter Ackroyd's intertextuality - how he uses other texts as the basis of his novels. The second is used in the more theoretical discussions about Ackroyd's art and is related to my argument about the kinds of views and purposes that can be found behind Ackroyd's use of intertextuality.

#### **1.4.2. Postmodernism**

The question of postmodernism is not fixed either, and there are many notions about it. The theories of postmodernism encompass a whole range of different fields, including philosophy, sociology, art history, architecture, literature and criticism, and every theorist seems to have his or her own conceptions and emphases about the term (cf. Selden, 1993: 174-9). Thus, instead of trying to limit my approach to one particular view, I accept the plurality of the concept and use the term 'postmodern' whenever a theorist calls a specific feature by that name. One of the best surveys of postmodern tendencies is given by Ihab Hassan (in *Romanticism, Modernism, Postmodernism*, ed. Garvin, H., 1980), and many of the features listed by him are also relevant to Ackroyd, especially qualities such as Decreation/Deconstruction, Text/Intertext, Against interpretation/Misreading, and Difference-Differance/Trace. These tendencies are also largely synonymous with poststructuralism.

Other postmodern features that are relevant to my topic are Ackroyd's use of metafiction, his playfulness in the re-examination and re-use of English literary history, his suspicion of historical 'truths', as well as the idea of 'postindividualistic' or intertextual 'self'. Also the blurring of boundaries and the questioning of established hierarchies can be seen as a postmodern feature, and this already becomes apparent in my discussion about *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*.

## **2. The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde (1983)**

The early novel, *Last Testament*, may not be the most complex or multilayered of Ackroyd's works, but it is a good starting point in my analysis, as it introduces many of the issues that Ackroyd constantly deals with in his fiction and which he has also given fuller treatment in his later novels. Thus its analysis here introduces and paves the way for the points about intertextuality, history and literature that I am also pursuing in my later chapters about *Chatterton* and *Dan Leno*. Consequently, in the first part of this chapter (2.1.) I shall draw my attention to these more general issues that are central to my thesis, and in the second part (2.2.) I shall illustrate what I feel is the most significant aspect of *Last Testament*: its accomplishment as a convincing literary ventriloquism.

### **2.1. Biography, autobiography, criticism or a novel?**

Like most novels by Ackroyd, *Last Testament* is involved with the rewriting of English literary history, at the same time as it emphasizes the intertextuality of art and writing. It is a novel written in the form of a journal as if by Oscar Wilde himself in the last year of his life as an exile in Paris. Through the mouth of Wilde, Ackroyd goes through the life and works of the English writer, reassesses the

value of his work, even traces his literary influences, and re-examines his place in the literary canon.

For decades this place was somewhat ambiguous. Convicted as a homosexual in 1895, Oscar Wilde suffered a serious blow to his reputation. He became known as the "obscene impostor" or the "High Priest of Decadence" (Thornton, 1983: 67), and with his trial and condemnation the whole Aesthetic or Decadent movement went down, since hardly anyone wanted to be associated with these literary movements after the scandal. In the eyes of later critics Decadence (1889-1896) was often seen as something to be forgotten, or it was merely seen as a curious interlude between Victorian literature and Modernism, and the name of Oscar Wilde was either pushed to the margins or achieved notoriety among traditional humanist literary critics. In the words of Ackroyd's Wilde, "I shall be remembered not as an artist but as a case history, a psychological study to be placed beside Onan and Herodias" (112), "At least I have the consolation that I shall not appear in Mr Walter Scott's 'Great Writers' series" (11). Even today Oscar Wilde is almost equally well known by his sexuality and 'flamboyant personality' as his literary output.

Obviously, these kinds of biases are injustices that Ackroyd's novel brings to our attention. Already in *Notes for a New Culture* (1976) Ackroyd has attacked the traditional humanism of much English literary criticism, which largely sees the importance of literature in the morality or 'experience' that is mediated by the author. In that essay Ackroyd warns us against judging literature by its morality, social use or the private meanings of the author, and instead emphasizes the autonomy of language and literature. Like all Ackroyd's novels, *Last Testament* can be seen to reflect these propositions - after all it was Oscar Wilde himself who, like Ackroyd, insisted on 'art for art's sake', or that "there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book" (*Dorian Gray*: 21), and as Ackroyd shows in his novel, this kind of posture of Wilde, this Aesthetic stance that went against the grain of Victorian morality and repressed feelings, contributed to his downfall and ruin. Understandably, the idea of judging an author on moral grounds is an issue that conflicts with the principles laid out in Ackroyd's essay.

Consequently, *Last Testament* is partly a kind of confession in the vein of Jean-Jacques Rousseau or Thomas De Quincey, where Oscar Wilde speaks candidly about his life and sexuality, but more importantly, it is also a self-defence

of his career and work, directed against the nation who condemned him:

I was the greatest artist of my time, I do not doubt that, just as my tragedy was the greatest of its time. (...) I mastered each literary form. I brought comedy back to the English stage, I created symbolic drama in our tongue, and I invented the prose poem for a modern audience. I divorced criticism from practice, and turned into an independent enquiry, just as I wrote the only modern novel in English (170).

Of course this sounds like a typical Wildean exaggeration, but critical comments like these that are made throughout the novel enter and remain in the reader's mind.

Direct literary criticism of this kind is typical of Ackroyd's novels in general, which often blur boundaries between literature and criticism, fiction and non-fiction, fact and fantasy. 'Truth' and non-truth become problematic in Ackroyd's hands - it is hard to say which is which - and this has clear parallels with poststructuralism or deconstruction theory, which is suspicious of 'primary' and 'secondary' hierarchies, such as truth/error, nature/culture, speech/writing, literature/criticism, and which also questions established 'truths' that are taken for granted (Davis & Schleifer, 1991: 162, 166). In an interview Ackroyd himself has said that he does not see any great difference between writing a novel or a biography, for example: in both cases one has a vast and often conflicting material ahead of oneself, which merely has to be organized into a coherent unity. The only difference is that a biography has to appear plausible.

This kind of remark very much resembles the postmodern scepticism of 'truth', 'fact' or 'science', and just as Ackroyd's novels often include historical 'facts' and other somewhat unexpected material among his fiction, such as newspaper clippings (*Last Testament*: 95-6) or other annexations, so do his biographies often contain artful or dramatic, anecdotal or even moving, episodes that resemble novelistic conventions. In *T. S. Eliot* (232-4), for example, Ackroyd gives a sad account of Vivien Eliot's fate as she was committed to a mental asylum for the rest of her life, but immediately afterwards provides two pages of 'comic relief' by telling us what a "funny man" (234) T. S. Eliot could occasionally be. In *Dickens*, moreover, Ackroyd mixes clearly fictional interludes with the main text, and self-ironically comments through the mouth of Charles Dickens: "Oh, biographers. Biographers are simply novelists without imagination!" (*Dickens*: 754).

Similarly, *Last Testament* itself blurs boundaries: not only does it mix fact with fantasy or literature with criticism, but it also blurs the distinction between a biography and an autobiography. It could well be the former; indeed it very much resembles Ackroyd's biographies, but then again it is written in the form of a first person narrative. And it could easily be the latter, an autobiography or a confession written by Oscar Wilde, unless we knew it to be actually written by Peter Ackroyd. It is these kinds of tensions between the different possibilities or dimensions of the text that make the novel interesting: we read it as though it were Oscar Wilde's text, all the time aware that it is actually created by Ackroyd. The two authors in the text have a kind of dialogic relationship between each other - the two eras in a way reaching over the gap between them - and this dialogic interplay creates somewhat intriguing, and often ambiguous effects: *whose text are we finally reading, Ackroyd's or Wilde's?*

A radical interpretation would be to say that the text belongs to neither of the authors: not to Ackroyd since the text is not his 'own' style, and not to Wilde since it is not created by him. Perhaps the novel, therefore, affirms the autonomy of language suggested by Kristeva, according to whom any point of origin is impossible to trace:

Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations, any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of *intertextuality* replaces that of intersubjectivity, and a poetic language is read as at least double. (Kristeva, 1980: 66)

In *Notes* (1976) Ackroyd adopts a similar view, when he calls for the impersonal and independent status of literature and, like Roland Barthes in "The Death of the Author" (in *Image, Music, Text*, 1977: 142-8), plays down the importance of authorship, emphasizing the priority of language over its individual users. It is significant, however, that later on Ackroyd has actually changed his views on intertextuality and authorship, giving up such an extremist position (see 3.1.), but in any case, arguments like these deconstruct the conventionally negative view of imitation in Western art theories, and thereby make it possible for writers like Ackroyd to employ pastiche and parody on a large scale, as is the case in *Last Testament*. Thus Ackroyd's use of imitation is another blurring of distinctions: those of 'individual' voices of the two authors, Wilde and Ackroyd. In *Chatterton* Ackroyd exposes the Romantic individuality in art as a myth, and in

*Last Testament* he affirms this in practice.

*Last Testament* also contains a paradox: it is a novel, largely a work of fiction, which nevertheless has a strong feeling of 'plausibility', as of that of a historical document or an academic treatise. Like Ackroyd's biographies of Ezra Pound (1980), T. S. Eliot (1984), Dickens (1990) and William Blake (1995), *Last Testament* integrates a vast collection of historical 'facts' and literary sources, which are turned into a coherent and convincing narrative. The novel resembles Ackroyd's biographies in that it traces the development of the career of the artist and shows us the connection between his life and works - a quality which is in accordance with T. S. Eliot's criteria for a poet's biography: "the biographer of an author should possess some critical ability; he should be a man of taste and judgment, appreciative of the man whose biography he undertakes" (Colby, 1991: 6). *Last Testament*, of course, is such a favourable appraisal of Oscar Wilde, just as it occasionally criticizes his work as well. This, for instance, is what Ackroyd writes about *Vera*, Wilde's early play:

[It] was suitable for the ears of the deaf. I [Oscar Wilde] cannot think of that play without embarrassment. There was poetry in it, but unfortunately none of it was my own. One can forgive Shakespeare anything, except one's own bad lines (46).

Whether *Last Testament* is a biography, autobiography, criticism or a novel - this at least is clearly a text of a critic; Ackroyd makes a fair comment about a bad play by skilfully using the kind of comic and epigrammatic style we would expect from Oscar Wilde.

Besides Shakespeare, Ackroyd provides a wealth of other suggestions about Oscar Wilde's literary tastes and influences - another confirmation of the intertextual view of art, which says that nothing is born in a vacuum. The fictional Wilde speaks fondly of Aubrey Beardsley, Ernest Dowson and Lionel Johnson (172-3), for example; all three (like Wilde) prominent figures associated with English Decadence. Ackroyd also traces Wilde's education in Classics that he received in Trinity College (31) and moves to his Oxford years: "if at Oxford I learned from Ruskin the integrity of individual perception, it was from Walter Pater that I learned the poetry of feeling" (36). Further, we learn that Chatterton and Poe also "fascinated" Wilde (67), but it is especially the French influences that are emphasized throughout the novel: Victor Hugo, Baudelaire, Huysmans, Gautier

and others: "I worshipped Flaubert with my head, Stendhal with my heart and Balzac by my manner of dress" (62).

The list of literary influences is at least partly Ackroyd's own interpretation; besides the Greek and Latin authors, Oscar Wilde hardly admitted any influence other than Keats, Flaubert and Walter Pater (*Dorian Gray*, ed. Ackroyd, 1985: 12).

Ackroyd, however, does not leave it at that; he does not only point out the intertextuality, literary tastes and influences behind Wilde's writing, but he also comments upon other literature of the time:

'Why,' I asked, 'are you interested in that particular author [George Moore]?'  
Maurice was quite unabashed. 'I live by the café where he says he learned French, the Nouvelle Athenés.'  
'Well, it is a disgrace that such a place is allowed to remain open. I shall speak to the authorities about it tomorrow.' (4)

Here we can also see the typical wit and derision of Wilde, and in a quite similar manner, as above, Ackroyd's Wilde mocks Bernard Shaw (5), and criticizes Matthew Arnold: "Of course, when one reads him, one always hopes that every word will be his last" (68). Wilde also remarks that Gide is "artistically...beneath me" (14) and calls Swinburne "farcical" (31). Further, he confesses that "I have never been interested in the work of my contemporaries, and I detest the critical mannerism that professes to find good in everything" (172). In the final pages of the journal, the fictional Wilde makes no less than an entire overview of his time:

[T]he only true artists of the period are now misty figures of the past. Pater and Ruskin are dead; Tennyson and Browning also, and I do not know if they will be able to survive their imitators. Swinburne and Meredith linger on, but in a half-light (172).

One of the last literary comments Wilde makes is that "like a dying star, English prose rose up in one last effort of glory before its fall - in myself, in Lionel Johnson and in Pater" (173).

This kind of criticism can be found in most of Ackroyd's novels: in *Chatterton*, *English Music*, *Dan Leno* and indirectly even in *The Great Fire of London* or

*Hawksmoor*. Yet nowhere is it as visible or direct as in *Last Testament*. The novel gives a definition to a whole era - and on both sides of the Channel. It 'rewrites' the literary canon of the age from the point of view of the 'other' - the outcast, the exile. It touches upon both prose and poetry, and praises works and writers that at the time of Victorian hypocrisy were largely considered improper or even immoral. Especially French novels had a very bad reputation for immorality, and implicitly *Last Testament* gives more value to literary Decadence than is usually the case in literary canons.

However, one should be careful about giving this kind of criticism too serious an importance: after all, the novel is largely a work of fiction. But as I have argued, Ackroyd's works deliberately blur these kind of distinctions between literature and criticism, history and fiction, biographies and novels, as well as question all kinds of established hierarchies and conventions. And as Ackroyd writes about T. S. Eliot, already he acknowledged the "strong connection between the 'critical' and the 'creative' mind" (*T. S. Eliot*: 197), which is a quality that equally well describes Ackroyd: he was an established critic already before becoming a novelist. Yet *Last Testament* is at least ambiguous - it is hard to say whose criticism it contains: Wilde's or Ackroyd's. I think this question, too, is being blurred.

*Last Testament*, in other words, has qualities that very much resemble a biography, autobiography or straightforward literary criticism. As such it may be said to widen our view of what is seen as literature. Like other works by Ackroyd, it plays with various conventions and mixes them together. It blurs the boundaries between conventional forms in order to better examine literary history. Thus it extends our view of what a novel is, or what purposes a novel may have, while still remaining one: it is a fictionalized account of Wilde's life and thoughts in Paris; it has a strong illusion of time and place; and it even dramatizes some of the scenes of Wilde's life there - by means of recorded conversations, for example. It has a simple chronology of a journal, but the reminiscences and stories that Wilde recount prevent the narration from ever becoming boring. Even the delirium of Wilde's death-bed is included - taken down by Maurice Gilbert (184-5) - and at this moment of death, Ackroyd is able to create a feeling of loss.

As a novel *Last Testament* is remarkable for its wealth of historical detail and general 'accuracy', but it also goes beyond that. Like Umberto Eco's novels or

other historiographic metafiction of the 1980s, it mixes fact with fantasy and "plugs the gaps" in the historical record (cf. Scholes, 1979: 206-9). It, for example, quite daringly provides details of Wilde's notorious sex life (e.g. 108), just as it shows us many other unrecorded scenes of his life. Wilde's childhood, for example, or his memories and emotions in general are more vividly portrayed here than in Ellmann's (1987) biography, for example, which - despite its impressive amount of factual details - cannot achieve the same immediacy as Ackroyd's Wilde's first person narrative. But then again, *Last Testament* is a fictional re-interpretation of Wilde's career, and at that it exceeds the conventional limits of history or biography writing. Like *Hawksmoor* or *Chatterton*, it itself is suspicious of historical 'truth':

'You cannot publish this [journal], Oscar. It is nonsense - and most of it is quite untrue.'  
 'What on earth do you mean?'  
 'It is invented.'  
 'It is my life.'  
 'But you have quite obviously changed the facts to suit your purpose.'  
 'I have no purpose, and the facts came quite naturally to me.' (160).

Although *Last Testament* is in many respects the most conventional of Ackroyd's works, this kind of self-reflexivity adds a layer of postmodern metafictionality, at the same time as the content of the conversation above reveals that Ackroyd acknowledges the postmodern textual view of history, which says that as soon as one writes down an event, it turns into a sort of fiction; after all, we are trapped in, what Jameson (1972) calls, the 'prison-house of language' and can never have an immediate contact to 'reality' through it. Signifiers only refer to other signifiers in an endless chain of signification process, where every point of origin is lost, and the relation to reality endlessly deferred (cf. Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play", in *The Structuralist Controversy*, 1972). Even a 'truth' about one's own life, Ackroyd seems to suggest, is impossible to attain, since it is always coloured by one's own subjective choices, omissions, partialities, ideologies, myths, etc. And this, of course, is especially relevant to Oscar Wilde, who himself tried to turn his life into a work of art. How, then, could such a person ever be able to write a 'realistic' account of his life?

The fictionality of the journal is also slightly foregrounded in the two versions that Ackroyd provides of the damaging of Wilde's ear in prison: either he fell on

the ground in the exercise yard or knocked his ear against the plank bed, while seeing a hallucination of his dead mother (152). Even Wilde is puzzled about this; either he cannot remember what happened or then he cannot recall what he has already written (or invented) about his life. This kind of uncertainty, obviously, raises questions about the trustworthiness of the narrator, but it can also be seen as a safeguard on Ackroyd's part against naive accusations of possible historical 'inaccuracies' or even lack of 'realism' in the novel. I would argue that such measures actually *enhance* the feeling of credibility, at the same time as they mock any pretensions to objective truths. The acknowledgement of inaccuracies merely shows what all writing is: ambiguities and blurred 'truths'.

This, then, is the ultimate paradox: the novel questions the objective 'truth' of history writing, at the same time as it itself appears to be a convincing document - one still reads it as if it was by Oscar Wilde himself. This kind of inherent irony is typical of Ackroyd in general, whose works are full of paradoxes, serio-comic semiotic games, intertextual jokes, inexhaustible meanings, etc. On the surface Ackroyd's novels may look fairly conventional, but beneath are hidden all sorts of intellectual games and puzzles.

However, compared to other novels, such as *Hawksmoor* or *Chatterton*, *Last Testament* is still rather mild in its treatment of history (as well as the myths of Romantic originality and realism). *Last Testament* questions the validity of history writing, but it does not actually *deconstruct* it by questioning the so-called 'truth values'. Largely, it stays within the limits of our previous knowledge of Oscar Wilde and does not radically try to change it - it merely emphasizes some aspects of the author more than others. Unlike *Hawksmoor*, it does not change historical dates or people's names, for example, and unlike *Chatterton*, it does not provide multiple versions of the same events on a large scale. The reason for this, I would argue, is that deconstruction, whether of history writing or of established literary modes, is after all not the main purpose of the book: the ultimate aim and strength of *Last Testament* lies in its verbal mastery of Oscar Wilde's prose style - a major display of ventriloquism and a convincing act of stylistic imitation, which is later on thematized in *Chatterton*, and which needs to be further discussed in a section of its own.

## 2.2. Ventriloquism - a stylistic *tour de force*

So far through my discussion of *Last Testament*, I have sketched out some of the issues that I see as central to Ackroyd's works: intertextuality, rewriting and revision of literary canon, the blur of boundaries and the deconstruction of hierarchies as well as the questioning of the myths of historical truth, Romantic originality and literary realism. I have also touched upon the question of pastiche and parody, but I have not yet quite tried to elaborate the matter, which is a task I shall set out to do now.

Trying to give a clear definition of parody and pastiche is not an easy thing to do, however, since there are many conflicting ideas about the terms. For Linda Hutcheon (1989: 93) parody is almost synonymous with pastiche or intertextuality, but this, I think, oversimplifies the matter and does not adequately take into account the humorous or ridiculing possibilities of parody that would distinguish it from pastiche. Margaret A. Rose (1993) acknowledges the humorous side of the term but, unlike Hutcheon, tends to emphasize more the reconstructive than the deconstructive qualities of parody. Therefore, a kind of synthesis between these views might be fruitful: I would argue that parody contains both the critical and the humorous element, although it may also have an ambivalent status of both affirming and subverting the object of its ridicule. It is analytic, subversive mimicry, which is often "deflationary and comic" (Fowler, ed., 1973: 137).

Pastiche, in its turn, lacks this comic quality of parody. It is imitation without change: "it is made up largely of phrases, motifs, images, episodes, etc. borrowed more or less unchanged from the work(s) of other author(s)" (Fowler, ed., 1973: 138). It differs from plagiarism in that it does not try to hide anything or deceive anyone: "it is literature frankly inspired by literature" (ibid: 139). According to Fowler (139), it may be both "reverential and appreciative" but it may also be "disrespectful and sometimes deflationary", which is a view that again resembles Hutcheon's theory, although she claims that parody (or intertextuality or pastiche) is "not nostalgic; it is always critical" (Hutcheon, 1989: 93).

How do these definitions, then, work with *Last Testament*? If we accept the distinctions, then we have a good reason to assert that *Last Testament* is primarily a work of pastiche - imitation without subversive change. It is faithful to Oscar Wilde's prose style, it imitates his vocabulary and grammar, and it uses the

kinds of phrases, motifs and images that we would expect Oscar Wilde to use as an exile in Paris, disillusioned and frank about his fate, slightly less jovial than in his heyday. The novel is not without some humour and irony - which would suggest parody - but then again this is difficult to distinguish from Wilde's usual wit and funny remarks that are often parodic themselves and in any case directed against other people or the prevailing notions of respectability. One may see a critical distance in *Last Testament* towards Wilde - he is portrayed as self-important and egoistic - but surely the novel is not disrespectful or deflationary, rather the opposite: as I have argued, it is very much appreciative of the writer, especially as an artist.

Whether the novel is nostalgic or not is slightly more ambiguous. Certainly it re-creates the atmosphere of Victorian *fin-de-siecle*, but then again, as I see it, this is not Ackroyd's main purpose: the verbal mimicry of the novel is first and foremost a defence of pastiche, which even in our times "has been underplayed by Romantic-influenced criticism with its stress on particularity and uniqueness in literature" (Fowler, ed., 1973: 139). In *Last Testament* Ackroyd shows in practice what he has articulated and defended elsewhere: "[Ezra Pound] was, both in his life and his work, an extraordinarily skilful mimic whose most concise perceptions were often best carried through another person's voice" (*Ezra Pound and His World*: 97), "[T. S. Eliot] was a good ventriloquist" (*T. S. Eliot*: 83), "Wilde was not one to shrink from open plagiarism, even plagiarism from himself, when the occasion warranted" (*Dorian Gray*, 1985: 12). And in *Dickens* (427-32) there is "A TRUE conversation between imagined selves":

*Chatterton*. Indeed not. The truest poetry is not the most feigning. It is that which is most borrowed, passed down from poet to poet.

*Eliot*. I originally entitled *The Waste Land* "He Do The Police In Different Voices". I took that line from *Our Mutual Friend*.

*Wilde*. You did not take it. You rescued it.

*Dickens*. I was perpetually being accused of stealing work from other novelists, but I did so without realising it at the time.

*Wilde*. That is the definition of inspiration. (427).

. . .

*Dickens*. ...All writing is a form of revelation, by which we can move into the shadowy world and borrow from there all the emblems and images which comprehend our state. If William Blake were here - *Chatterton*. He will be joining shortly. (430).

Here in a concise, six-page postmodern parodic mini-play integrated into the biography (!), Ackroyd - through the voices of other writers - gives his best

definition of what all writing is: intertextual. Indeed, in all of his works he speaks about imitation in positive terms, and is not afraid to do it himself. Even in his least literature-centred works, like *Hawksmoor* or *The House of Doctor Dee*, he imitates early 17th century and Elizabethan English, respectively, perhaps even overdoing it. The chapter 6 in *Chatterton* is convincingly written as if by Thomas Chatterton (although later on it is revealed as a forgery). In *English Music*, moreover, the central character has a number of dream sequences that echo more than ten different writers, including Lewis Carroll, Charles Dickens, Arthur Conan Doyle, William Blake, etc. The biographies themselves often sound like parodies of other biographies:

It was a hot summer, the summer of 1858. The Thames stank, and the sewage of three million people boiled under the sun in what was no more than an open sewer. In the public buildings along the banks of the river, blinds were soaked with chloride and tons of lime were shovelled into the water itself. Boiled bones. Horse meat. Cat gut. Burial grounds. All of them putrefying and fermenting in the heat. This was the climate in which Charles Dickens began his London readings in the second week of June, [etc, etc.] (*Dickens*, 831).

Whether a slightly grandiose passage like this is (self-)parodic or not, Ackroyd nevertheless has a remarkable ability to appropriate his style to different voices and mediums, even managing to sound quite Dickensian here (cf. the opening of *Bleak House*: 1-2). Yet even if Ackroyd uses imitation in all of his writing, nowhere is it better executed than in *Last Testament*. It is the most convincing act of ventriloquism he has yet managed to do, at least partly because of the extent of the enterprise: (almost) the whole novel is written in another writer's style. But how exactly does he do this?

Obviously, it is a matter of both form and content, and in most cases they are inseparable. Ackroyd adjusts his words to the style and subject matter that we are already familiar with Wilde:

You can do two things with the English - you can shock them, or you can amuse them. You can never reason with them, at least if the editorials in *The Times* are anything to go by. (*LT*: 48).

Ackroyd uses the formula of a typical Wildean aphorism that is at the same time witty and derisive. Compare it, for example, to this remark uttered by Lord

Henry Wotton in *Dorian Gray* (248):

Civilization is by no means an easy thing to attain to. There are only two ways by which man can reach it. One is by being cultured, the other by being corrupt. Country people have no opportunity of being either, so they stagnate.

The form is the same: the statement, the elaboration in two parts, and the final punch-line, which often has an ironic twist to it. Ackroyd's versions are often not *exactly* the same as Wilde's - Wilde's derision, for example, is usually directed against the society, country people, marriage, morality and the English in general, whereas in Ackroyd the mockery tends to be slightly more centred against literature: "[Maurice] wished to begin *Jude the Obscure*, but I begged him not to. It would add a new horror to the death-bed" (*LT*: 176). As always, literature is the main concern of Ackroyd, but on the other hand, literary rebukes like these are by no means uncommon in Wilde either (cf. "The Decay of Lying" in *Intentions*, for example), and the stylistic illusion is effective enough to be convincing.

Besides witty remarks or aphorisms, subversion of 'common truths' is another typical feature of Wilde, who in general was a great lover of artifice: "There is one principle you must understand (...): an artist's life is determined by what he forgets, not by what he remembers" (*LT*: 69). Paradox is another common characteristic employed by Ackroyd: "in those days I was never more serious than when I was using melodrama" (*LT*: 64). And obviously, satire is also typical of Wilde: "I had heard of America, unfortunately, before it had heard of me" (*LT*: 52). Like Ackroyd here, Wilde had in a similar way ridiculed the Americans in "The Canterville Ghost", (in *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories*, 45-73):

'I don't think I should like America.'  
'I suppose because we have no ruins and no curiosities', said Virginia satirically.  
'No ruins! no curiosities!' answered the Ghost; 'you have your navy and your manners.' (63).

The Ghost's answer is a deliberate misunderstanding, and it is yet another feature of Wilde's wit and humour that Ackroyd is able to pick up in his novel:

'Please, Bosie, do not violate our friendship with words of scorn.'  
'Our friendship, as you call it, was violet from the beginning.' (*LT*: 8).

But humour, whether in the form of aphorisms, irony, parody, satire, word play, etc., is only one quality in the repertoire of Wilde's language that is used by Ackroyd. After all, Wilde did not merely write comedies and funny dialogue, but he was also a master of melodrama and children's stories as well as being able to provide pathos and suspense (e.g. in *Dorian Gray*), or passages of beautiful description (e.g. in "The Fisherman and His Soul"). Likewise, *Last Testament*, even with its humorous elements, is largely a serious book, imitating the more sombre side of Wilde's writing. It has qualities of sadness and decay in it, even world-weariness and ennui - exactly as we would expect from a man whose life and career has been ruined, a man who can only look backwards in his life and contemplate his destiny with grief mixed with wounded pride: "I had appealed to the world to save my reputation, and it crushed me" (138). Ackroyd, in other words, is able to re-create not only the humour but also the poignancy that is so characteristic of Wilde.

Ackroyd himself comments upon Wilde's language. He draws our attention to its artificiality as well as points out the fact that it was a conscious creation:

[I]n those days we assailed each other with extravagant phrases, and often carefully examined them. 'No, Oscar,' Frank would tell me, 'don't say, "It is a terrible thing that..." That sounds like an Irish expression. Simply say, "It is terrible that..." He was immensely helpful to me. (41).

This means that Ackroyd, in fact, mixes imitation with criticism: he foregrounds his own style, and cleverly brings our attention to it, at the same time as he critically examines Wilde's:

[I]ndeed I have always attempted to express in my own tongue the languor and the eroticism of the French writers. Their sentences are like flowers pressed tightly together: no light can pass them which is not dazed by colour and infected by scent. (62).

Ackroyd's metaphor both precisely captures and describes the atmosphere of Wilde's prose. Ackroyd here not only copies Wilde's style and content but also interprets it, and in both ways catches an essential quality of Wilde's writing. We only need to compare it, for example, to the opening paragraph of *Dorian Gray* (23), which in a similar way combines sensuality with languor, flowery scents with

erotic colours:

The studio was filled with the rich odour of roses, and when the light summer wind stirred amidst the trees of the garden, there came through the open door the heavy scent of the lilac, or the more delicate perfume of the pink-flowering thorn.

Oscar Wilde's passage paves the way for one of the homoerotic scenes of the book. Homoeroticism is what Ackroyd also employs, but with more frankness than Wilde ever did. With Ackroyd we do not simply get vague suggestions of romance, as in *Dorian Gray*, but quite candid descriptions of Wilde's sex life. There are at least two reasons for this: on the one hand Ackroyd knows that this added explicitness will make rather interesting reading in our increasingly voyeristic age, but on the other, this is also quite justified in the fact that now as an exile, Wilde has nothing left to hide any more. Since he has already lost his reputation, he can just as well reveal everything (even if still hoping for forgiveness). And are not confessions, like *Last Testament*, moreover, always intended to be more or less revealing anyway?

However, Ackroyd's pastiche, as usual, is not mere imitation or recycling of the old material; it also contains strong elements of pure invention, written in the spirit of playful emulation. The three stories that the fictional Wilde recounts are good examples of this: The first is about a poet who loses his gifts as soon as he faces the reality of his life (62-3). The second tells the story of a young prince who commits suicide after trying to escape from his beautiful, but sterile, palace into the real world where Poverty and Sorrow as well as Passion and Joy could be found (84-7). The third is about a young man who deserts his betrothed girl in order to slay the king whose face is stamped in the coins that he finds; he dies as an old man, when he realises that the wrinkled face in the coins is his own (146-9) - almost like in *Dorian Gray*. All these stories could well have been written by Oscar Wilde. They may not be as good as Wilde's own children's stories, but then again the fictional Wilde complains that "All powers of imagination have deserted me now" (11) - again an apt safeguard on Ackroyd's part against accusations of 'poor plots'.

Still, these stories clearly echo Wilde's own fairy tales. The second story, for example, about the young prince is a kind of negative reversal of "The Young King" (in *Savile*: 85-98), with its unhappy ending and its name of the palace, *Sans*

*souci*, ironically alluding to that of Wilde's story, *Joyeuse*. There is also veiled social criticism included - in the typical Wildean manner:

'What are these things I have dreamed of, Poverty and Sorrow?' The courtiers were quite astounded, since they could not imagine how he had discovered such things in his beautiful chamber. 'They are vulgarisms, your Highness,' the Lord Chamberlain replied, 'invented by the common people. They are not known in Society.' (*LT*: 85).

Ackroyd's story, in other words, replicates the same sympathy for the poor and the downtrodden that pervades such stories as "The Young King" or "The Happy Prince".

However, the three stories are not just playful emulations of Wilde's fairy tales; beneath the surface can be found deeper symbolic meanings, too, that reflect the situation in which Oscar Wilde now finds himself (as in fact there are deeper symbolism in Wilde's own fairy tales; they are not just surface 'stories'). The poet in the first story, for example, is clearly Wilde himself: he sought inspiration for his art at the expense of his wife and family, and when the reality of the world was finally revealed to him in prison, he largely lost his impersonal creativity, becoming increasingly autobiographical in his *De Profundis* and *The Ballad of the Reading Gaol*. The two other stories in a similar way parallel Wilde's wish to escape the norms of society (84-7) and reflect his belief in the inevitability of destiny (146-99), which already was a central theme in "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime", for example. All these stories in *Last Testament*, moreover, are more pessimistic in tone than Wilde ever wrote, but this is clearly a mere indication of his desperation as an exile.

The symbolism of the stories can also be seen to reflect Wilde as an Aesthete. Just as these stories mirror Wilde's life, so did he in reality try to turn his own life into a work of art. Art and life, indeed, have always been strangely intertwined in Oscar Wilde, and this is a point that Ackroyd also very much utilizes in his novel for effects of successful imitation. In "The Decay of Lying" (in *Intentions*: 31-1) Oscar Wilde wrote that "Life imitates art far more than Art imitates life (...) A great artist invents a type, and Life tries to copy it, to reproduce it in popular form..." Consequently, Ackroyd's Wilde constantly confirms these ideas: he has adopted the name of Sebastian Melmoth (as he did in real life) and compares his situation to that of Faust or Jesus, Stupor Mundi or the Anti-Christ (48). He sees himself as

"Zeus and Athene all at once" (33) and says that he "could weep for [his children] longer than Niobe, who wept for ever, and mourn more bitterly than Demeter ever did" (78). About his marriage he comments that

Constance and I were like characters out of *Modern Love*. I do not suppose that anyone had experienced marital discord until Meredith invented it, but nevertheless it was a ridiculous posture - to be reduced to a poem (78-9).

Similarly, at one point the fictional Wilde sees his life as a classical tragedy and at another a cheap melodrama (79). The relationship between Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas in *Last Testament*, moreover, is largely modelled upon that of Lord Henry Wotton and Dorian Gray (e.g. *LT*: 127), and in all these similes and comparisons to literature can be seen the kind of reading and experience that we can assume Oscar Wilde himself had gathered. The comparisons to classical mythology and contemporary literature reflect his literary tastes throughout.

In fact, it is interesting to notice here that Wilde's idea of life imitating art, expressed in 'The Decay of Lying' and applied in *Last Testament*, anticipates our postmodern ideas about the human 'self': we, like Oscar Wilde in Ackroyd's novel, see ourselves through the light of the texts that we encounter in our lives, rather than create meanings by virtue of our 'innate' reason, as Descartes once believed. The human subject, as Wilde, too, realised (before the postmodernists), is not an independent Cartesian unity as such, but is actually intertextually defined, always subjected to language, culture, texts and art (cf. Saariluoma, 1992). In *Last Testament* Ackroyd matches this poststructuralist intertextual view of the 'self' to Wilde's very similar ideas about life and art, and uses the two views simultaneously, without contradiction (as is the case in *Dan Leno*, too, where Ackroyd makes the intertextual 'self' one of his central themes. See 4.3.). Thus, by drawing our attention to the fact that Wilde's idea of the self resembles our postmodern view of the 'self', Ackroyd makes us realise that Oscar Wilde was ahead of his time: intellectually Wilde was closer to our time than the puritanical age into which he was born. (Ackroyd in general shares close artistic and intellectual affinities with Oscar Wilde and obliquely makes this clear in his novel.)

So far I have illustrated some of the aspects that not only highlight Ackroyd's gift of literary ventriloquism but also speak for his profound understanding of his subject. Without going into deeper linguistic details, I have drawn attention to

those aspects of Wilde's writing that I consider most salient and important, and which I feel Ackroyd has managed to utilize particularly well in his imitation. This has comprised aspects of humour and seriousness, general atmosphere and style, as well as connections to Wilde's personal life, fairy tales, Symbolism and Aestheticism. There is, however, one more aspect that cannot be avoided but needs to be, if only briefly, further discussed here and that is Decadence.

Decadence in the English context is a somewhat vague term, but if such a movement ever took place, then Oscar Wilde, with his public and private life as well as his works such as "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime", *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and *Salomé*, became an essential part of it. Oscar Wilde took aestheticism as far as it would go and so gave 'decadence' an English definition (Gilman, 1979: 121). Thus *Last Testament* itself can be seen as a Decadent novel with the 'decadent' Oscar Wilde as its central character. (Also some aspects of *Hawksmoor* and *The House of Doctor Dee* are clearly decadent.) According to Malcolm Bradbury (1993: 401) this reappearance of Decadence in late twentieth-century British fiction in general parallels the same apocalyptic mood of fin-de-siècle that was so tangible one hundred years ago as well. According to him (401), this return to the mood of Decadence in the 1980s and 90s was a more widespread phenomenon in British and American literature than just in Ackroyd, although he was certainly one of the first to do it.

Thus some features of Oscar Wilde's Decadence, affirmed by Ackroyd in his novel, include his egomania ("I enjoyed praise, I admit it. I like to be liked", *LT*: 89); his admiration for immorality, sin and crime ("I succumbed to strange sins...and made a philosophy out of insincerity", *LT*: 89); his central glorification of art ("the only matters of any importance were Art and the things of Art", *LT*: 65); and his despising of popular opinion ("Of course I knew that my plays were potboilers - exquisite potboilers - and I disowned each one as soon as it was successful", *LT*: 88) (cf. Thornton, 1983: 66). Also words like world-weariness, self-indulgence, ultrarefined, overcivilized, debauchery, effeteness, depravity, hedonism, luxuriousness, decay, degeneration and retrogression (Gilman, 1979: 24) very much describe the portrait of the artist painted here. Further characteristics of Ackroyd's Wilde are his hatred of the modern age (cf. Gilman, 1979: 100) and nostalgia for more robust and dramatic ages; his examination and cultivation of the forbidden, the tainted (*ibid*, 91); his dandyism and elegance in dress, as well as his retreat from reality into the spirituality created by art

(Bradbury, ed: 1979: 28). Also neurasthania ("In my state of nervous hysteria, I thought I would go mad", *LT*: 155); excess, richness and corruptness ("I was drinking so excessively that even my friends began to whisper about me", *LT*: 118); as well as sexual perversity ("My real joy was to watch two boys together in the various acts of love and pleasure myself as they did so", *LT*: 118) (cf. Gilman, 1979: 103) are included, as indeed are countless other Decadent features, such as boredom as an excuse for corrupt sensuality (ibid, 83); degenerated Roman Catholicism and lack of Christian faith (ibid, 103); the slight mysticism of colours (Thornton, 1983: 66); the idea of the "fatal book" corrupting its reader (such as Huysman's *A Rebours*) (Dowling: 1986: 170-3); the admiration of style above content in language and literature (Bradbury, ed: 1979: 20), etc.

This list could be continued, but perhaps these examples are enough. My point with Decadence is that Ackroyd has researched his subject well and turned his knowledge into a pastiche that integrates a vast material of historical and cultural information, with Oscar Wilde as the mouthpiece of this information, so that the overall impression begins to resemble consummate ventriloquism, a perfect replica of Wilde's 'voice'. With these aspects of Wilde's personality and demeanour Ackroyd more or less affirms the picture of Wilde we have already gathered from other books, but at the same time he goes beyond them by fictionalizing and dramatizing his subject. The effect of this combination of scholarly historical research, pure imagination and stylistic imitation is that now we - paradoxically again - not only get a better view of history than in history books, but we also have a strong illusion of reading a text that could well be by Oscar Wilde.

This is not a small achievement, and it is a venture that could easily go wrong. But I think Ackroyd has managed to retain the illusion more or less complete throughout the novel. It is a display of intertextuality in practice; it is a stylistic *tour de force*, which is in accordance with the propositions laid out in *Notes*: literature is always about other literature, even when it tries to hide it; therefore, the proper subject of literature is literature itself. Ackroyd's Wilde himself has something to say about this: "The first law of imagination...[is]...that in his work the artist is someone other than himself" (*LT*: 131), "almost all the methods and conventions of art found their highest expression in parody" (50). And this, of course, is what Ackroyd has more or less done in *Last Testament*: he has imagined himself into a position of someone else, while creating a work of art that is about other literature

almost to the point of parody. It confirms its own logic of being a convincing literary enterprise in its own right - indeed, it is almost a 'realistic' novel - although this 'realism' is rooted in the skilful use of language that is *foregrounded*, not made 'transparent' as in literary realism. Ackroyd draws our attention to language as such and makes us appreciate it for its own sake, rather than pretend that language is a mere vehicle for depicting the outside world, as the realist school professes to do. Thus in *Last Testament* Ackroyd has proved his skills as a literary stylist in practice; in *Chatterton* he continues with this subject and deals with it in theory, by making imitation and forgery one of his central themes.

### 3. Chatterton (1987)

In my discussion of *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* I already stressed the point that in examining literary history Peter Ackroyd emphasizes its essentially intertextual nature. This, however, becomes even more apparent in *Chatterton*, where Ackroyd, in fact, makes Thomas Chatterton (1752-1770) the emblem of intertextuality itself. In various literary histories, Chatterton has been accused of imitation and plagiarism, even of deceiving and forgery (cf. *The Rowley Poems*, ed. Hare, 1991: xxvi), so here Ackroyd sees an issue which simply needs to be re-examined - especially when his own works, too, as we have seen, contain strong elements of imitation and pastiche. Consequently, through the means of fiction, Ackroyd seeks to deconstruct such negative views about Chatterton's poetry as well as to question the historical 'truth' about the poet. Ackroyd makes us see Chatterton, the 'forger', in a new light through the eyes of postmodernism and poststructuralism. He, as it were, gives his own definition of the poet and at the same time gets to explore the questions of imitation and parody, originality and forgery, even further.

In the following chapter 3.1. I shall explore Ackroyd's treatment of imitation and

plagiarism, whereas the chapter 3.2. will concentrate on the deconstruction of canonized 'truths', such as totalizing views about history. Further, these two issues, intertextuality and deconstruction, are closely interrelated in the novel, so in the chapter 3.3. I shall offer my interpretation of why this is so.

### 3.1. Intertextuality - plagiarism or true poetry?

*Chatterton* is a complex, postmodern novel, with a fragmented structure and multiple plots that echo and mirror each other. The novel takes us to three different centuries and ties together the lives of Thomas Chatterton, George Meredith and Ackroyd's own creation, Charles Wychwood. These different story lines are unified by a strong thematic design that not only centres around Chatterton but also circles around issues as varied as death and the representations of it, history and the question of truth, and life and immortality through art. The novel shows that history gains its continuity through art, and death itself can be overcome by it, but ultimately *Chatterton* asks what art actually is: Is only originality and uniqueness good art, or do imitations have their value as well? What, in fact, is an imitation - is it plagiarism, borrowing or even a theft or a forgery? Or are imitation and intertextuality, after all, just common properties of all art?

Such questions are relevant in a novel where most characters are dealing with art, often with imitations and forgeries. The main plot concerns Charles Wychwood's discovery and attempts to solve the mystery of a painting and a manuscript which seem to prove that Chatterton not only forged the poems of a medieval monk, Rowley, but also counterfeited his own suicide in order to produce even more forgeries, such as poems by Blake, Gray, Cowper and others - until, of course, these documents themselves are revealed to be fakes and imitations. Similarly, while Henry Wallis paints the picture of Chatterton's death, George Meredith, the model, is impersonating Chatterton, and their discussion revolves around the question, whether this image will eventually be remembered as the true Chatterton. Charles' wife, Vivien, works in an art gallery, which itself deals with forgers such as Stewart Merk. Harriet Scrope, in her turn, is a novelist and a plot stealer, who is unable to write her memoirs for the fear of being found out; she does not want to admit her borrowings. Her friend, Sarah Tilt, "the famous art critic", is writing a treatise about representations of death, such as the

one in Wallis' painting. Andrew Flint, moreover, is a novelist and a biographer, currently writing a book about Meredith. Finally, to add to this already complicated tangle of plots, there is the librarian, Philip Slack, another friend of Charles's, who himself once attempted to write a novel but eventually abandoned it:

[N]ot only had he written with painful slowness and uncertainty, but even the pages he had managed to complete 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...[with] the overwhelming difficulty of recognizing his own voice among them. (C: 70).

Ackroyd's characters, in other words, are in one way or another faced with issues of intertextuality, and the description of Philip's unfinished novel very much resembles Kristeva's (1969: 146) view of language as "*mosaique de citations*" or Roland Barthes' (1977: 145) idea of texts as "echo chambers", thus proving the point that Ackroyd is well aware of current theories of intertextuality.

Yet, the fact that these characters are almost excessively caught up in such matters of art and writing has more serious purposes than merely to produce an ironically complicated web of plots. Of course this kind of permutation of the same issues in constantly similar story lines is part of Ackroyd's postmodern playfulness, but more specifically, the purpose of these plots - which not simply are about imitation but which also imitate each other - is to draw our attention to the idea that there are "only a limited number of plots in the world" (C: 70) and that "Everything is copied" (93). So, to give an example, Philip finds out that

Harriet Scope had written a novel in which a writer's secretary was responsible for many of her employer's 'posthumous' publications; she knew her style so well that she was able effortlessly to counterfeit it, and only the assiduous researches of a biographer had uncovered the fakery. (69).

Harriet's novel self-reflexively copies and permutes the story of Stewart Merk's forgeries (112-4) but also the novel's story of Chatterton itself, who as Ackroyd suggests, forged a number of poems by his dead or already declining contemporaries. Yet, somewhat ironically, Philip notices that Harriet's plot (about a fakery) is itself stolen from Harrison Bentley's novel, *The Last Testament*, where quite similarly,

the biographer of a certain poet...discovers that his subject, at the end of his life, had been too ill to compose the verses that brought him eternal fame; that in fact, it had been the poet's wife who had written them for him. (69).

The same plots, in other words, occur over and over again, with ever new variations. But the point is even further underlined in the fact that Bentley's novel, *The Last Testament*, actually echoes that what Ackroyd himself had done in *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, that is, written a book that Wilde somehow did not manage to do - a book, moreover, which would possibly have restored Wilde's good name. And what is even more, in *Dan Leno* there is yet another variation of the same story when Elizabeth Cree completes her husband's unfinished play after his failure (this time without literary success, though). So *Chatterton* is a real 'echo chamber', and self-consciously so: Philip "dropped...[the book], and its fall echoed in the basement of the library." (C: 69).

Clearly Ackroyd is not one to shrink from open plagiarism, even plagiarism from himself, but the essential point in *Chatterton* is to convince us that there is really nothing unusual in a poet or a novelist using other writers' material; whether they admit it or not, all writers are copycats: "Well you know these writers. They'll steal any...'(...)' Anything, that's right." (100). "Yes, everyone copies" (106), repeats Charles, who in general is not worried about the idea. Harriet Scrope and Philip Slack, in their turn, are anxious about it, although Philip in a way admits his influences, while Harriet does not. Further, we also notice that Thomas Chatterton, too, was well aware of these issues of influence and imitation:

Now Rowlie ynne these mokie Dayes  
Sendes owte hys shynynge Lyghte  
And Turgotus and Chaucer live  
Inne every Line hee wrytes. (C: 87/ *The Rowley Poems*: 27)

Here Chatterton confesses his indebtedness to medieval writers, but on the other hand these lines were written by the fictional 'Rowley', whereas Chatterton himself had to conceal his imitations from his contemporaries for fear of being accused of forgery. It is true that other literary 'frauds' of the 18th century, such as James Macpherson's 'Ossian' or Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, more or less retained their popularity even after being exposed as pure fabrications, but who would bother to read some obscure imitations and forgeries by a mere boy and an attorney's apprentice? (*The Rowley Poems*, ed. Hare, 1911: xxvi).

By his all-encompassing theme of intertextuality, however, Ackroyd specifically aims to problematize the notion of forgery. If indeed everything is copied, as Ackroyd and other intertextualists, such as Kristeva (1969), Barthes (1977) or Plett (1991), assure us, then the line between 'fake' and 'genuine' becomes blurred: "Is the work of Rowley a forgery? (...) Is it not, as the Platonists tell us, an imitation in a world of Imitations?" (C: 91). Such a question is even more pressing in our own time of postmodern 'simulacras' and 'hyperreality', where television and media 'simulate' or actually *create* the world we live in; where such simulated reality is eventually more real than the real itself (cf. Baudrillard, 1981); and where 'genuine' products, for instance, are constantly advertised but are never to be found among their endless copies of mass-production. Therefore, as a true deconstructionist, Ackroyd goes so far as to suggest that a genuine fake is better than a fake genuine, and applies this idea to Chatterton:

'The Fame of a great Plagiarist?'  
 'No, the Fame of a great Poet. You prove your Strength by doing their Work better than ever they could, and then by also doing your own.' (91).

Following this logic, we get the equation that Chatterton's skills in imitation are by no means forgery but "the truest Poetry" (87).

Still, Ackroyd's problematizing of forgery is not only directed against literature but to the art of painting as well. Consequently, the question whether the latest Seymour's are forgeries or not remains intriguingly unsolved when Stewart Merk reveals that as years went by he came to know his employer's painting style so well that he actually assisted him in completing his final paintings. "/ painted all of Seymour's last pictures" (114), so "who is to say what is fake and what is real?" (113). Similar questions animate the discussion between George Meredith and his painter, concerning Wallis's 'realistic' picture about Chatterton. "I see," Meredith says. "So the greatest realism is also the greatest fakery?" (139).

Certainly Ackroyd forces us to reconsider the notion of forgery - what is genuine and what is not - but even as he does so, he also seeks to undermine the idea of artistic originality - at least as it is understood in the Romantic sense. The Romantics believed that true originality was to be found in the minds of rare individuals of natural genius, who would not have to depend on thoughts of others

in their invention of universal truths. In his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) William Wordsworth wrote, "all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (Wordsworth and Coleridge, 1963: 266); a poet is a man who "has acquired a greater readiness and power in expressing...those thoughts and feelings which, by his own choice, or the structure of his own mind, arise in him without immediate external excitement." (ibid: 256). Yet Ackroyd shows that such an idea is absurd; no one can raise above one's historical or cultural context simply by means of his 'innate' imagination or emotions:

Sarah took up a catalogue...and read out the summary (...): 'Fritz Dangerfield's composition, *The Opium Dream*. He painted the same picture over and over again but would not be parted from the canvases, which he kept in his bedroom until his death. He did not speak, and he did not write except with an alphabet of his own invention.' She closed the catalogue. 'Now that really *is* madness.' (C: 116).

Here we have a case of ultimate Romantic originality: a man who wanted to be separate from everything, to be cut off from any external influences on his art. "As a result he was unintelligible. No one can start all over again" (116), "Where there is no tradition, art simply becomes primitive. Artists without any proper language can only draw like children" (110). Ackroyd makes us see the implications of intertextuality: in the light of the view, by now established, that all texts are intertexts (Plett, 1991: 6), the Romantic myth of original genius becomes to be seen as an impossible fancy.

Yet even as these myths are broken - plagiarism, forgery, Romantic originality - Ackroyd's characters still suffer from anxieties: hopes of immortality, fame and recognition, or fears of one's works being ignored, forgotten in the dusty shelves of bookstores or libraries (e.g. 102). Charles says, "It's called the anxiety of influence" (100), which of course refers to Harold Bloom's (1975) theory of poetry: the dread every major poet feels of the weight of tradition before him; the fear that coming late in literary history, one's precursors have already exhausted all the available inspiration (Selden & Widdowson, 1993: 153), resulting in "the immense anxieties of indebtedness, for what strong maker desires the realization that he has failed to create himself?" (Bloom, 1975: 2). Of the novel's characters, Philip Slack responds most forcibly to this oppressive feeling: since he could not find his own voice out of the multitude of others, he decided to abandon his novel altogether. Charles's situation is opposite, but not any better: since he has "no

intention of yielding to the conventional anxieties about recognition" (C: 15), we see that his long poem, too, remains unfinished, as he works slowly and infrequently. With such examples, Ackroyd seems to suggest that the anxiety of influence is an issue which needs to be tackled and eventually overcome if one wishes to be a successful writer. The weight of tradition cannot simply be ignored, but neither should it be allowed to crush one altogether, which is a view, of course, that is in harmony with Bloom's theory.

The anxiety of influence in general is a feeling that has clearly obsessed Peter Ackroyd. *Chatterton* as a whole can be seen as a response to it; a kind of attempt to vanquish the horror of indebtedness by thematizing it, and so at the same time vindicating one's art. Certainly Ackroyd returns to the same theme over and over again in his works: *English Music* (1992), for example, is an elaborate allegory of the anxiety of influence, dealing with a father and son relationship, where Clement Harcombe, a medium and a spiritual healer, teaches his son, Timothy, the delights of English literature, culture and history. During the course of the novel, Timothy - exactly as Bloom (1975: 121-2) theorizes - oversteps his father, and the novel ends up with the father dead, whereas Timothy himself takes over his father's place and continues his work in entertaining and 'healing' people. Meanwhile on another level, *English Music* draws its textual energy from the works of its literary fathers - Malory, Bunyan, Blake, Defoe, Dickens, Doyle, etc. - and by creative misreading 'kills', or at least rises above them, finding a light of its own despite the shadows these 'fathers' cast. Thus Bloom's (1975) literary application of the Freudian argument that the sons need to "contest" (122) and at last "destroy" (121) their precursors in order to 'live' is reflected in both the content and the construction of the novel.

Also in *The House of Doctor Dee* (1993) one of the worst nightmares in that gothic monster of a novel is the same terror again - the anxiety of influence:

I confess to one obsession, or fear. It always visits me when I am inside the house at my writing-desk, and rarely follows me beyond these walls (...) - this fear that whatever I happen to be writing comes from another source, that I'm stealing someone else's plot or words, that I'm relying upon the themes or images of another novelists. (...) And this is the strangest anxiety of all - what if that other person were actually within me all the time? (...) And then yesterday, it happened at last. (...) My book had been written before. I was convinced of it. (...) I had copied another novel word for word. Even the title was the same. (...) Then I began what I knew to be a

fatal search (...) And then I found it. There was a book here with the title I had only recently chosen...This was the novel I had just written. (...) But am I, even now, writing what others have written before me? And if this is so, what am I to do? (*The House of Doctor Dee*: 222-4).

There is genuine horror in these lines, but at the same time this is an elaborate joke on Ackroyd's part. After all, in his works, such as *Last Testament*, *English Music*, *Dan Leno* or *Chatterton* he has shown that he is not afraid to rely on other novelists' texts; that his specific answer to the anxiety of influence is not to hide it but to deal with it directly: to raise above one's influences by openly exposing one's sources and pre-texts and by thematizing intertextuality itself. Ackroyd shows that by self-conscious imitation and open plagiarism one really leaves no room for accusations of influence or indebtedness. Instead, one can show one's creativeness by making us see what one does for one's source-texts which anyone can go and check afterwards, if they wish to do so. Since "everyone copies" (C: 106), why not do that oneself, too?

Obviously, this is where Thomas Chatterton becomes important. As Ackroyd writes, "Chatterton knew that original genius consists in forming new and happy combinations, rather than searching after thoughts and ideas which had never occurred before" (C: 58). Chatterton, in other words, is made no less than an ideal representative of an intertextual writer:

My Method was as follows: I had already around me, in Volumes taken from my Father's shelves or purchas'd from the Booksellers, Charters and Monuments and such like Stuff; to these I added my Readings from Ricat, Stow, Speed, Holinshed, Leland and many another purveyor of Antiquity. If I took a passage from each, be it ever so short, I found that in Unison they became quite a new Account and, as it were, Chatterton's Account. (C: 85).

Chatterton's Account is given a central place in Ackroyd's art philosophy since it is not only openly intertextual but it also shows that by such a method a writer can solve the problem of the anxiety of influence: by consciously using earlier texts as the basis of one's works, one is in full control of one's writing - one is not merely passively influenced by the texts of others; one is using them *actively*, re-arranging these sources as one's own text, and at one's own free will. The result may be a new combination of texts which to a certain extent resembles its predecessors but which also reads like no other text before it.

Such a view of intertextuality, implicitly or explicitly expressed in *Chatterton*, is significant in that it restores the authority of the writing subject that Kristeva and Barthes (in articles such as "Word, Dialogue, and Novel" or "The Death of the Author") sought to undermine in their leftist radicalism of the 1960's *Tel Quel* movement (see also Friedman, S., "Weavings: Intertextuality and the (Re)Birth of the Author" in Clayton & Rothstein (ed.), 1991: 146-61). In Ackroyd's model, authorship is *not* undermined by intertextuality, as it was for the French poststructuralist. For Ackroyd the author is still a meeting point between various texts and discourses; he is the crossroads where numerous texts "blend and clash" (Barthes, 1977: 146-61), but the radical poststructuralist emphasis is re-shifted when he shows through Thomas Chatterton that a poet or an author does not have to be at a total mercy of these discourses; he can still adapt, assimilate, transform, alter, reshape, revise or misread the precursors' texts as his own text (cf. Bloom, 1975: 14-6, or Clayton & Rothstein, ed., 1991: 155). Intertextuality for Ackroyd is still a feature of all writing, but an artist can assert his strength and even independence by active intertextuality and open plagiarism. As Ackroyd's Chatterton sums it up: "Thus do we see in every Line an Echoe, for the truest Plagiarism is the truest Poetry" (87).

Interestingly, in re-asserting the author's position as an active text (re)producer, Ackroyd takes a step further from that of his views in *Notes* (1976), where he more or less merely echoed the theories of the French poststructuralists. In *Chatterton* Ackroyd may be said to articulate the position he had already adopted in his biographies, where he no longer emphasized the autonomy of language at the expense of authorship but, rather, sought to combine the methods of intertextuality with the idea of the later T. S. Eliot, who said, "We also understand the poetry better when we know more about the man" (*T. S. Eliot*: 335). In his essay on 'Modernism' (1976) Ackroyd spoke for the theories of Barthes and Derrida, but by *Chatterton* Ackroyd seems to be more at home with the Anglo-Saxon and American tradition of literary criticism - theorists such as Jonathan Culler or Harold Bloom, who have never really accepted the French ideas of the 'death of the author'. Ackroyd's view, in fact, comes very close to that of Oscar Wilde, who said, "It is only the unimaginative who ever invents. The true artist is known by the use he makes of what he annexes, and he annexes everything" (quoted in Ellmann, 1987: 155). This view is in exact harmony with those ideas expressed in *Chatterton*, as indeed are the views of T.

S. Eliot and his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1920), condensed into the famous dictum: "Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal" (quoted in Cowart, 1993: 1).

*Chatterton* as a whole, therefore, can be seen as a response to the ideas of the 'death of the author', but this is not the only significance in the novel's theoretical discussions about intertextuality: at the same time as he defends authorship, Ackroyd seeks to 'rescue' the notion of originality: even as he destroys the Romantic cult of original genius, Ackroyd does not wholly reject the concept of originality (as he does not reject authorship), but gives it a new meaning: unlike other postmodernists, like Hutcheon (1988), who have insisted that by the advent of intertextuality, there can be no such thing as originality, Ackroyd takes a step further and redefines 'originality' to match his intertextual view of art: "originality consists in forming new and happy combinations, rather than searching after thoughts and ideas which had never occurred before" (C: 58). The words bear repeating since they are central to Ackroyd's art philosophy and even if they resemble Bloom's (1975: 7) idea that "poetic influence need not make poets less original; as often it makes them more original", Ackroyd gives a more exact definition of originality than Bloom or other intertextualists. (In his theory of poetry, for example, Bloom (1975) tends to emphasize, rather vaguely, that the greater 'swerve' the poet makes from his precursor, the more original he is - without effectively taking into consideration the possibility of many influences or sources working at the same time - while Kristeva and Barthes reject the concept of originality altogether.) But Ackroyd is more precise and consistent in his model when he implies that even if texts are always based on other texts, it is still possible for writers to achieve individuality and even originality by making such combinations of already existing texts that have not been done before. In the light of such a model, works of pastiche - such as Chatterton's poems or *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, for instance - can finally be considered 'original' in the sense of being new, creatively constructed works of art, even if blatantly based on pre-existing material. And this status of originality, of course, is a position that has been denied works of pastiche in both the Romantic and the more radically poststructuralist models, such as those by Barthes and Kristeva, for example.

In Ackroyd's model, thereby, pastiche and parody are finally free from their negative connotations that have plagued the terms ever since the Romantics. This, together with the defence of authorship, can be seen as Ackroyd's

contribution to current literary theory. Ackroyd is not merely echoing various theories and theorists in his novel, but out of these he formulates his own position, which nevertheless keeps within the bounds of poststructuralist thinking. Yet Ackroyd truly shows his creativeness by projecting these ideas and discourses on Thomas Chatterton and building a whole fictional world around him, with a multitude of different characters and situations that can be both amusing and touching, poignant and comical. In Ackroyd's treatment, Chatterton becomes synonymous with intertextuality, the very symbol of everything that is related to it. Philip, for example, tells Charles how Harriet Scrope's books very much resemble those by Harrison Bentley, and Charles replies,

'There you are, you see. It's catching.'  
 'What is?'  
 'Chatterton.' (C: 94).

And so it is: through Chatterton Ackroyd develops the themes of intertextuality, which affects almost every part of the novel. Especially his view of the poet - originality through pastiche and imitation, finding oneself by using the texts of others - is extended to many of the novel's characters: not only is Chatterton's plagiarism "the truest Poetry" (87), but we also see that as George Meredith is posing as Chatterton, he says, "I'm a model poet...I'm pretending to be someone else" (144). Henry Wallis, in his turn, takes the position of Meredith and says, "Don't be alarmed, George. I'm rehearsing your part. (...) The better I impersonate you...the better I paint you" (136-7). As a consequence, both artists' names live on in the famous picture, reprinted in the cover of *Chatterton*.

Further, Thomas Chatterton meets a "posture master" (203) and imitates him; because of this he will remember him (203). Later on he meets a hydrocephalus, an idiot boy without a name, and the same pattern emerges:

See, my name is Tom. Tom. He points to himself. Who are you?  
 Whoyoo? The boy kisses the doll, and then presses it against his  
 cheek. Tom. I am Tom. Who are you?  
 Tom. The boy points to himself, in imitation, and smiles. (209-10).

The boy, in other words, gains his very identity by imitating Chatterton. Ever since "the idiot boy was always known as Tom" (211).

Similar examples also abound in the book's twentieth-century narrative. Edward, for instance, imitates his father's voice after Charles's death, and suddenly makes Vivien very happy: "her husband was dead and yet he was not dead" (189). Her husband would live on in Edward, Edward being a sort of 'copy' of Charles. Further, we are told that Harriet Scrope found her artistic voice only after using the plots of other novelists; she found her style through the exposure and imitation of other people's plots, just as Philip Slack "might discover that [he] had a style of [his] own, after all" (232), when he plans to write a novel based on the already existing story of the Chatterton manuscripts. Finally, even the waiter in the Indian restaurant exemplifies this all-embracing theme of uniqueness through copying:

'I have a novel,' he said. 'Good book.'  
 'Who wrote it?' Harriet asked sharply.  
 'No sir. This my idea.' And it occurred to the horrified Harriet that the waiter had a story to tell also. 'Nice modest man, correct?' He stood up straight, and flashed a smile at her. 'Now this nice man does not want to stand out from others, do you see? Too modest.' Harriet held out her glass, and he refilled it as he spoke. 'But still he is odd. Very odd man.' He shook his head. 'And do you know why?' He could hardly contain himself. 'He is very odd because he tried to be exactly like everyone else. Precisely like. Good story, is that so?' (149).

Of course the waiter's already by now familiar story, along with all these other examples of imitation and intertextuality, is yet another self-referential joke that points toward the construction of *Chatterton*: the novel itself is an intertextual collage, which contains imitation of Chatterton's language (Chapter 6) and which is also based on already existing stories and plots, taken from the English literary history as well as other texts, novels and poems, being a real mosaic of quotations itself: the story of Thomas Chatterton, for example, is adapted from his biographies, and the plot of his forgeries, including Chatterton's forged suicide, very much resembles other stories of fakeries, such as Oscar Wilde's "The Portrait of W. H." (in *Savile*), which contains a number of same elements, not the least of which are the forged suicide and the forged painting. The story of the Merediths - Mary eloping with the painter - is also a well documented 'plot', found in various books, just as Meredith's *Modern Love* (1862) is directly alluded to and further developed in *Chatterton*: "This is modern love, you know. Secretly we adore each other." (C: 144). The love triangle of the Merediths, moreover, is repeated in the twentieth century story line, as we notice that Vivien and Philip,

too, find each other after the poet husband is dead (or in the case of Meredith, figuratively 'dead' in the canvas).

Similarly, the plots about the plagiarisms are constantly repeated with endless variations, as we have already seen. Obviously, all such intertextuality is very deliberate and, in fact, whenever he sees an opportunity for it, Ackroyd purposefully points out, or at least hints at, a similarity between his novel and other books, thus highlighting the fact that he does not want to hide his sources but rather underlines the more theoretical speculations of *Chatterton* by showing how intertextuality works in practice. An ironic allusion, for example, is made to the related story of the 'Ossian' fakeries when Charles sells James Macpherson's book, *The Lost Art of Eighteenth Century Flute-Playing*, to the junk shop, where he also finds the forged painting of another 'forger', Chatterton. Further, in Charles' funeral, Harriet says, "This reminds me of the scene from *Villette*" (176), and so in fact it remotely does: In Charlotte Brontë's novel the heroine buries her somewhat revealing letters in the cemetery (*Villette*: 305-10), and this is thematically echoed in *Chatterton*: as Charles gets buried, so does the mystery of the Chatterton manuscripts get 'buried' along with him, remaining in obscurity for ever.

Yet these intertextual echoes and allusions become even more self-reflexive, when we remember that a number of textual echoes are specifically made to the theories of intertextuality as such, including Barthes' concepts of 'echo chamber' and 'the death of the author' (69), Kristeva's idea of texts being 'patchworks' or 'mosaics of quotations' (70), Bloom's theory of 'the anxiety of influence' (100) and T. S. Eliot's notion that all artists steal from other artists (100). Clearly Ackroyd's metafiction has more significant purposes than the usual procedure of narcissistically pointing towards the novel's own construction; *Chatterton* refers to literary criticism and literary theory as a whole, giving its own interesting contribution to the poststructuralist debates about textuality and art. Yet the novel hardly becomes didactic in any negative sense, but these theories are permuted in a creative and entertaining way - always subjected to the primacy of the plot or the dramatic interest of the novel - so that anyone, also those outside literature seminars, can appreciate the ideas and the artistry of the book. The novel is not merely concerned with intellectual ideas; certainly it contains this dimension, but Ackroyd does not neglect the aesthetic or the emotional side either: all the various story lines in the different centuries possess their own special atmosphere, and so

balance each other nicely. All the daring stylistic variations make the text very lively indeed (imitation of 18th-century language (81-93) is placed next to Chatterton's poems (79) and idioms of modern English (93), for instance) so that as a whole *Chatterton* is both funny and moving, educative and entertaining. It supplies us with all the information we need about intertextuality, or poets like Chatterton and Meredith, at the same time as we may smile at the comic portrait of Harriet Scrope or feel disquiet at the deaths of Charles Wychwood and Thomas Chatterton.

### 3.2. Parody and the deconstruction of history

The discussion so far has explored pastiche and intertextuality. (The two terms are used almost synonymously in this study. See 1.4.1. for my clarification of 'intertextuality' and p. 19 for my definition of 'pastiche'.) Now, however, it is necessary to turn our attention to parody. For more than any other work by Ackroyd, *Chatterton* is involved with the subject, dealing with it both in practice and as a theme. In what follows, I shall first discuss the thematic side of parody and after that I shall show how it is used in practice - what is parodied and why, and what aims and effects can possibly lie behind Ackroyd's use of parodic techniques, especially in their relation to history.

In my discussion of *Last Testament* (see chapter 2.2.) I already made a distinction between pastiche and parody, and argued that parody is imitation with a subversive, ridiculing change. But only now in *Chatterton* does this point become really apparent: just like imitation and plagiarism, so is parody made one of the central issues in *Chatterton*. Many of the novel's characters exemplify the uses of parody and so underline its importance for Ackroyd.

Obviously, the most important of these characters exemplifying parody is Thomas Chatterton; the "great Plagiarist" (91) is also a "great Parodist" (81). Ackroyd shows that Chatterton not only mastered medieval language, but his skills in imitation were also successfully employed in the ridicule of his contemporaries, that is, parody in the service of satire. Once in London, Chatterton notices that writing poems only is not lucrative enough:

I found that they had more need for Satires than for Songs. Of

course these I compos'd willingly enough, for I hold that Man in contempt who cannot write to Measure: for the *Town and Country* I wrote political Satires against all Parties, Whig or Tory, Papist or Methodist; for the *Political Register* I compos'd meer Squibs, which they took up gladly tho' they did not know the true Range of my Shot; and knowing my own Skill in the Art of Personation, for the *Court and City* I set myself to write the memoirs of a sad dog (a gentleman pursued by Bailiffs), of a malefactor chain'd in Newgate, of an old Relict thirsting for a Man, and of a young ripe Girl about to be pluck'd. And these I related in their own Voices, naturally, as if they were authentick Histories. (89).

Although parody and satire are not the same thing (parody is a textual, or rather, intertextual practice, whereas satire exceeds the limits of textuality and literature, pointing towards social, political, religious or other human matters) these nevertheless often work together, as is the case with Ackroyd's Chatterton. He parodies various discourses and styles of writing, but he also uses parody as a means of achieving satiric purposes: "Lee, Lee, twig from the City tree, which does not grow but springs unnaturally, its roots in consanguinity, its fruit mere fantasy" (191). The fictional Chatterton ridicules the dead Alderman Lee with a mock poem, a parody of poetic language, which serves to undermine the dignity of the deceased person. This is an instance of parodic satire, and it is inconceivable without the one supporting the other.

Ackroyd's other characters use parody, even if with less sophisticated methods. Harriet Scrope, for example, parodies the speech of her secretary, Mary Wilson:

'That silly bitch typed them out -' and here she imitated her previous assistant's high quavering voice - 'it *seemed* to her, *actually*, that she didn't know what to *do* with them, as it *were*.' (C: 99).

Similarly, Edward imitates the vendor's "sound of high-pitched singing or wailing" (44) in the antique shop, and so exposes the ridiculous qualities in Mr Leno's behaviour. Charles says, "Don't...It's rude to imitate people" (44), precisely because of the critical elements in parody. Yet he himself does it, too, as he imitates Andrew Flint's "rather sonorous rhythms": "Oh, very fashionable. Very contemporary. Shall I say picturesque?" (19).

These examples are not without humour, but their real significance is that they display the deconstructive propensities of parody, its tendency to point out faults

or imperfections, and so foreground Ackroyd's own critical purposes: *Chatterton* as a whole satirizes and parodies various social and literary institutions, such as art circles and their pretentiousness, publishers and the whimsical tastes of the reading public, even the church and its clichés in clerical language (e.g. 179). Also the hypocrisy of Chatterton's contemporaries is exposed, but above all, Ackroyd uses parody in order to mock the authority of History; it is his main weapon in undermining its credibility.

For just as *Chatterton* is a book about intertextuality, it is at the same time a parody of history writing - just as *First Light* is largely a parody of archeology and science. *Chatterton* is closely involved with history, but instead of being a historical novel, it is a novel about the historicity of history, the problems involved in history writing. Linda Hutcheon (in O'Donnell, P. & Davis, R., 1989: 3-28) calls such a type of novel "historiographic metafiction" and argues that novels like this have become increasingly numerous during the last thirty years or so, reflecting the crisis of scientific status in the human sciences, brought about by postmodernism and deconstruction theory. Besides Ackroyd, other novelists dealing with the same issues of history include Salman Rushdie, D. M. Thomas, John Fowles, Julian Barnes, Umberto Eco, as well as John Barth, Robert Coover, Thomas Pynchon, E. L. Doctorow, Joseph Heller, Ishmael Reed, and many others (ibid: 6). Peter Ackroyd is certainly in a good company, but it needs to be seen now how he has ended up there: in what ways he, too, uses and abuses history?

As already mentioned, Ackroyd seeks to deconstruct the 'truth' of history primarily by the means of parody. The official version of Chatterton's life is given on the first page of the novel, but throughout the book Ackroyd deviates from the biographical account and provides multiple versions of the same events which mock the authenticity of the historical record. The biographical 'truth' is that Chatterton was apparently discouraged by the poor reception of his poetry in London and killed himself with arsenic at the age of 17 on 24 August 1770. Ackroyd, however, offers two alternative versions, with a parodic twist: the first is that Chatterton only faked his suicide and lived on until at least 50, composing verses of his contemporaries, such as we now know as poems by Cowper and Gray, for example. The second is that Chatterton did die at seventeen, but not of suicide: instead of being unhappy, he was full of vitality; he did not do badly at all, but was prolific and optimistic; and instead of a suicide, his death was a pure accident, merely a wrong mixture of arsenic and opium, intended to cure a

venereal disease. Both versions deride the official historical record and so raise questions about its validity: Ackroyd's suggestions about Chatterton's life remain a possibility - outwardly anyone could still interpret his feigned death and his accidental death as a suicide - but they remain a kind of possibility that would hardly be accepted by the conventions of history writing. Thus *Chatterton's* parody is clearly deconstructive: history is exposed as no better than fiction, merely one story among many others, and the belief in ultimate truths crumbles to pieces, which reflects the postmodern disbelief in Grand Narratives.

The second version, the story of the accidental poisoning, is actually doubly parodic. In addition to the biographical record, it mocks Henry Wallis' 'realistic' painting about Chatterton's death. Throughout the discussions between the painter and his model, Wallis insists on verisimilitude and realism, scattering pieces of paper on the floor, dressing Meredith in an 18th-century costume, and drawing the outlines of the picture in the attic room where Chatterton, according to his biographies, was found dead. But against such realist claims, Ackroyd makes us see that Wallis' painting, in fact, has very little to do with realism; its 'verisimilitude' is a greatly romanticized, beautified vision that has actually more to do with 19th-century art conventions than an outcome of arsenic poisoning:

The saliva fills Chatterton's mouth, a river overflowing its precious banks. There is a pain in his belly like the colic but burning so, my liver and spleen might roast in the heat. What is happening to me? He tries to rise from his bed, but the agony throws him down again and he rolls in terror to stare at the wall. Oh God the arsenic. 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. Everything is fleeing from me. I am the house on fire. Oh god the poison. I am being melted down. (227).

Ackroyd mocks Wallis' realism with a realism of his own, demonstrating that death by arsenic is never a beautiful sight. Yet the irony of Wallis' painting is that posterity will eventually remember the picture as "the true death of Chatterton" (157).

As Hutcheon (1989: 96) points out, the novel's multiple versions of the same events, such as Chatterton's death, draw our attention to *representations* of history, and so have a de-naturalizing effect, making us realise that history is always a made up, actively constructed creation. So Henry Wallis' painting is one

representation of history, and Ackroyd's parodic reply to it is another - both telling a different story. Sarah Tilt's study of the images of death in English painting serves to emphasize the same thing, the multiplicity of representations, just as Charles finds out 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 he still understood very little about Chatterton. At first Charles had been annoyed by these discrepancies but then he was exhilarated by them: for it meant that anything became possible. If there were no truths, everything was true. (C: 127).

The truth of the past is the representation of events (Cousins, M. in *Post-Structuralism and the Question of History*, ed. Attridge, D. et al., 1987: 133), but if these representations vary, then the truth becomes blurred. Or then "truth" as a word suffers from inflation, it loses its value, as is the case in *Chatterton*: the words "true" and "truth", "real" and "reality", are used so often, so differently, by different characters that 'truth' becomes a relative concept, always open to suspicion. Not only do the biographies portray different 'truths' about the poet (C: 127), but also Charles Wychwood thinks he has found the 'truth' about Chatterton (23). Mr Joynson tells the story of the 'real' bookseller, Samuel Joynson (219), and as we have seen, Wallis' painting becomes the "true death of Chatterton" (157). Harriet Scrope, moreover, represents the idea of *hiding* the past, keeping the 'truth' repressed or at least beautified for various personal or ideological reasons, as she wants to omit her plagiarisms from her memoirs. Eventually she does not even want to find the final truth about Chatterton but ponders that "there is a charm and even a beauty in unfinished work...Why should historical research not also remain incomplete, existing as a possibility and not fading into knowledge?" (213).

It is thus the scientific aspirations of history that Ackroyd constantly questions through his parody and his thematics of history writing. This is a typically poststructuralist position, a view taken by Rodolphe Gasché (in *Post-Structuralism and the Question of History*: 150), for example, who argues that

Poetic discourse and history are clearly aesthetic discourses. (...) History is one form of *perfected* sensate, or aesthetic discourse. It is one form of lucid exposition contributing to the perfection and clarity of confused representations. Yet, in that quality, history is poetic. It

thus seems that history, rather than being a discourse different in nature from poetic discourse, is after all only one of the latter's possible articulations.

In many languages the word 'history' means 'story' and 'history' at the same time. The French use the word *l'histoire*, and the Italians *la storia*, but in English the two-fold etymology of the word has become blurred, and 'history' is given a special status, different from that of mere 'story'. Yet Ackroyd in a way bridges the gap between 'story' and 'history' and brings them closer together by devaluing the status of history and praising the fictionality of stories. His novel shows that the two terms ultimately amount to the same thing: Harriet says, "Everything is made up" (C: 28) and Charles makes the same observation: "The real world is just a succession of interpretations. Everything which is written down immediately becomes a kind of fiction." (40). Even Meredith approaches the same subject, but from another angle:

There is nothing more real than words. They are reality. (...) Our dead poet created the monk Rowley out of thin air, and yet he has more life in him than any medieval priest who actually existed. The invention is always more real. (...) The poet does not merely recreate or describe the world. He actually creates it. (157).

So Ackroyd in fact reverses the hierarchy: for him true fiction is more real than 'reality' or historical 'truth'. If history and fiction, indeed, are both aesthetic discourses, then are not they also valued and even believed in on aesthetic grounds? At least this is how Charles Wychwood and Philip Slack respond to the invented Chatterton manuscripts:

'Is it real?'  
'Of course it is real. It's stupendously real. Incredibly real.' Charles paused.  
'Didn't it seem real to you?'  
'Yes, it seemed real.' (93).

On the one hand Ackroyd is flattering himself here - the fictional story of the Chatterton manuscripts is written by him, after all - but on the other hand he is being merely consistent with his view of fiction and reality, invention and history: later on Charles turns the story of these manuscripts into a historical investigation, and Harriet remarks, "None of it seemed very real, but I suppose that's the trouble with history. It's the one thing we have to make up for ourselves." (226).

Harriet speaks from her own experiences - and failure - of writing down the past. She knows that history is never objective; it is always subjective interpretation, invested with different ideologies, purposes and meanings (cf. Selden and Widdowson, 1993: 162-3). There is no such thing as an innocent history, Ackroyd seems to say: history can only be known as traces, elusive memories or impartial documents, primary and secondary sources, to which the historian imposes his or her meaning. One is not just dealing with 'facts'; these facts must be selected, ordered, sequenced and interpreted. The vast, and often conflicting, material has no meaning or coherence in itself; it is the historian who creates this structure or meaning. It is therefore a fantasy that "the past may not only be represented as history, but also exhaustively and truthfully represented" (Cousins, M. in Attridge, D. et al., ed., 1987: 135). As Ackroyd's Meredith paraphrases this poststructuralist notion of history,

'Of course there *is* a reality -'  
 'Ah! The tune has changed!'  
 '- But, I was going to add, it is not one that can be depicted. There are no words to stamp the infinite thing.' (C: 133).

This failure of history as a science is reflected in the failure of historical, scientific or forensic investigation in Ackroyd's novels: not only do Harriet Scrope, Charles Wychwood or Sarah Tilt fail in their work in *Chatterton*, but also in *Hawksmoor*, *First Light* and even in *Dan Leno* the ultimate 'truth' is strangely elusive: The detective Nicholas Hawksmoor becomes mad as a result of being unable to solve the connection he sees with murders taking place in London, but which seem to point towards the past, the early 18th century. In *First Light* the archeologists and astronomers "see what [they] want to see" (158) - "everything takes the shape we expect" (160) - as they gaze at the stars or build their somewhat far-fetched theories of the mysterious burial grounds of the ancient Britons. In *Dan Leno* the police do manage to track down and hang the murderer - but not for the right crimes, which for them remain an unsolved puzzle. In *The House of Doctor Dee*, moreover, the main character, Matthew Palmer, gains knowledge of the past by unconventional means: besides historical research he is in contact with the spirits of the dead through dreams, hallucinations, voices, apparitions, ghosts, and other nightmares, which eventually take him over in the three different endings of the novel.

Qualities like these, the resistance to closure and the failure of finding the 'truth', are typical characteristics of postmodern writing. Similar examples can be found in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1983) or Julian Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), for instance, which both - like Ackroyd - are concerned with semiotics, the interpretation of signs, and its fallibility in the face of the world, which is more complicated than the human mind. John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) is also close to Ackroyd's novels, with its parody of history writing and its two alternative endings, which mock the totality of any final 'truth'. *Chatterton*, of course, displays exactly the same features as these novels, and at the end of it we are left with the question: who really was Thomas Chatterton? What was the personality behind his poems, and why did he die? With his parody and with his problematizing of the biographical 'truth', Ackroyd interferes and tampers with the historical record. Yet his novel hardly becomes too serious and certainly not academically dry, but throughout retains its playful characteristics while posing its alternative scenarios and intriguing possibilities. We shall never find the final truth about the 18th-century poet, but this is merely the way it should be. When history fails, we still have the comfort of fictions. "And, when his body is found the next morning, Chatterton is still smiling." (C: 234).

### 3.3. Reconstruction of the literary canon

As we have seen, questioning the authority of History is typical of poststructuralism and postmodernism. Yet I would like to argue that in the case of *Chatterton* the deconstruction of history also has deeper purposes than merely to problematize it for its own sake, or undermine it in order to further the causes of postmodernism. That has already been done by at least a dozen novelists, as Hutcheon (1989) and Scholes (1979: 206-9) tell us.

Rather, Ackroyd's deconstruction is closely related to his thematics of intertextuality. As I see it, his undermining of the myth of Chatterton has a quite specific purpose: for the Romantics - Keats, Coleridge, Wordsworth and others - Chatterton was important chiefly because he suffered a romantic death. Ever since them, Thomas Chatterton, "Thou marvellous boy...Who perished in his pride" (C: 21), has been seen as a tragic figure, a kind of pioneer of the Romantics, who "lost his life in a heroic attempt to penetrate the dull crashness of the mid-eighteenth century" (*The Rowley Poems*, ed. Hare, M., 1911: xxxiv). Yet

Ackroyd, with his problematizing of the 'truth' of Chatterton, specifically seeks to shake this Romantic notion of the poet. The multiple versions that he offers of Chatterton's life parodically subvert any romanticism associated with Chatterton's destiny: an image of a fifty-year-old recluse, forging the poems of others, or a scene of a drunken adolescent haphazardly trying to cure a venereal disease with alcohol, drugs and poison, can hardly sustain any Romantic dreams of the poet.

Instead, Ackroyd undermines the Romantic myth in order to show that the importance of the poet was *not* that he died a tragic death, or lived a heroic life; the real importance of Chatterton was in his poetry itself: as early as two hundred years ago, he understood the powers of pastiche - how history could be woken up to life through imitation and imagination, by a unique conflation of fact and fiction. As Ackroyd's Meredith puts it,

Chatterton did not create an individual simply [the monk Rowley]. 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. (157).

Despite the Romantic sympathies for his destiny, Chatterton has usually been seen as "a very minor poet...some kind of forger" (121). But with critical comments as above, interspersed with his fiction, Ackroyd re-evaluates Chatterton's importance and playfully suggests that he may well have influenced later poets more than has been assumed. This is what Charles says to Andrew Flint, for example, "Think of them all around watching us, Blake, Shelley, Coleridge...Meredith. (...) And do you know what...They all got it from Chatterton" (77).

Charles' suggestion may be somewhat facetious, but it is, nevertheless, a clear praise of the poet on Ackroyd's part. Yet Philip Slack stumbles upon something more concrete, when he reads an advert of "a forthcoming publication of *Thou Marvellous Boy: The Influence of Thomas Chatterton on the Writings of William Blake*":

There have been many accounts of Thomas Chatterton's influence upon the Romantic poets, but Professor Brillo's study is the first to examine in detail the effect which Chatterton's 'Rowley' poems had upon the vocabulary and prosody of William Blake's epic verse. Professor Brillo also studies the devices by which Blake introduced

the subliminal figure of Chatterton, the suicide, into his texts and discusses the influence of Chatterton's medievalism on Blake's own vision. As Professor Brillo states in his introduction, "This is the one 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 influence of Thomas Chatterton, Blake's own poetry would have taken a wholly different form." (72).

If this was *entirely* fictional, it could well be read as a parody of academic writing, or as a typical Ackroydian joke, but it is more than that since in *Blake* (1995) Ackroyd does exactly the same as the fictional Professor Brillo, when he writes that "By 1767 Blake had already started reading the verses of Thomas Chatterton...and was so powerfully affected by their medieval vocabulary and cadence that he began to reproduce the same characteristics in his own verse" (*Blake*: 40);

Blake knew that Chatterton had divined a truth and acquired the authority of the past in a manner unavailable to the orthodox scholars and fashionable critics of the period. (...) Blake's own debt to Chatterton is extensive and profound; there are various references to his early writing...and Blake's youthful poetry is heavily influenced by the vocabulary and imagery of the 'Rowley' ballads. (*Blake*: 57).

As I have argued before, Ackroyd's novels are literary criticism in the form of fiction, and this seems to be very much the case with *Chatterton*, since in instances like these his fiction sounds exactly like his biographies. It is therefore possible to read *Chatterton*, as well as other novels by Ackroyd, as an extension of his critical practices, and so form an overall view of 'Ackroyd's canon' of the literary history. We already know from his biographies that poets like William Blake, Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot are valued high in his scale, but reading novels like *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, *Chatterton* or *English Music* supplies us with a plethora of further critical suggestions: *English Music* as a whole, for example, pays respect to writers as varied as Thomas Malory, John Bunyan, Daniel Defoe, Charles Dickens, Lewis Carroll or Arthur Conan Doyle, and chapter 16 (written in the style of Blake) even gives an entire survey of the history of English poetry - from Beowulf to 19th century Decadence - praising poets like Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Chatterton and Blake, whereas the Age of Reason (Dryden and Pope), as well as the 'night school' - Young, Smart, Gray, Cowper and Collins - are played down by reason of their "weak vision" and

"narrowed perception" (*English Music*: 349-59).

In the same critical vein, Ackroyd's Chatterton asks his friend for an opinion of Cowper and Gray, and Dan replies, "Curiosities. Both of them." (C: 215). It is also interesting to notice that the imaginative qualities of George Meredith are questioned as well: "Meredith tried to imagine himself in the position of Chatterton but he could not. He was George Meredith." (139).

Throughout Ackroyd's books, however, Thomas Chatterton is praised with laudatory comments. He is given a special place in Ackroyd's literary canon:

'The greatest plagiarist in history?'  
'No...He was the greatest poet in history!' (94).

Ever since the late eighteenth century, poets have attached different meanings to Thomas Chatterton. For William Blake, Chatterton was important in reviving the medieval world and mythology (*Blake*: 40). For the Romantics, Chatterton became their pioneer and a tragic figure (*The Rowley Poems*: xxxiv). For Oscar Wilde, he was an object of identification as well because of his criminal propensities and his artistic power (Ellmann, 1987: 268). But now Peter Ackroyd, too, seems to have found a precursor of himself in the 18th-century poet. Like so many men of letters before him, he redefines the myth of Chatterton and makes him an emblem of his own writing. Like any great writer, Ackroyd destroys old myths and creates new ones, and by so doing creates a reality or a mythology of his own.

#### 4. Dan Leno & the Limehouse Golem (1994)

Alongside the constant preoccupation with the issues of intertextuality and literary history, there are of course other concerns in Ackroyd's fiction. His themes, in fact, encompass a wide range of human matters: what it is to be a human being; how people live, think and behave throughout the centuries, especially in a city as large, dark and threatening as London. Ackroyd's novels (with the exception of *First Light* and *Milton in America*) are all more or less novels about London: its peculiar characteristics, its streets and alleys, its places imbued with history. Ackroyd writes about the people who inhabit the great city, both past and present, the famous and the infamous, men and women, even gay or straight, showing that, regardless of its long line of history, the city and its people have changed remarkably little during the centuries. In novels as varied as *The Great Fire of London*, *Hawksmoor* or *The House of Doctor Dee* special attention is being paid to the sidelines and the outer edges of society: the poor, the outcast, the madmen, the whores, the weird and the criminal. The circularity of time and the human fascination with the supernatural are, moreover, themes that often bring a certain mysticism or a gothic element into Ackroyd's fiction, but frequently this kind of darkness is balanced by the subtle humour, the ironic insights, deriving from Ackroyd's sharp eye for the absurdities and peculiarities of human behaviour. Although Ackroyd's characters cannot always be said to be very 'realistic', they remain recognizable enough to provide us with a range of human experience.

However, even as Ackroyd writes about many different subjects - indeed, he likes to try something new in every novel - there is still a clear sense of continuity in his works. It is true that after *Chatterton*, with novels such as *First Light* and *The House of Doctor Dee*, Ackroyd pushed his by now more familiar themes, art and literature, somewhere in the background, while concentrating more on other issues: the contrast between country life and city culture, for example, or the clash between rural mythologies and the methods of science in *First Light*, and the more sinister aspects of the human psyche and the occult - spiritism, alchemism, magic, clairvoyance - in *The House of Doctor Dee* (supposedly based on the life of an Elizabethan alchemist). Still, even in these works Ackroyd has by no means rejected his poststructuralist world view, and in *English Music* and in *Dan Leno & the Limehouse Golem* he once again resurfaces with his critical

examination of the past literature and his emphasis on the intertextual view of art - now in *Dan Leno* extending itself into new areas, such as the relationship between language, culture, and the human subject.

My explicit purpose in bringing *Dan Leno* as part of this study is to show that even as he is moving into new areas, Ackroyd, even in his later novels, almost ten years after *Chatterton* and twenty years after the manifesto, *Notes for a New Culture*, is still largely occupied with the same issues: revising literary canons and applying poststructuralist ideas. Instead of repeating himself, however, I hope to show that even in these more familiar issues Ackroyd is able to find new areas and new significances to explore. Thus in the remaining chapters I will concentrate on the following aspects which I find to be at the centre of *Dan Leno*: its constant literary criticism and its self-conscious construction upon earlier texts (4.1.); its specific attack against literary realism (4.2.); and finally, the theme that runs like a thread throughout the novel - the intertextual self (4.3.).

#### **4.1. Literature of the second degree**

*Dan Leno & the Limehouse Golem* is the most complex and the most disturbing novel Ackroyd has written so far. On the surface it looks like a more than usually sinister crime novel, with a plot that involves an excess of blood and gore: murders of two prostitutes, a mutilation of a Jewish scholar, and slaughters of two entire families on the Ratcliffe Highway of Limehouse, London. Yet this gruesomely entertaining and morally shocking crime plot is primarily a convenient novelistic device to attach other, deeper ideas and themes to the work. The fact that the police investigation, curiously enough, centres on suspects as varied as Karl Marx, George Gissing and Dan Leno brings a whole cluster of other dimensions to the text: Karl Marx, the father of the Communist Party, stands for Socialism and the struggle to alleviate the sufferings of the poor; George Gissing, the author of novels such as *Workers in the Dawn* (1880) or *The Nether World* (1889), represents Realism and Naturalism; and Dan Leno, a famous music-hall comedian, "the funniest man on earth" (*DL*: 193), symbolizes popular theatre and, by analogy, the idea of an intertextually defined self.

Thus, what at first glance may have appeared as mere sinister entertainment (*Dan Leno* is very readable indeed) turns out to be a very complex and very

challenging novel. This complexity is further enhanced by the fragmentation of the structure, the breaking up of chronology and the employment of a number of stylistic techniques, including omniscient narrating, first person narrative, diary entries, courtroom documents, newspaper reporting and quotations from critical essays. The narration, moreover, is deliberately misleading as regards the identity of the murderer (in his posthumous diary, John Cree confesses to the murders, but then again his wife, Elizabeth, claims to have written it), and the reader finds himself constantly baffled by what is historical fact and what is purely invented. The crime novel, then, is at the same time a historical novel, a novel of ideas, a sort of black *bildungsroman*, and despite its atmospherically historical setting, the London of 1880s, it is also a contemporary, postmodern work. In fact, every historical novel reflects its own time as well.

Characteristically, however, *Dan Leno* is also a work of oblique literary criticism. This time Ackroyd's critical eye mainly concentrates on Realism and Naturalism (4.2.), but he also re-examines the work of Thomas De Quincey. In the novel where most characters are involved with texts of some sort - either reading, writing or stage acting - Ackroyd makes his characters read De Quincey's essays. In the Reading Room of the British Museum, Karl Marx takes down from the shelf *Dialogues of Three Templars on Political Economy* by Thomas De Quincey (195). Dan Leno becomes interested in the famous 18th-century clown, Joseph Grimaldi, and so reads De Quincey's essay on pantomime, 'Laugh, Scream and Speech' (193). George Gissing writes his first public essay, 'Romanticism and Crime', and extols Thomas De Quincey's impassionate prose:

I might turn for a suggestive analogy to Thomas De Quincey's essay "On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts", which is justly celebrated for its postscript on the extraordinary theme of the Ratcliffe Highway murders of 1812 when an entire family was butchered in a hosier's shop. (...) The Marr murders of 1812 reached their apotheosis in the prose of Thomas De Quincey, who with purple imagery and soaring cadence has succeeded in immortalizing them. (...) He is primarily concerned with the fatal figure of John Williams, of course, but he takes care to place his creation (for that is what the murderer essentially becomes) before a scenery of a massive and monstrous city; few writers had so keen and horrified a sense of place, and within this relatively short essay he evokes a sinister, crepuscular London, a haven for strange powers, a city of footsteps and flaring lights, of houses packed close together, of lacrymose alleys and false doors. (35-40).

On the one hand, the coincidence that all these characters should read De

Quincey's essays exemplify the novel's great theme of hidden connections in the apparent chanceful nature of the world, but on the other hand, this also serves to remind us of the importance of Thomas De Quincey. *Dan Leno*, true enough, makes only passing references to the most famous work of the writer, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (38-9), but it revives our interest in those works of "the great author" (190) that are not so widely read any longer. Ackroyd especially makes us turn back to the essay, 'On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts'. This is not simply because Gissing's essay is quoted at length in the novel, but more specifically, because Ackroyd's own central crime plot is borrowed from Thomas De Quincey.

There is thus an intricate relationship between *Dan Leno* and Thomas De Quincey, especially his murder essay and its dramatic postscript. Ackroyd borrows quite happily all the interesting elements from De Quincey's murder story: the ominous atmosphere of approaching doom; the narration from the murderer's point of view and the access to the killer's disturbed mind; as well as the parallels between murder and acting, together with the theatrical imagery which depicts the murderer very much like an artist in crime. Ackroyd even goes so far as to use the same setting (two houses on the Ratcliffe Highway, East London) and the same method of murder (the use of a mallet and a razor to crush the victims' skulls and cut their throats).

However, even as he reinvents the murder plot, Ackroyd wisely takes precaution to distance himself from Thomas De Quincey: all this borrowing is quite justified in the fact that Ackroyd makes his murderer, too, read 'On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts'. As this text becomes part of the psychological reality of the character, there is no reason why Ackroyd should not imitate De Quincey's work in such an open manner: being so influenced by the essay, in fact, the murderer (which the newspapers dub the 'Limehouse Golem') begins to imitate it in his own actions. Thus a curious thing happens: at the same time as Ackroyd is able to construct his plot on borrowed material, there occurs a significant thematic change between Ackroyd's novel and De Quincey's murder story. *Dan Leno* retains the theme of the connection between artistry and murder (in fact, it further develops it), but at the same time it shifts its emphasis elsewhere: it highlights its own intertextual position and thematizes intertextuality itself; the theme of texts influencing our thinking and behaviour (the idea of the intertextual 'self') becomes more important than the murder plot.

According to Manfred Pfister (in Plett, 1991: 214), this kind of foregrounding and thematizing of intertextuality as the work's central constructional principle is a feature of postmodern intertextuality. An application of David Cowart's (1993) theory, however, may explain more satisfactorily what has happened here: *Dan Leno* and De Quincey's essay have a kind of 'symbiotic' relationship with each other where both texts benefit from the closeness of the contact. Ackroyd's novel savours of all the merits of Thomas De Quincey's macabre tale, at the same time as it makes enough thematic changes to boast its individual position. Similarly, De Quincey's essay loses nothing in the process but enjoys a renewed interest as we realise, somewhat ironically, what an extraordinary effect it creates on Ackroyd's antihero. There is, indeed, something darkly humorous in the murderer's comments to the reader: "I can heartily recommend this work. Is that not what they say?" (*DL*: 30-1).

Like *Chatterton*, then, *Dan Leno* is a novel that advertises its own intertextuality. This is typical of postmodern fiction, which has an obsession of self-consciously revealing the fact that it is quoting. This type of fiction which is openly based on other texts could be called 'literature of the second degree' as a distinction from those more naive works that attempt to hide their sources. The artist who plainly bases his work on pre-existing material may risk being thought 'unoriginal' (Cowart, 1993: 11), but on the other hand such an artist may be said to master the tradition he is part of and so be able to play games with it. Most of the major novels of the postmodern era could be said to be part of this category.

Naturally, all Ackroyd's novels reveal their indebtedness to earlier texts. *Dan Leno*, however, makes a special virtue of this: since Ackroyd's work aims to re-create the spirit of nineteenth-century London - involving a multitude of historical figures such as Marx, Leno, Gissing, and Oscar Wilde, too - it suits Ackroyd's purposes to quote from his sources every now and then for effects of historical 'accuracy':

The early autumn of 1880, in the weeks just before the emergence of the Limehouse Golem, was exceptionally cold and damp. The notorious pea-soupers of the period, so ably memorialized by Robert Louis Stevenson and Arthur Conan Doyle, were quite as dark as their literary reputation would suggest. (*DL*: 43).

This, however, may be said to parody history writing: Ackroyd bases his knowledge of the pea-soupers on the authors he is actually referring to but at the same time pretends that his novel is more than fiction, i.e., historically accurate knowledge. Like Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), which inserts historical texts to the fiction and uses footnotes to create an illusion of credibility (Hutcheon, 1989: 84), so does Ackroyd incorporate other contextual material, including newspaper reports (*DL*: 216-18) and courtroom documents (e.g. 9-10) for effects of documentary value. Yet the irony in Ackroyd's case is that one cannot be 100% certain - unless one goes through all the labour of checking out - which of these quotations are genuine and which are invented since Ackroyd takes special care to make his annexations look authentic:

*The Morning Advertiser of the 3rd October, 1880, carried the following announcement on its front page (216)*

or

*All extracts from the trial of Elizabeth Cree, for the murder of her husband, are taken from the full reports in the Illustrated Police News Law Courts and Weekly Record from the 4th to the 12th of February, 1881 (9).*

As always, the division between fact and fiction becomes problematic in Ackroyd's parody of history writing, but there is perhaps a further irony in the already-quoted pea-souper example, since Ackroyd, with his reliance on fiction writers such as Doyle and Stevenson, may even be "parodically exacting revenge for some historians' tendency to read literature only as historical document" (cf. Hutcheon, 1989: 84).

Whatever the case, the effect remains that Ackroyd foregrounds his intertextuality. The very name of his main character, Lambeth Marsh Lizzie (or Elizabeth Cree after her marriage) recalls the title of W. Somerset Maugham's novel, *Liza of Lambeth* (1897). Indeed, it seems likely that Ackroyd has based his character on Maugham's heroine. At least the parallels are obvious: both are stories of a young woman gone astray; the heroine in both books is the only child of a religious, hypocritical mother who mistreats her; both women oppose their mother's will; and both have lived all their childhood in poverty in Lambeth approximately in the same period. Both novels, moreover, share the theme of popular theatre influencing the lives and behaviour of the urban masses, which

however is taken to extremes in *Dan Leno*, and which is also where the two stories begin to differ: Ackroyd makes his character join Dan Leno's theatrical group, after which similarities are hard to find.

On the whole, *Liza of Lambeth* appears to be the general starting point in *Dan Leno*. But as Ackroyd mixes it with Dan Leno's music hall scenes, De Quincey's murder plot and the biographical episodes of George Gissing and Karl Marx, the final outcome bears little resemblance to the initial model - or any single models, for that matter. The novel is a strange combination of different texts and different plots, where Maugham's innocent heroine, for example, turns into a callous murderer who kills her mother and all the other people who get in her way. (She may well be the 'Limehouse Golem', too, but this is not revealed until the end.) The most likely explanation for what has happened here is that Ackroyd has deliberately retained a distant resemblance to *Liza of Lambeth* in order to parody it in a strange, dark way: Ackroyd exaggerates the book's scenes of poverty and degradation (e.g. 11-6) and adds an 'improbable' crime plot so as to mock Maugham's 'realistic' fiction. *Liza of Lambeth* is just the kind of novel for Ackroyd to ridicule, since beneath its apparent realism (the use of demotic language and the stock imagery of filth, drunkenness and domestic violence) it has a rather unimaginative plot which relies on unconscious models of stage melodrama and popular romances that have nothing to do with the kind of higher literature Ackroyd is promoting in his works, novels and biographies.

#### **4.2. Mocking literary realism**

Ackroyd may well have parodied Maugham's first novel in *Dan Leno*, but far more important is the stance in general the novel displays against Realism and Naturalism. According to Bradbury (1993) the last hundred years or so that have marked the development of the modern British novel have been characterized by the critical attitude novelists have adopted against their Victorian predecessors. The Victorian heritage of 'realist' writers such as George Eliot, Charles Dickens or some of Henry James is still so strong that British novelists even today tend to respond to it, both paying homage to their predecessors and criticizing them. Ackroyd, of course, is no exception: it is no coincidence that *Dan Leno* is set in the 1880s, for example; this is the period of the high peak in realism and naturalism in Britain; a period when novels were becoming so life-like that Oscar

Wilde, in 'The Decay of Lying' (1889), complained that "no one can possibly believe in their probability" (*Intentions*: 8. See also Bradbury, 1993: 27). 1880 is also the year when Emile Zola wrote his naturalist manifesto, *The Experimental Novel*, and this is also the decade when George Gissing wrote his pessimistic novels about the miseries of urban slums (Coustillas, P. and Partridge, C. ed., 1972: 1-21).

In *Dan Leno* the issue of realism is mostly explored through the figure of George Gissing. He was a Yorkshire radical, a naturalist and a realist, writing novels more concerned with a bitter social cry than a form of art (Bradbury, 1993: 22). Married to an alcoholic, Nell, who "earned her drink by prostitution" (*DL*: 111), Gissing's own life was far from happy, as he lived in poverty himself, forced to rely upon the cheap rewards of journalism after his first novel, *Workers in the Dawn*, sold only 49 copies during the first six months of its publication (111-2). "He was an idealist who believed that, in the best theatrical tradition, he could 'rescue' Nell" (111) by marrying her, but this was a 'delusion' that almost brought him to the gutter. As Ackroyd writes,

This sounds like a mere melodrama from the London stage, something which might be performed on the boards of a 'theatre of sensation' like the Cosmotheke in Bell Street, but it is a true story - the truest story George Gissing ever completed. (112).

The life of George Gissing offers an interesting case for Ackroyd to explore since here he sees a man whose own life was more interesting than his art. Ackroyd infuses sympathy for the poor novelist at the same time as he is ready to condemn his realism. This may be a paradox, but an even greater one is the fact that he also sees Gissing's life in terms of "melodrama", even as he compares him to a "modern outcast, who might have come from the pages of Emile Zola" (111).

Such paradoxes may best be explained by looking at realism itself. In literary history realism is usually associated with the effort of the novel in the 19th century to "establish itself as a major literary genre" (Fowler, R. ed., 1973: 155). The assertion was that "far from being escapist and unreal, the novel was uniquely capable of revealing the truth of contemporary life in society" (*ibid*). This new role of the novelist led to detailed reportage and often excessive description of people's everyday life, their physical surroundings and the social and economic

bases of the contemporary society. "The virtues pursued were accuracy and completeness of description" (ibid), and the underlying assumption was that language can represent the 'real' (Selden, R. ed., 1988: 41). Naturalism went even further in its goals of elaborate documentation and scientific objectivity and, since it rested on an analogy to the scientific method, Emile Zola was able to "see no further need for the imagination" (ibid: 42).

However, as Ackroyd shows in his novel, such an ideal of literature is itself mixed up in a paradox:

There was...one difficulty and it was, appropriately, a stylistic one; despite Gissing's interest in realism and unstudied naturalism, his own prose encompassed the romantic, the rhetorical and the picturesque. Within the narrative of *Workers in the Dawn*, for example, he had bathed the city in an iridescent glow and turned its habitants into stage heroes or stage crowds on the model of the sensation plays in the penny gaffs. Even now, as he settled in his small room and began looking through his notes on Charles Babbage's Analytical Engine, he might have noticed that he referred to it as a 'towering Babylonian idol' which 'faces out towards the heaving masses'.  
This was not the language of a realist. (*DL*: 137).

The difficulty with the realistic style, supposed to be 'objective' and 'transparent', may have been Gissing's problem, but Ackroyd implies that the same awkwardness plagues literary realism as a whole: although realism assumes that there is a one-to-one relationship between language and 'reality', it is itself bound to the conventions of writing, including questions of style, form, plot and structure, with the beginning, the middle and the end - qualities that are not found in the 'world' but which are imposed upon representations of it. Even as it records and catalogues the physical minutiae of everyday life, realist fiction is unable to escape the underlying models of writing or the devices of plotting, if it is to be readable at all. *Dan Leno* shows that realists like George Gissing, in their social, historical, moral or scientific purposes, largely neglected form and ignored tradition, with the unfortunate result that they unconsciously reverted to easy models of lower art, such as "melodrama" (112) or "sensation plays" (137). Beneath the social or historical subject matter lay an inferior form of art.

*Dan Leno*, in other words, criticizes realism because of its lack of self-consciousness, but it goes further than that: it undermines the assumption that

language can represent the 'real' and instead, like Baudrillard (1983) or Hutcheon (1988), suggests that possibly far more than 'reality', language represents other texts. Thus we notice, for example, that when John Cree, another aspiring realist in the book, plans to write a novel about urban poverty and "the crime and disease which it engendered" (44) he does not go to the streets to collect his material but, instead, his first place of study is the Reading Room of the British Museum:

He had reserved a copy of Plumstead's *History of the London Poor* and Molton's *A Few Sighs From Hell*. Both books were concerned with the life of the indigent and the vagrant in the capital, and for that reason they were of especial interest to him. (44).

By coincidence, John Cree sits between George Gissing and Karl Marx, and they, too, exemplify the same idea that texts are quite as much, or more, based on other texts as the 'reality' they are supposed to depict:

Karl Marx was dividing his attention between Tennyson's *In Memoriam* and *Bleak House* by Charles Dickens. (...) Now he was once again contemplating the composition of a long poem, which was to be set in the turbulent streets of Limehouse and entitled *The Secret Sorrows of London*. (...) He was reading the last instalment of *Bleak House*, and had reached that point where Richard Carstone asks, on his deathbed, 'It was all a troubled dream?' Marx seemed to find the remark interesting, and wrote on a sheet of lined paper, 'It was all a troubled dream'. (45-6).

Similarly, Gissing himself seeks inspiration from other "books and pamphlets" (45), but what all these examples essentially underline is the fact that realism, like any other genre, is based on a set of conventions. Ackroyd exposes the intertextuality behind literary realism and makes us see that, besides its sociohistorical subject matter, there is hardly anything special about it. Even the subject matters themselves tend to revolve around certain conventionalized areas, such as low and middle class life, which is something that is turned into parody in *Dan Leno*: it itself employs some of the stock items of 'realistic' fiction, including details of poverty and drunkenness, social degradation and the suffering of the labouring masses, scenes of people dressed in rags, children naked and half-starved, stray dogs eating "scattered remnants of rubbish or excrement" (243-6).

Indeed, parts of *Dan Leno* read like novels of social protest - just like the darkest scenes in *North and South* by Mrs Gaskell or Dickens's *Hard Times* - and this is exactly the point: Ackroyd piles up heaps of imagery which bring about the illusion of 19th-century realism. He provides plenty of background information of the sociohistorical scene of late 19th-century London so that a kind of fictional illusion of the 19th-century world begins to take shape. Yet this 'realistic' illusion is at the same time problematized by the very use of intertextuality: Ackroyd's 'realistic' passages do not greatly differ from some of those by Dickens, Gaskell or George Gissing, for instance, but as they are written more than one hundred years after the novel's setting, 1880, they are by necessity based on other texts, novels, history books, biographies, etc. Ackroyd's 'realism' is learned and imitated from other books, which suggests that so is much of the realism of the 19th-century novelists. As Hutcheon (1988: 125) has put it, "realism is a set of conventions...representation of the real is not the same as the real itself." Kathy Acker goes even further by saying that "Our reality...is other texts" (O'Donnell, P. and Davis, R. ed., 1989: 175). Of course, Peter Ackroyd affirms these postmodern views of language and reality in *Dan Leno*, and applies these ideas both in his themes and his practices.

Thus, it is more than obvious that despite its imitation of realism, *Dan Leno* is *not* a realistic work itself. Not even 19th-century readers would consider the novel as a whole very 'life-like' - it is far too 'improbable' for that. And as for 20th-century readers, we may recognize the conventions of realism in it, but eventually we will pay attention to the deliberate artistry of the book, its blatant intertextuality and its highly patterned construction as a work of art. Yet ironically, it is most often at the very application of the conventions of realism that the novel undermines its realistic impressions. Ackroyd, for example, arrests his narration of George Gissing's affairs with this comment:

In the novels which Gissing subsequently wrote, there are often coincidental events and chance encounters; when asked about these devices he generally declared that 'this is what happens' or 'this is the way life is'. (*DL*: 121).

Immediately after this, however, Ackroyd applies Gissing's method of writing and arranges a chance encounter himself, remarking that Gissing "may have been correct in [his] assumption but he was also speaking from direct experience: as he now walked through Limehouse Causeway towards Scofield Street, for

example, he saw his wife running across the road ahead of him." (121). Ackroyd foregrounds the conventions of realism by literally spelling them out, but when he actually makes such coincidental events and chance encounters one of the most conspicuous features of his novel, *Dan Leno* teases the reader's credulity to the limits: all the hidden connections and complex interrelations between different characters and their lives; the curious coincidence that most characters come across Thomas De Quincey's essays; the fact that Marx, Leno and Gissing become the prime suspects of the murders; the strange parallels between Joseph Grimaldi, Dan Leno, Lambeth Marsh Lizzie or even Charlie Chaplin; the chanceful results of one insignificant event leading to a whole series of other episodes - all these features, chances and coincidences, accumulate to incredible proportions in the novel, thus parodying Gissing's 'realism' - ironically, by using his own methods.

Quite clearly, then, *Dan Leno* does not even try to be a realistic work since, on the contrary, it does not believe that language can truthfully and objectively represent the 'real'. All such attempts are seen to fail in Ackroyd's novel:

Charles Dickens and certain 'problem novelists' had described the horrors of urban poverty before, but these accounts were characteristically sentimentalised or sensationalised to take accounts of the public taste for Gothic effects. Newspaper reports were not necessarily more accurate, of course, since they tended to follow the same patterns of melodramatic narrative. (268).

Similarly, Lambeth Marsh Lizzie tells the story of her life to other characters, not as it is previously shown to happen, but the way it is more plausible to them - the way the other characters expect to hear it:

I told her [Doris] that my parents had died when I was very young, that I had earned my living as a seamstress in Hanover Square, and that I had run away from a hard mistress before I had found lodgings with a sail-maker in Lambeth Marsh. After that, I had been found by Uncle and Dan Leno. Of course she believed my story - who would not? - and throughout my narrative she patted my hand and sighed. At one point she began to cry, but then wiped her eyes, saying, 'Pay no attention to me. It's just my way.' (81).

Both examples emphasize the theme that different discourses - like newspaper reports or stories of our past - constitute their own sphere of reality; we either accept or do not accept them, despite the complex relationship they

have with the 'real world'. The conventions dictate what is appropriate in a discourse and what is not and, like in *Chatterton*, 'truth' is a highly relative concept, largely dependent upon aesthetic concerns of representation. Still, this is by no means inconsequential since, as we are shown in the novel, in the worst case human life may be at stake: Elizabeth Cree is sentenced to death for the murder of her husband on the grounds of two conflicting representations of events. The prosecution (157-8) and the defence (187-9) have their own very different versions of the death of John Cree, implying that at least one of them has to be false. Predictably, however, we notice that they *both* go wrong in their pursuit of making a convincing, realistic case. Elizabeth Cree is hanged, but is it really for the right crime(s)?

Ultimately, the failure of representation in the face of conventions is reflected in the construction of the novel. John Cree's diary entries, Elizabeth's first person narrative, the newspaper reports, the courtroom speeches, even the omniscient narration - all these have an ambiguous and uneasy relation with each other. None of these can be completely trusted; they all portray different and often conflicting versions of the events so, finally, it is up to the reader to construct his own 'truth' of what 'really' happened in the novel. The identity of the Limehouse Golem may well be revealed at the end of the novel, but still the reader doubts, even looks back to the text, and asks: how did this happen?

In this respect, *Dan Leno* is ingenious in its construction. It is so complex, fragmented and multi-layered that it can be explained in many different ways, without hardly arriving at an exhaustive interpretation. In its polymorphous quality it resembles the Limehouse Golem itself: the name the newspapers give to the mysterious killer after a shapeless monster of ancient Jewish mythology, a creature made of red clay, varying its appearance at will (4, 216), becomes another symbol of poststructuralist ideas in Ackroyd's fiction. As the fictional Karl Marx explains, the golem must be read in an allegorical sense, with the ancient monster as an emblem of "the visible world...a golem of giant size; we give it life in our own image. We breath our own spirit into its shape" (68). The world, in other words, takes the exact shape we impose on it by words; we see what we want to see; reality is what we describe it to be - just like Ackroyd's novel itself. Whether it is a crime novel, a historical novel, another London novel, or a novel of ideas, a work of literary criticism, even a novel about Marxism and realism, popular culture and social issues, it is up to the reader to decide. There are as

many interpretations as there are readers.

### 4.3. Intertextual 'self'

In this study I have emphasized the importance of intertextuality and literary history in Ackroyd's fiction. Therefore, it is only natural that I should see his works, *Dan Leno* included, in the shape of these terms. Like any other researcher, I have found what I have looked for but, on the one hand, in my emphasis on intertextuality I have also followed the signs in Ackroyd's writing itself: the ventriloquism in *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, the themes of plagiarism and forgery in *Chatterton*, or the anxiety of influence in *English Music*. (In addition to its father and son theme, *English Music* has direct references to "palimpsest" (12) and "allegory" (28) to support its intertextual explanation.) My analysis, therefore, cannot be completely unfounded and, as we have seen, *Dan Leno* displays many of the familiar tendencies, with its plain construction upon earlier texts and its parody and criticism of realism.

There is one further aspect in *Dan Leno*, however, which I take to be central in the novel and which I think underlines the significance Ackroyd pays to the poststructuralist ideas of textuality, art and world. This has to do with the postmodern, textualized view of the 'self', and it concerns both Dan Leno, the music-hall comedian, and the Limehouse Golem, too, as we shall soon see in this final chapter of my study.

Let us begin by continuing the discussion of the Limehouse Golem.

Nietzsche once said that "There are no facts, only interpretations" (quoted in Colby, ed., 1991: 6), and this is exactly the idea behind the reappearance of the mythological creature in the streets of 19th-century London. After the newspaper reports of the inhuman massacres in the Limehouse region, the reading public in *Dan Leno* earnestly comes to believe that a shapeless monster, Golem, is at work, since this is what the newspapers, in their sensationalism, choose to call the murderer. (The name derives from the coincidence that the killer has left the severed penis from the mutilated body of Solomon Weil upon an open page of a book, "decorating a long entry on the golem" (*DL*: 6).) Thus, becoming familiar with the scoops, people begin to see signs of the monster everywhere around

them: in the passing shadows, in the strange shapes or in the unfamiliar noises:

Mrs Jennifer Harding...claims to have seen the creature lapping blood in the shambles by Smithfield before making its way past St Bartholomew's Hospital. An itinerant match-seller, Anne Bentley, has been in a hysterical condition ever since Friday last, when she was apparently taken up by a pale creature with no eyes. (...) She claims that the Golem 'unpeeled' her and 'guzzled her' like a piece of fruit; she now believes that she is with child, and is fearful of giving birth to a monster. (...) Mrs Buzzard who owns a chair-making establishment in Curtain Street was disturbed...by a 'shadow' which...followed her everywhere until she ran shrieking into Shoreditch High Street. (217-8).

On the one hand, these newspaper reports are Ackroyd's satire against 'objective' journalism - with certain details "embellished, or on occasions invented, in order to ensure more notoriety for what were already gruesome accounts" (6-7) - but on the other hand, these eye-witness reports simply speak for the idea that 'reality' is not fixed or constant, but takes the shape we give to it in our interpretations. That is why Anne Bentley is able to see the man who raped her as the golem itself, and that is why "the unfortunate woman has been confined to Shadwell Asylum" (217).

Clearly, then, it is not inconsequential how we interpret the world, but the essential point here is that the interpretation has less to do with our senses or perception than the tradition or texts that actually constitute our interpretation. The sensory data we obtain from the world has no meaning in itself until it is interpreted. The interpretation, however, depends on our cultural and textual knowledge of the world, and this knowledge in its turn gives form to our perception. We do not, therefore, make sense of the world by virtue of our innate individual reason or deduction, as Descartes once believed (cf. Saariluoma, 1992). Instead, our experience of 'reality' is determined by the cultural tradition, texts and discourses we are exposed to in our lives. The experiencing self has lost its Cartesian unity and individuality; the poststructuralist 'self' is dispersed, fragmented and, most of all, intertextually defined (ibid).

According to Saariluoma (1992) this kind of 'postindividualistic' view of the 'self' is typical of postmodern writing, which opposes the individualism displayed in realism and modernism. In postmodernism the 'self' is too weak and non-coherent

to hold together reality, or any consistent experience of reality (ibid: 20). That is why postmodern writers, like Ackroyd, have turned away from realist attempts to portray the world. Instead, they have problematized reality, showing that it is experienced through language, various discourses, ideologies, cultural institutions, art, etc. (ibid: 31). The postmodernists have turned their attention to language as such; they show that the human 'self' does not exist prior to language, but is actually subjected to it. Rather than controlling language, language itself tends to control us.

Ackroyd himself has theorized about "The Uses of the Self" in his essay, *Notes for a New Culture* (1976: 64-89), where he expresses very similar ideas about the 'self' and its relation to language. He has used these ideas throughout his fiction, notably in *The Great Fire of London* and *Chatterton*, but it is finally in *Dan Leno* where such themes really become prominent: not only do the reading public see the world in terms of newspaper scoops, but almost all the other characters, too, are shown to be intertextually defined. We have already seen the influence of Thomas De Quincey upon the murderer, and the degree which the brutalities are modelled upon De Quincey's account of the Ratcliffe murders, but exactly the same pattern can be found in other characters as well: Elizabeth's mother, for instance, sees her life in terms of religious discourse - literally, since she has pasted the walls of their two rooms with the pages of the Bible. Almost everything she says in the novel can be traced to Biblical origins or other religious sources:

'Oh God my help in ages past. Be now the water to comfort me in my affliction.' These were no more than the words she had learned by rote from the hymnal, and I [Elizabeth] laughed as she passed her tongue across her lips. I could see the sores upon it. (...) How she prayed and moaned while we worked, repeating all the bunkum she had learned from the Reverend Style who kept a chapel on the Lambeth High Road. One moment it was 'God pardon me for my sins!' and then it was 'How I am exalted!' (12, 14).

Similarly, Dan Leno, 'The Funniest Man On Earth', wishes to "understand the conditions which had, in a sense, created him" (193). He reads *The Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi* as well as Thomas De Quincey's essay on the famous clown, thus identifying with him and seeing parallels between Grimaldi's and his own life. He, as it were, *becomes* him: when he lays sick and dying he repeats, word for word, Grimaldi's farewell speech, "while those around his deathbed believed he was delirious" (193-6).

Ackroyd, in other words, emphasizes that we are products of our culture, and no more than that. Like Umberto Eco in *The Name of the Rose*, where the characters' world-view is directly related to the religious books they have been reading, or the medieval culture that is surrounding them (Saariluoma, 1992: 187-92), Ackroyd shows that our thoughts, dreams, and behaviour reflect our cultural and textual experience. We are what we read; everything we do or say has its complex origins in textual or cultural sources. "Sometimes I believe that I am made of ink and paper", Karl Marx says (92). In the vein of Saussure, Ackroyd stresses the primacy of language system (*langue*) over its individual users (*parole*): that which has already been said is easier to repeat than trying to formulate new ideas. New ideas, moreover, are hardly more than new combinations of already existing discourses (see 3.1.), and when we fall short of the comfort of tradition - when faced with a totally new situation, for example - we are at a loss, or at least feel uneasy: Solomon Weil, a Jewish scholar, is "perplexed" when he first meets Karl Marx, an atheist and a revolutionary (64-5). He does not quite know what to think of the new situation, and Karl Marx, too, was "perhaps...even too polite" (64). The two German émigrés begin to exchange theories and speculations in weekly meetings, but the situation remains odd enough for them to create a certain awkwardness in their manners: the handshake in the English fashion, the exaggerated apologies for being late, and the interesting "argot of German and English, with the occasional use of Latin or Hebrew terms for an exact or particular sense" (65).

Likewise, Dan Leno finds himself uncertain in a new situation. The great comedian is forced to step out of his stage character when he comforts Peggy, a surviving relative of the butchered family: "He could find only the most frail and timid words of comfort now, whereas on the stage he could have delivered a great tirade of sorrow before spoofing his own grief" (206). At the lack of models of behaviour, Leno feels "cramped and restless" in the small room, but soon he finds a way out: he reverts back to his theatricality and announces, "And do you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to set you up in a nice little clothes business a long way away from here." (206). Dan Leno takes the subject position the situation offers him, and immediately he is more animate: "Leno was always adept at giving directions, and it was as if he were leading her through a rehearsal" (207).

As with Dan Leno above, Ackroyd is especially interested in the ways how our lives are affected by forms of art. He quotes 'The Truth of Masks' by Oscar Wilde: "The true dramatist shows us life under the conditions of art, not art in the form of life" (*DL*: 281/*Intentions*: 256). Ackroyd applies this idea throughout his novel - ironically, in the case of Oscar Wilde, too: Ackroyd claims that Wilde wrote the quoted words when he remembered a scene in the 'realistic' play, *The Crees of Misery Junction*; "a true story" based of the lives of John and Elizabeth Cree that is performed at the end of the novel (267-82). Ackroyd, in other words, suggests that his own mock-realistic play in his mock-realistic novel caused Oscar Wilde to comment on realism in his famous essay! (This is not the only intertextual joke in *Dan Leno*: with a straight face, Ackroyd informs us that "The murders in Limehouse led indirectly to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, written by Oscar Wilde some eight years later", and "They also inspired the famous sequence of paintings by James McNeill Whistler, 'Limehouse Nocturnes'", 164.)

Clearly Ackroyd has a distinct and individual sense of humour, but it is apparent in the case of George Gissing as well: despite all his efforts in realism, Gissing cannot escape the conditions of art even in his own life:

[S]ometimes he looked upon...[his miserable surroundings] as a form of experiment, with his own life as a self-conscious exercise in realism. He had been reading Emile Zola's volume of essays, *The Experimental Novel*, published a few months earlier, and it had confirmed all his latent faith in '*naturalisme, la vérité, la sciencé*' - to the extent that he congratulated himself on leading a thoroughly modern and even literary life. In such a light even Nell could be considered a heroine of the new age. (136).

The portrait of the naturalist, who not only fails in his realism, but whose own life reflects the texts and fictions he has been reading is funny in its gentle mockery of the writer. Seeing his own life through the models of art, Gissing mixes reality with fantasy, but there is also an added irony here since, in the light of the poststructuralist view of the 'self', Ackroyd's own treatment of Gissing seems to be particularly 'realistic' in the novel.

Perhaps the funniest scenes in *Dan Leno* are, however, when Ackroyd shows us life (or the 'self') under the conditions of melodrama or popular forms of theatre: John Cree, Elizabeth's husband, is a "man of ungovernable lust" (224). But as his wife declines to have sex with him, or with anybody else, Elizabeth

hires a maid, Aveline Mortimer, hoping that "nature [will] take its course" (226), as it soon does. Elizabeth changes her plans, however, after her husband has accused her of ruining his unfinished play, so she arranges a scene of "domestic tragedy" (254) in her house in order to control her husband:

I recognised all the signs - the sudden silences, the whisperings, the blushes, and, most important of all, the fact that he never looked at her during breakfast. I allowed a month to pass and then, at the beginning of December, I boldly stepped into his room without knocking upon the door: there they were upon the bed, as I had expected, lying with one another. 'Shame upon shame's head!' I cried out. He was quite distraught and jumped from the bed, while she simply looked at me and smiled. 'So this has come to pass!' In my excitement I echoed one of the phrases from *The Northolt Tragedy*. 'This is the fruit of my marriage!' I left the room and, banging the door behind me, began to weep as loudly as I could. Now I had him, tied with bonds stouter than cord. I would no longer be the guilty one. He would plead with me, praying for forgiveness, and at last I would be the master in my own house. (254).

Through Elizabeth, Ackroyd exposes the theatricality of marital discord in a most amusing way. Yet she is a disturbed woman, seeing all the world - even her marriage - as a stage: "she played the part of a wife perfectly, and yet in the very definition and completeness of her role there was an air of strangeness", (227). So as might be expected, through the eyes of Elizabeth Ackroyd offers us many insights into the theatricality of our culture, especially in instances such as court of law procedures (the judge, with his black cap, "looked like Pantaloon in the pantomime", 209), the public executions (in the theatrical fashion, Elizabeth exclaims, "Here we are again!" when she is hanged, 2), or the rituals of the Roman Catholic church:

[E]ven before I met my husband, I knew a great deal about the Roman ceremonies. Many of the hall folk were Catholics - my old friend Dan Leno used to say that it was in the blood. He saw a connection between Rome and the pantomime, as I did after a time. Sometimes he took me to mass at Our Lady of Suffering off the New Cut. It was such fun. (264-5).

The theatricality of human behaviour and the idea of the intertextual 'self' are closely intertwined in the novel but, essentially, these themes are woven around the crime plot, in which the poststructuralist 'self' - the influence of Thomas De Quincey upon the murderer - is inseparable from the theatricality of the killings themselves. As the inspector Kildare says to Dan Leno:

'[T]he odd thing is that the murderer must have read it ['On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts'] before he killed your friend. There are too many resemblances for it to be entirely natural.'  
 'So you think he may have been a literary man?'  
 'An educated man, certainly. But perhaps he was an actor playing a part. (...) Everything is very messy and very theatrical. It is a curious thing.' (204-5).

For the police, however, the Limehouse murders remain a mystery. All the clues and the signs point in many different directions but, with the lack of a unifying factor, the case is too complex and confusing to solve by means of human reason and deduction; in postmodern literature the 'self' is too weak to support such infallible, individualistic characters like Sherlock Holmes or Hercule Poirot that appear in the more traditional forms of detective story. In the postmodern thriller, like *Hawksmoor*, the murder investigation usually fails, or is only impartially or accidentally solved, as in *The Name of the Rose* or *Dan Leno* (cf. Saariluoma, 1992: 205).

However, like in any good 'whodunnit', the identity of the killer is finally revealed to the reader. All the hidden connections in the suspects' lives lead to one place, which is given a symbolically significant position in the novel: the Reading Room of the British Museum. This infinite source of ideas and influences becomes a kind of ultimate intertextual meeting place in *Dan Leno*; a place where the characters' lives and destinies are strangely intertwined:

[T]he Reading Room was the true spiritual centre of London where many secrets might finally be revealed. (...) All participants in the mystery, willing or unwilling, had come to this place - Karl Marx, George Gissing, Dan Leno and, of course, John Cree himself. (...) Dan Leno had encountered Joseph Grimaldi here, and had thereby found his inheritance;...Karl Marx had studied here for many years, and out of his books had created a giant system;...here George Gissing had been led towards the mysteries of Charles Babbage's analytical machinery;...here her [Elizabeth's] husband had dreamed of future fame. (269-70).

The Reading Room becomes a place of almost mystical quality in Ackroyd's novel: this is the meeting point between various texts and discourses; this is where the roots of all the events in the book derive from; this is a giant library which can "be said to have affected the course of human history" (124); and this may also be the place Ackroyd has in mind when he writes, "And perhaps there was...a place where perpetual, infinite, London would one day be found" (246). If

indeed the Reading Room is it (or is it Ackroyd's novel?) then in such a place "nothing need be lost. Not one voice, or laugh, or threat, or song...but it reverberate[s] through eternity" (246).

However that may be, the Reading Room does in any case have a profound influence upon the lives of Ackroyd's characters, shaping their very identities, and providing the material for their thoughts and ideas. Still, if the Reading Room - as the key to the hidden connections and the clue to "many secrets" (269) - can be seen to symbolize intertextuality itself, then Dan Leno, as a master of different stage identities, becomes the perfect representative of the poststructuralist, dispersed 'self':

[H]e played so many parts that he hardly had time to be himself. And yet, somehow, he was always himself. He was the Indian squaw, the waiter, the milkmaid, or the train driver, but it was always Dan conjuring people out of thin air. When he played the little shop-keeper, he made you see the customers who argued with him and the street arabs who plagued him. When he murmured, in an aside, 'I'll just go and unchain that Gorgonzola' you could smell the cheese and, when he pretended to shoot it and put it out of its misery, you could see the rifle and hear the shot. How they all roared when he first appeared on the stage; he would run down to the footlights, give a drumroll with his feet, and raise his right leg before rigging it down with a great thump upon the boards. Then suddenly he was the sour-faced spinster on the look-out for a man. (108-9).

Poststructuralists, such as Saariluoma (1992), tend to see the 'self' not as a fixed unity but more like a flux or a process which adapts to different situations and discourses it encounters. In this sense Dan Leno, the master of masks and poses, is an excellent example of the intertextual, postmodern 'self' since, as Uncle puts it, "He is endless" (109); there is no part Dan Leno could not play. His identity is hidden behind the masks he assumes but, then again, this exactly is his identity - a multitude of different selves. Of course Dan Leno is a special case, an extraordinarily good actor, but still there is an analogy to be drawn to all of us: are we not all playing different parts in our lives? Do not we all have different masks? At least in his biographies Ackroyd portrays his objects of study, especially Dickens and Eliot, in all their different roles and identities, without even trying to impose one unified personality or self on his elusive subjects. Ackroyd implies that there are many sides, many personas, in all of us.

As might be expected, Dan Leno is also a great imitator and parodist, so it is quite typical of Ackroyd to make him one of the central characters in his novel, thus acknowledging his greatness and showing homage to him: "They talk of Tennyson and Browning', Austin used to say, 'and I am the last person to deny the genius of these two gentlemen, but believe me...Mr Leno is *it*.'" (108). Ackroyd is fascinated by this little man - after all, he had already appeared in *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (LT: 117). What especially appeals to Ackroyd is the versatility of Dan Leno, but at the same time he also suggests that possibly far more than Gissing's novels of social protest, or Karl Marx's lofty ideas of "the greatest good of the greatest number" (118), it was really popular comedians like Dan Leno who, more than a hundred years ago, with their ditties, spoofs, popular songs and comical patter, made the lives of the poor and the working class a little brighter, offering relief and escape from the harsh conditions of 19th-century reality. There is a marvellous scene in *Dan Leno* where George Gissing watches workers in a manufactory "proceeding up and down the staircase for eternity, as they slowly sang in unison...that old melody from the halls, 'Why Don't They Have the Sea in London?'" (245).

Perhaps, then, like in Thomas Chatterton, Peter Ackroyd sees an image of himself in Dan Leno. At least he resembles Leno in many respects: in his skills in imitation and parody; in his ability to assume many personas and identities in his art; in his artistic impersonality and his almost endless versatility as a writer. Indeed, there is hardly anything Ackroyd has not tried yet: he is a novelist, biographer, poet and a critic. He is a film and book reviewer and he has prepared programmes for television. In his novels he has combined his talents, mixing art with criticism, literary theory with novelistic entertainment, in a most creative way. He has drawn his subjects from the fields of history and literature, and he has utilized the great tradition before him, while at the same time re-examining and even changing that tradition. In his fiction he has given his own interesting contribution to the poststructuralist debates about textuality, art and world but, ultimately, his greatest gifts may be seen in his superb stylistic imagination and his outstanding skills as a formidable pasticheur. Against the grain of so many other postmodernists who have claimed that originality is dead (e.g. Hutcheon, 1988) Ackroyd has gone one step further and redefined originality (see 3.1.). By so doing, and by his own imitation of others, Peter Ackroyd has proved to be quite inimitable himself, being now one of our most exciting and original authors, a man at the height of his powers.

## 5. Conclusion

In this study I have interpreted Peter Ackroyd's works, concentrating on three novels, *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983), *Chatterton* (1987) and *Dan Leno & the Limehouse Golem* (1994). I have argued that Ackroyd's novels are for a large part literary criticism written in the form of fiction where Ackroyd both re-examines and rewrites the literary past. By self-consciously basing his fiction on already existing texts and by foregrounding and thematizing the intertextual position of his novels, Ackroyd breaks away from literary realism, exposing it as a myth and a convention. In his emphasis on poststructuralist ideas, Ackroyd at the same time works to deconstruct two other myths: the truth of History and the Romantic originality. If indeed all our knowledge is based on textual and cultural sources, as Ackroyd and other postmodernists insist, then 'truth' is a relative concept and the Romantic cult of individualistic genius is impossible to maintain. Yet, against the poststructuralist consensus, Ackroyd does not wholly reject the concept of originality but, through his intertextual view of art, goes so far as to redefine it; ironically gaining his own originality by the extent and the accomplishment of his imitation of others.

In my analysis of *Last Testament* (chapter 2) I specifically drew attention to the merits of Ackroyd's pastiche: the novel, written in the form of a journal as if by Oscar Wilde himself, is the most complete piece of literary ventriloquism Ackroyd has ever managed to do. Yet this early novel also has another conspicuous feature: it blurs the boundaries between biography and autobiography, literary criticism and a novel (2.1.), thus extending our view of what a novel is or what purposes a novel may have. In its affirmation of the deconstructionist distrust of conventional hierarchies, such as fact and fiction, *Last Testament* also anticipates Ackroyd's later, more complex novels.

In the second part of chapter 2 a distinction was made between parody and pastiche, after which Ackroyd's imitation of Oscar Wilde was analysed in greater detail. Through examining aspects of Wilde's writing, such as humour and seriousness, style and general atmosphere, the fairy tales and the Symbolism, Aestheticism and Decadence, it was possible to conclude that the overall

impression comes near to consummate ventriloquism - a strong illusion of reading a text by Oscar Wilde himself.

What *Last Testament* does in practice, *Chatterton* does more in theory: imitation and plagiarism, intertextuality and parody, are its central themes. In the chapter 3.1. we saw that *Chatterton* raises questions about the nature of art, problematizing our traditional assumptions about plagiarism and forgery and attacking the Romantic notion of originality. The novel is a true display of deconstruction at work since it reverses the conventional hierarchies: the "truest Plagiarism" becomes the "truest Poetry" (C: 87) and "original genius consists in forming new and happy combinations, rather than searching after thoughts and ideas which have never occurred before" (58). Ackroyd responds to the poststructuralist theories of intertextuality and formulates his own position, in which he defends authorship and gives a new meaning to the concept of originality. Self-reflexively, *Chatterton* deals with the 'anxiety of influence' and, paradoxically, overcomes it by its own thematizing of it.

The chapter 3.2. concentrated on another great aspect of *Chatterton*: parody and its mockery of historical truth. The novel adopts the postmodern textual view of history, which means that history is open to many different interpretations and, since we can only know the past through its textual traces, any final, totalizing view of History cannot be sustained. Especially, by providing several versions of the same events - Chatterton's life and death - Ackroyd problematizes our belief in the biographical 'truth' of the 18th-century poet. Rather, it draws our attention to the representations of history, thus making the novel, what Hutcheon (1989) calls, historiographic metafiction.

In the final section of chapter 3, I argued that the two themes, intertextuality and deconstruction of history, are closely interrelated in the novel. In other words, Ackroyd's re-examination of Thomas Chatterton has a specific purpose: for the Romantics, Chatterton was important because he suffered a romantic death, but Ackroyd undermines this Romantic notion of the poet in order to show that the importance of Chatterton was not in his tragic death; instead, his real importance was in his poetry itself: as early as two hundred years ago, Chatterton understood the powers of pastiche - how history could be woken up to life through imitation and imagination. Ackroyd re-evaluates the importance of Chatterton and suggests an addition to the literary canon.

After *Chatterton*, Ackroyd has moved into new areas but, as my analysis of *Dan Leno* sought to point out, he has not rejected intertextuality or poststructuralism, but finds new significances and new areas to explore. In chapter 4.1. I charted the close intertextual relationship *Dan Leno* has with other books, especially with Thomas De Quincey's 'On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts'. I argued that *Dan Leno* and Thomas De Quincey have a kind of 'symbiotic' relationship with each other (cf. Cowart, 1993), and so called *Dan Leno*, and Ackroyd's novels in general, 'literature of the second degree' as a distinction from those more naive works (such as in the realist school) that attempt to hide their sources.

The chapter 4.2. explored the novel's mockery of Realism and Naturalism more systematically. Thematically, this criticism is centred around the figure of George Gissing, whose own life Ackroyd sees as more interesting than his art. Yet this mockery is achieved also in Ackroyd's own practices since he parodies literary realism by using its own methods. At points *Dan Leno* reads like realistic novels, but this 'realism' is at the same time undercut by the blatant use of intertextuality: by using earlier texts as the basis of his novel, Ackroyd exposes realism as a mere convention, implying that reality itself is conceived through texts, discourses and language.

In the final chapter of my study (4.3.) I showed that Ackroyd extends intertextuality to encompass no less than the basic principles of our humanity: postmodernists, like Ackroyd, see the human 'self' as intertextually defined, and so oppose the Cartesian individualism that characterises the Romantics, the Realists, and even the Modernists (cf. Saariluoma, 1992). Thus, rather than creating meanings by virtue of our innate reason, our identities are determined by the cultural texts we encounter. Most characters in *Dan Leno* exemplify these ideas, as their thoughts, speech and actions reflect the texts they have become exposed to. Ultimately, the most important of these characters is Dan Leno, whose endless versatility in his roles resembles Ackroyd himself: he, too, is at his most unique when imitating other styles and other writers. In every novel he has tried something new, and we can assume that so he will in the future: it seems as if there are no ends to Ackroyd's talents.

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