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Performing the Boundaries:
Peter Ackroyd's Historiographic Metafiction

by

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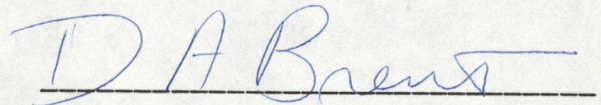
The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled, "Performing the Boundaries: Peter Ackroyd's Historiographic Metafiction" submitted by K. Pitman in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Abstract

Historiographic metafiction provides an exemplary site for an investigation of postmodernist problematizations (from within) of literary and critical conventions and assumptions, particularly the conventional oppositions of history/fiction and author/reader. My introduction briefly maps out my own process of "discovering" postmodernism through its manifestations in literature and explains my focus on historiographic metafiction as a dominant postmodernist form.

The main body of the thesis is divided into two parts of three sections each. In the first part, I outline the conventionality of the opposition between history and fiction. I then go on to discuss the various strategies by which two historiographic metafictive novels, Peter Ackroyd's *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton*, perform and, in performance, transgress (but never eliminate) the boundary between history and fiction by inscribing and subverting the conventions of both genres. This discussion is then widened to include consideration of the postmodernist interrogation of the boundary between text and reality, or word and world.

Examination of the postmodernist questioning of the relationship between word and world is extended in the second part of the thesis to a discussion of the traditional opposition between two extra-textual entities, author and reader, a discussion first placed in context by a brief survey of relevant literary criticism. The postmodernist problematization of this opposition as an extra-textual

struggle for interpretive authority is facilitated by various strategies, including a playful foregrounding of intertextual relations. An analysis of the ways in which Ackroyd's texts perform/transgress the boundary between author and reader by positing both entities as intra-textual constructs, rather than extra-textual opponents, is undertaken. The author/reader opposition is then explored within the context of cultural production and reception of texts as commodities.

The conclusion of the thesis places postmodernist challenges to binary oppositions like history/fiction and author/reader within the wider opposition of textuality and extra-textuality, or artifice and reality. I then address the problem of a traditional assumption that British literature and criticism is resistant to innovation and challenges to realism, and thus, resistant to postmodernism. The thesis ends with an argument for a recognition of a British postmodernism, of which Ackroyd's work is but one example.

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

While writing this thesis, I attempted to take refuge from my own work in Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler* and eventually came upon this passage:

> A girl came to see me who is writing a thesis on my novels for a very important university seminar in literary studies. I see that my work serves her perfectly to demonstrate her theories, and this is certainly a positive fact--for the novels or for the theories, I do not know which. From her very detailed talk, I got the idea of a piece of work being seriously pursued, but my books seen through her eyes seemed unrecognizable to me. I am sure . . . [she] has read them conscientiously, but I believe she has read them only to find in them what she was already convinced of before reading them. (185)

My reactions to these words were predictably ambiguous. I found, and still find, the passage highly amusing. But I also felt that I had been found out, mocked a little, even chastised. That is, while I was on one level critically engaged with Calvino's strategies for foregrounding the production and reception of texts, I also felt (appropriately enough, since Calvino's novel makes extensive use of the second-person pronoun) *implicated* in a very specific way. Refuge indeed! The appearance of the militant graduate student in *If on a winter's night a traveler* led this graduate student straight back

to her own work, to the texts of Peter Ackroyd, and to the question of whether those texts demanded the critical approach I had taken or whether I had, in fact, gone seeking only what I was prepared to find.

I have been a student of the post-war British novel for some time and my reading of Ackroyd's texts first took place within this context, as part of a wider study of novelists from Graham Greene, William Golding and Margaret Drabble to John Fowles, Fay Weldon and Angela Carter. My encounters with critical theory are much more recent, and much more tentative, than my studies in contemporary British fiction itself. In fact, though my introduction to postmodernism as a concept(s) has coincided, to a certain extent, with my "discoveries" of the works of such writers as Jeanette Winterson, Graham Swift, Julian Barnes, Nigel Williams and Peter Ackroyd, the exploration of postmodernist textual strategies that I have performed in relation to Ackroyd's texts has been the result of the questions and contradictions that I have found in the fiction, and not an imposition of a pre-determined theoretical perspective on that fiction. Indeed, there are manifestations of those questions and contradictions even in British fiction that is not usually considered under the banner of postmodernism--in the parodic plays with narrative perspective in Muriel Spark's *Not to Disturb*, in the unresolved confrontations of various narrative forms in Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, in the intertextual play of Iris Murdoch's *The Black Prince*, in the revisioning of popular and

literary forms in Timothy Mo's *Sour Sweet,* and so on. That is, after anxiously considering the single-minded focus of Calvino's graduate student, I have decided that my awareness of and interest in postmodernism has been stimulated by the practice and not the theory, or more accurately, by the theory *in* the practice. The questions which are posed in this thesis are questions that come from the postmodernist novel itself.

By "the postmodernist novel" I mean, in this thesis, historiographic metafiction, those texts that refer to both historical referents and their own artifice, that self-consciously balance on the boundary between historical and fictional writing. There are other kinds of postmodernist texts, but I take historiographic metafiction as the dominant manifestation of literary postmodernism in Britain. This is a decision made after considering not only theories of postmodernist literature, in which the problems caused by encounters between solipsistic metafiction and a desire to re-engage with historical reality arise again and again, but also the British postmodernist novel itself, which, from John Fowles's *The French-Lieutenant's Woman* to Salman Rushdie's *Shame,* can be seen as

> texts that exist in a talismanic relation with a given aspect (text or author) of the literary tradition on which they draw, and texts that, through various kinds of presentation of historical narrative contrive to compel us to query their ontological status. (Todd, "Confrontation with Convention" 124)

It is, in fact, these two aspects of the postmodernist novel, in Britain and elsewhere, that have provided the two interrogative stances that I have examined in this thesis. Both are interrogations of conventionally assumed oppositions, that between history and fiction, and that between author and reader. The historiographic metafictive novel performs or transgresses the boundaries between the opposing terms of those dichotomies in order to question the validity of such oppositions and the hierarchies they conceal. Ackroyd's texts, which focus overtly on both these issues, are exemplary examples of British postmodernism, displaying, as they do, "an unusually intense perception of fiction's relation to various kinds of convention" (Todd, "Confrontation" 116) that is "characteristically if not exclusively British in nature" (Todd, "Confrontation" 124). The problematizations of authoritative historical knowledge of extra-textual reality in novels like *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton* are linked to those texts' simultaneous problematizations of the concept of the single, autonomous, extra-textual author as the authoritative origin of texts. But this does not mean that these texts reverse the hierarchies which they examine. Nor do they (nor can they) eliminate them. They perform the boundaries between them in order to question the powerful place such oppositions hold, and that performance requires inscription *and* subversion, an interrogation of conventions from within those very conventions.

Postmodernism is a contradictory enterprise, then, and it is this contradictoriness that I have tried to examine. There are other contradictions, however, that arise as much from the thesis as from the novels. I have tried to avoid an explicit treatment of postmodernism as a single, unified, literary-historical discourse, since this thesis, taking its cue from the fiction it examines, questions this very tendency to construct monolithic literary-historical categories. In terms of temporality, for example, I recognize such novels as Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* as postmodernist texts. Yet my own reading in the contemporary novel has led me to the conclusion that postmodernism, though it is by no means a unified field of literary or critical practice, historically or otherwise, is a way to characterize the interrogative, problematic fiction that is dominant at this time. Thus, though throughout the thesis I have dealt with postmodernism as a literary practice characterized by certain textual strategies, and not as a historically specific literary movement, the postmodernist novel's own construction of itself in opposition to precursive practices and theories is difficult to ignore, as is the preponderance of historiographic metafiction in contemporary British fiction. Another contradiction that arises from the thesis is more ironic. By focusing on the texts "signed" by a single author in a thesis that questions this very power of the author as the creator/legislator of texts, I fear that I have helped to perpetuate the very opposition between author (Ackroyd) and reader (myself) that the postmodernist text

challenges. The thesis that, as many do, focuses on the works of a specific author surely contributes to the tyranny of authorship that Barthes finds so limiting to textual performance. My only defence is that, like the postmodernist novel, I am attempting to question the author/reader opposition as it must be questioned, from within. The conventions, bibliographical and otherwise, that fix authors to texts-- be they literary or critical--are strong ones, and, though I have not been concerned with the biographical intentions of Peter Ackroyd, I find I have had to maintain the same relationship with those conventions that the postmodernist text maintains with those it challenges, one of contradictory use and abuse, one that constitutes a performance, rather than a negation, of boundaries.

Part One

I: Truth, Lies and the Postmodernist Way

> People like to separate storytelling which is
> not fact from history which is fact. They do
> this so that they know what to believe and
> what not to believe. This is very curious. How
> is it that no one will believe that the whale
> swallowed Jonah, when everyday Jonah is
> swallowing the whale?
> Jeanette Winterson *Oranges Are Not
> the Only Fruit*

In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon explicitly privileges historiographic metafiction, "novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (5), as the narrative form in which the always unresolved contradictions characteristic of postmodernism are most overtly and most problematically enacted. Historiographic metafiction is presented as an exemplary site for an investigation of the postmodernist literary enterprise because it typically constructs a space in which postmodernist interrogations of conventional modes of narrative discourse are performed:

> In most of the critical work on postmodernism, it is
> narrative--be it in literature, history, or theory--that has
> usually been the major focus of attention. Historiographic
> metafiction incorporates all three of these domains: that
> is, its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as
> human constructs (historio*graphic* *meta*fiction) is made

the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms
and contents of the past.   (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 5)

Hutcheon's use of the word "incorporates" here is itself problematic,
implying as it does a synthesis of different "domains" into a unified
whole that conflicts with her own repeated assertions of the
"fundamentally contradictory" nature of postmodernism (Hutcheon,
Poetics 4). Historiographic metafiction undoubtedly partakes of
different domains but, rather than combining them into a completely
new domain, it foregrounds the boundary between them and the
points at which they intersect. Thus, while it is true that it is the
"very separation of the literary and the historical that is now being
challenged by postmodern theory and art" (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 105), it
is important to remember that historiographic metafiction only
challenges, and does not eliminate, that separation. In fact,
historiographic metafiction is paradoxically dependent upon that
which it challenges and, while it self-consciously foregrounds the fact
that both history and fiction are human constructs, it cannot
dispense with the traditional binary opposition between fact and
fiction. Hutcheon acknowledges this elsewhere when, for example,
she states: "historiographic metafiction suggests the continuing
relevance of such an opposition, even if it be a problematic one. Such
novels both install and then blur the line between fiction and
history" (*Poetics* 113). Blur, but not eradicate; it is an important
distinction. For it is tempting to view the result of historiographic
metafiction's   reworking of historiograpical and fictional forms as a

new, postmodernist genre since "A new genre is always the transformation of an earlier one, or of several: by inversion, by displacement, by combination" (Todorov 15). But, while historiographic metafiction questions past generic assumptions, it is not itself a new genre. Rather, it self-consciously constructs a space in which conflicting generic conventions meet without merging. It is also tempting to claim that the transgressional nature of historiographic metafiction demonstrates a postmodernist dispensing with the very notion of genre so that the blurring of the border between history and fiction *does* constitute an eradication of that border. Yet historiographic metafiction plays with the idea that generic boundaries, though they certainly exist, are restrictive only insofar as they continue to be perceived as immutable and unquestionable. As M. M. Bakhtin points out, the novel is the genre least likely to view generic boundaries, including its own, this way and "emerges consciously and unambiguously as a genre that is both critical and self-critical" ("Epic and Novel" 10). Thus it is not surprising that it is *within* the realm of fiction, the genre aware of both "its peculiar capacity for change and . . . its influence and effect on the rest of literature" that postmodernist interrogations are typically performed (Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel" 11). Transgression of generic boundaries in historiographic metafiction, then, is neither an example of the formation of a new genre nor an indication of the end of genre, but one of the defining characteristics of the novel *as* a

genre, one that, according to Bakhtin, "often crosses the boundary of what we strictly call fictional literature":

> After all, the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, between literature and nonliterature and so forth are not laid up in heaven. Every specific situation is historical. And the growth of literature is not merely development and change within the fixed boundaries of any given definition; the boundaries themselves are constantly changing. (Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel" 33)

Historiographic metafiction is concerned precisely with the historicality of the generic boundaries between history and fiction, but it is also aware that such boundaries, though mutable, exist. Thus such novels practice generic transgression with an extreme self-consciousness, cognizant of the fact that the very concept of transgression is dependent upon an acknowledgement of the existence and power of boundaries. Historiographic metafiction both acknowledges and transgresses, both inscribes and subverts the conventions of historiographic and fictional writing. Historiographic metafiction, in other words, is first and foremost a performance of boundaries, particularly the boundary between history and fiction (*historio*graphic meta*fiction*).

The separation between history and fiction is often perceived to be as much a moral as a generic distinction, a distinction, in other words, between truth and lies. The concept of the artist as liar is traditionally traced back to Plato, who tells us that what the artist

"makes is not the reality, but only something that resembles it" and thus "that art is a form of play, not to be taken seriously" (326, 333; bk. X, ch. XXXV). The conventional generic separation of literary and historical writing, however, has its roots in the theoretical example of Aristotle: "The difference between the historian and the poet. . . . is that the one tells of what has happened, the other of the kinds of things that might happen" (43; ch. 9). This separation is perpetuated in various forms until, in the nineteenth century, an oppositional relationship between history and fiction becomes firmly entrenched:

> In the early nineteenth century . . . it became conventional, at least among historians, to identify truth with fact and to regard fiction as the opposite of truth, hence as a hindrance to the understanding of reality rather than as a way of apprehending it. History came to be set over against fiction, and especially the novel, as the representation of the "actual" to the representation of the "possible" or only "imaginable." (White, "The Fictions of Factual Representation" 25)

While Aristotle privileges the literary as "something more philosophical and worthy of serious attention" since "while poetry is concerned with universal truths, history treats of particular facts" (44; ch.9), the theorists of the nineteenth century generally "tended to distinguish between 'lying' literature and 'true,' 'objective' history and to ascribe a positive moral value to fact" (Lee 29). Whichever half of the binary opposition is privileged, the opposition itself seems

to be taken for granted and a fundamental antithesis between history and fiction is maintained: "It is commonly accepted that there is a radical disjunction between the basic assumptions underlying these two notions of reference. History's referents are presumed to be real; fiction's are not" (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 118-19). Historiographical and fictional writing, then, are normally distinguished by the ontological status of the "worlds" to which they refer, worlds which are presumed to "exist" unproblematically on either side of an easily identifiable and fixed boundary.

The nineteenth-century privileging of history over fiction, or truth over lies, coincides with the rise and dominance of literary realism, the narrative form which claims to "capture" reality, to bridge the border between history and fiction and thus to have an authoritative relationship to truth equal to that of history. Both history and realist fiction share the assumption that reality, specifically past reality, is unproblematically knowable and conveyable, "that truth and reality are absolutes" (Lee 3). In fact, nineteenth-century realism counteracts fiction's morally inferior position by "endorsing a particular way of looking at art and life as though there was a direct correspondence between the two" (Lee 3). Within this context, art, or fiction, is presumed to have a valid claim to truth because "the world of natural objects, of bare, clear, downright facts is unproblematically given, accessible to experience, and able to be re-presented in art [as in historiography]" (Belsey 9). Consequently, the realist theory privileges in fiction the qualities

that it "borrows" from historiography: impersonality or objectivity, a judicious concern for documentation and facts, and democracy in its all inclusive portrayal of society (Lee 30). The realist novel, then, shares with historical writing the assumption that history is "accessible as pure fact, independent of individual perception, ideology, or the process of selection necessitated simply by creating a written narrative" (Lee 29). And thus the novel should look as much like history as possible, for it is "a common Realist sentiment that fiction is to be mistrusted unless it pretends to be something else" (Lee 11).

Of course, it is the historical novel that combines the best of both worlds within the context of the realist aesthetic, since its "combination of fiction and history . . . seems to fulfill the Realist demands for objectivity, detail, democracy, and, above all, factual documentation" (Lee 30). The historical novel enlivens history with fiction and validates fiction with history. But, despite this combination of two modes of discourse which are conventionally perceived to be oppositional, the historical novel should not be confused with historiographic metafiction. For in the historical novel, the transgression of the boundary between fact and fiction, between external and internal fields of reference, is painstakingly concealed:

> "Classic" historical fiction . . . tries to make this
> transgression as discreet, as nearly unnoticeable as
> possible, camoflauging the seam between historical
> reality and fiction . . . by introducing pure fiction only in

> the "dark areas" of the historical record; by avoiding
>
> anachronism; by matching the "inner structure" of its
>
> fictional world to that of the real world. (McHale 90)

One of the strategies for "camoflauging the seam between historical reality and fiction" is the backgrounding of real-world figures. Such figures are meant to be touchstones for a complete and faithful portrayal of the past and should be secondary to the larger aim of rendering the "complex and ramifying totality" (Lukács 167) of historical reality:

> In . . . [the historical novel], then, social-historical
>
> necessity must triumph over the will and passions of
>
> individuals. . . . The "world-historical individual" can only
>
> figure as a minor character in the novel because of the
>
> complexity and intricacy of the whole social-historical
>
> process. The proper hero here is life itself. . . . (Lukács
>
> 149)

The backgrounding of real-world figures in the classic historical novel allows for the rendering of a reality ("life itself") that is presumed to be common to all. It also, of course, neatly avoids the problem of the tension created by the reader's awareness of the "seam" or boundary between history and fiction.

In contrast, historiographic metafiction "seeks to foreground this seam by making the transition from one realm to another as jarring as possible" (McHale 90). Thus, while the classic historical novel, like the realist novel in general, claims an unproblematic

transcription of a common reality similar to that claimed by historical writing, the postmodernist examination of fiction and history that is enacted in historiographic metafiction openly questions this supposedly unproblematic transcription. Of course, postmodernism, while it acknowledges the conceptual differences between the referents of fiction and history, does posit similarities between these two modes of discourse. But rather than assuming that the (realist) novel is equivalent to history in its ability to represent reality, postmodernism, or, more specifically, historiographic metafiction, posits history as equivalent to fiction in its inability to do just that:

> [R]ecent critical readings of both history and fiction have focused more on what the two modes of writing share than on how they differ. They have both been seen to derive their force more from verisimilitude than from any objective truth; they are both identified as linguistic constructs, highly conventionalized in their narrative forms; and they appear to be equally intertextual, deploying the texts of the past within their own complex textuality. (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 105)

Again, however, it is important to emphasize the fact that historiographic metafiction, in questioning the separation of history and fiction, does not eradicate the line between the two. In Catherine Belsey's terms, historiographic metafiction is "interrogative" rather than "declarative."[1] Historiographic metafiction, inviting answers

rather than providing them, poses questions about the assumptions underlying the separation of fact and fiction, of "reality" and artifice, and it does this by performing (and thus transgressing) the boundary between the two.

If historiographic metafiction performs the boundary between historiographical and fictional writing, it does so by "positing the generic contracts of fiction and history" (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 110). Historiographic metafiction, then, "puts the reader in a contradictory position" (Lee 36). That is, it interrogates the radical disjunction between history and fiction by juxtaposing (without reconciling) historical referents ("real" people, places and events) and fictional referents:

> Since the novels present themselves as documentary history *and* as artifice, the reader must come to terms with the referential and non-referential nature of the literature at the same time. While he or she recognizes that the historically verifiable events, people, and places exist(ed), he or she must also recognize them . . . as discourse. The problems for the reader of historiographic metafiction can be clearly seen in . . . novels in which the question of *how* we know history is thematized. (Lee 36)

Peter Ackroyd's *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton* are two such novels: both texts self-consciously perform the boundary between history and fiction. It is a performance that begins on the covers of the novels, where the generic contracts

posited by the titles (autobiography and biography respectively) are undermined by the reader's awareness of the fictionality of the texts. Firstly, publishers' categorizations bluntly inform the reader that these are "fiction" not "non-fiction" and the prospective buyer or borrower is likely to find them shelved accordingly in the fiction section of bookstore or library. More importantly, the "information" conveyed by means of publishers' abstracts and excerpts from reviews contributes to the contravention of the contracts promising "factual" writing. *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* is described as "a virtuoso literary exercise" and "an absorbing, moving novel." More significantly, the paradoxical absence of Wilde from his own putative autobiography (an absence already registered in some degree by the presence of Ackroyd's name on the cover) is signalled by the publisher's description of the text as "the book which Oscar Wilde never wrote." *Chatterton* is described as being "dense with echoes, illusions and dreams," as "an amazing, unputdownable novel" containing "an almost Dickensian cast of rogues and eccentrics." Even without the actual use of the word "novel," it is likely that these qualitative descriptions would signal different generic contracts than those posited by the titles of the texts. The reader knows, then, that these are works of fiction, not works of history. Yet they are works of fiction that are somehow "about" people who exist(ed) in the "real" world, so works of history at the same time. Thus the reader is immediately made aware of the paradoxical nature of the texts signified by such titles--not *really* Oscar Wilde's journal, not *actually*

a biography of Thomas Chatterton--texts that summon and yet problematize the extra-textual existence of their referents, texts that write and simultaneously erase conventional (and conventionally disparate) generic contracts.

This simultaneous inscription and subversion of conflicting generic contracts invites the reader to reconsider her or his assumptions about the separate and apparently self-contained "worlds" of history and fiction. Of course, the insertion of historical referents into fictional worlds is a strategy common to much fiction in which "real" places are the sites for the activities of fictional characters. In historiographic metafiction, however, the reader is likely to focus more intently on the problematic presence of real-world figures in the fictional world:

> [T]he bandying about of celebrities' names holds a certain appeal for readers; it has the scent of scandal about it. And what, exactly, is the source of this scandal? Ultimately, its source is *ontological*: boundaries between worlds have been violated. . . . In general, the presence in a fictional world of a character who is trans-world identical with a real-world figure sends shock-waves throughout that world's ontological structure. (McHale 85)

In the classic historical novel, the "shock-waves" of ontological scandal caused by the inclusion of real-world figures within the fictional world are absorbed by the backgrounding of those figures.

Historiographic metafiction does not attempt to similarily cushion the reader from its jarring ontological transgressions. Certainly *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton* are ontologically scandalous texts. Real-world figures like Oscar Wilde, Thomas Chatterton, Henry Wallis, and George and Mary Ellen Meredith are not included only to provide a historically verifiable background which validates the fictions' portrayals of "real life." In fact, they are foregrounded; they are the central figures of these texts. Their presence becomes extremely problematic within the context of the belief that real people and fictional people (whom we call characters) and the discourses in which they are inscribed are radically opposed. This binary opposition between history and fiction remains "one of the most tenacious of realist doctrines" (Lee 46) and is often demonstrated by comparing historical figures and fictional characters. E. M. Forster, for example, finds the distinction between fact and fiction based on the distinction between real and imaginary people relatively easy to establish and maintain:

> There is bound to be a difference. If a character in a novel is exactly like Queen Victoria . . . then it actually is Queen Victoria, and the novel, or all of it that the character touches, becomes a memoir. A memoir is history, it is based on evidence. . . . the historian records whereas the novelist must create. (55-6)

But how do we know that a character in any text, fiction *or* history, is "exactly like Queen Victoria?" What, in other words, is the nature

and status of historical evidence? These are questions posed by historiographic metafiction, texts in which the "epistemological question of how we know the past joins the ontological one of the status of the traces of that past" (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 122). These questions are manifested in both *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton* through a foregrounding of the obsessive search for the truth of the past accompanied by a simultaneous problematization of the status of historical evidence and through a self-reflexive gesturing to the text as fiction, as artifice.

II: Telling the Past

> How do we seize the past? How do we seize
> the foreign past? We read, we learn, we ask,
> we remember, we are humble; and then a
> casual detail shifts everything. . . . every so
> often we are tempted to throw up our hands
> and declare that history is merely another
> literary genre. . . .
> Julian Barnes *Flaubert's Parrot*

Both *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton* are
narratives whose primary focus is the act of narrativization itself. In
the former, the fictional Wilde is intent upon recovering and
explaining history, for "when we conceal the past, like a fox beneath
a cloak, it injures us" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 30). In the latter,
various characters, especially Charles Wychwood, attempt "to decode
Chatterton" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 57). The notion of concealment is
important. Whether it be Wilde's two lives--social celebrity and
covert homosexual--or the two histories of Thomas Chatterton--
tortured poet or hapless upstart--both texts continually play with
the theme of the double life and tease the reader with the possibility
of reconciling these two lives, two pasts, into one unified,
authoritative, "true" story. Moreover, the texts themselves are
double-lived--(auto)biography and novel, history and fiction--and
play with the possibility of reconciling those two discourses. But
neither Wilde's and Chatterton's two lives nor *The Last Testament of
Oscar Wilde*'s and *Chatterton*'s two generic contracts can be

reconciled. There is no single, unified truth in or about the past, only a self-consciously constructed web of multiple and often contradictory truths. Both novels strategically inscribe and then subvert conventional narrative perspectives in order to explore not only the authority of the teller, but the authority of the act of telling, and the imposition of patterns of meaning inherent in any act of narration.

The fictional Wilde attempts to write the true history of his life. From his present vantage point, he seeks to peel away the layers of fiction with which he himself has obscured the "real" Oscar Wilde:

> The whole course of my former life was a kind of madness also, I see that now. I tried to turn my life into a work of art. . . . the past and future seemed to be of no account. I must connect them with simple words: I owe that to myself. Now that I have seen my life turn completely in its fiery circle, I must look upon the past with different eyes. I have played so many parts. I have lied to so many people--but I have committed the unforgiveable sin, I have lied to myself. Now I must try to break the habit of a lifetime. (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 3)

Wilde believes, then, that he can find and tell the truth, that he can dis-cover himself in the process of writing his own history and provide a definitive answer to the question: "Who was Oscar Wilde?" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 5). It is a question that Wilde himself

poses in the past tense, suggesting a separation between Wilde written and Wilde writing, a separation that is reinforced by Wilde's assertion that he has seen his life "turn completely in its fiery circle." Thus the text invokes two kinds of narrative authority. As Wilde's "signed" testament, it invokes the authority of the (legal) confession or the eye-witness account, while Wilde's overt separation of his past from his present self inscribes the authority of the objective biographer/historian: "I had become a spectator even of my own life, so that everything seemed to come to me from an infinite distance" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 118). Yet both kinds of narrative authority are ultimately subverted. First, the reader knows that Wilde is, in this text, "Wilde" and that, contrary to Forster's view, the presence in a text of a character who appears to be "exactly like" a historical figure does not necessarily make the text a memoir. Real-world figures in historiographic metafiction "are fictionalized: they both are and are not the entities designated by their names. Their ontology, thus, is called into question" (Lee 46). In fact, the reader's knowledge that such figures are textually constructed is paradoxically intensified by a simultaneous awareness of the extra-textual dimension of referents like "Oscar Wilde." Thus *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* performs a subversion of first-person authority that goes far beyond the modernist concept of the unreliable narrator. For the reader's task is not only to decide whether Wilde is telling *the* truth or only *his* truth; the reader must also accept Wilde himself as both real and not real. In other words, there can be no

unproblematic first-person authority because there is no unproblematic first-person. Second, the claim to objectivity suggested by Wilde's assertion of a present stance that is entirely separate from the past is ultimately revealed to be a tautology; how can he look upon the past with anything *but* different eyes? The past cannot be re-experienced and it cannot be narrated objectively but must be constructed from fragments in language. For every stranger he sees, Wilde says, he "invent[s] an entire history" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 10) and this is what he must do for himself.

While the interrogative stance toward the writing of history adopted by *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* is largely dependent on the self-consciousness of a narrator who despairs at ever unproblematically representing the past, *Chatterton'* s questioning of the possibility of such unproblematic representation in fiction or history is less overtly subversive of its own omniscient narrator. According to Hutcheon, historiographic metafiction, suspicious of narrative mastery, typically interrogates the convention of a stable (and stabilizing) narrative perspective:

> Its [historiographic metafiction's] subversion of the stability of point of view . . . takes two major forms. On the one hand, we find overt, deliberately manipulative narrators; on the other, no one single perspective but myriad voices, often not completely localizable in the textual universe. (*Poetics* 160)

The overt, manipulative narrator of *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* draws the reader's attention to the act of narration as construction and to the narrator as textual construct. *Chatterton*, on the other hand, employs a conventionally omniscient narrator, which, because of its "distance" from the text, seems to possess the objectivity and authority characteristic of the narrators of both narrative history and realist fiction. There is, however, considerable irony in this, since the narrator that provides the authority of objective "truth" is here employed in a text that persistently questions the nature of truth and its relationship to representation in both history and art. The use and abuse of first-person perspective in *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* allows for obviously self-reflexive gestures to the act of writing itself. The employment of an omniscient perspective in *Chatterton*, however, does not necessarily mean that the reader is allowed to forget the existence of a controlling narrator. Specific strategies, particularly open contradiction and narrative intrusion, are used to recall the narrator's presence. The official version of Chatterton's life and death and another version, in which Chatterton dies accidently, rather than by his own hand, are presented in the same narrative voice with no attempt to reconcile the contradiction. And the movement of the "objective" narrative, in which events seem to narrate themselves, is problematized by the use of epigraphs and, more immediately, by the narrator's intrusion upon the "flow" of that narrative. *Chatterton* is divided conventionally into chapters, but within these chapters, at

moments in which changes of locale and time occur, the use of fragments of language that are spatially and typographically set apart from the main body of the text (and thus foregrounded) set up spaces or gaps in the text that are far more problematic than those between chapters. In the first chapter, for example, the phrase "'oh yes . . . if this is real, this is him'" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 23), which is part of a dialogue when it is presented in context at the end of the chapter, is fragmented and scattered throughout the chapter, in italics and spaced apart from the text, *before* it is encountered within the context of that dialogue. In another chapter, a sentence from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, "'Whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must be silent'" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 36), is quoted by a character *after* it has already been dispersed, in italics and spacially set apart, within the narrative. Such separated and separating phrases, sometimes recognizably intertextual references and sometimes fragments of *Chatterton* itself that have not yet been read, recur throughout the text. Such fragments serve to remind the reader of the narrator's presence and of the control inherent in that narratorial position. By teasing the reader with the yet-to-be-discovered significance of these textual fragments, the process of selection and organization that constitutes narrativization is foregrounded. Thus the narrator, though unnamed, is never effaced but proves to be just as overtly manipulative, and thus just as potentially unstable, as the narrator of *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*.

Wilde's separation of himself into the investigator and the object of the investigation is also a strategy by which he attempts to impose closure on his narrative. The past tense of "Who was Oscar Wilde?" is necessary if Wilde is to construct history as his *story* with beginning, middle and, most importantly, end (that end being, in this case, Wilde's spectacular fall from public grace). By positing his story as completed, Wilde hopes to fix the meaning of his life, for in history, as in fiction, meaning is a product of narrative structure: "Common opinion has it that the plot of a narrative imposes a meaning on the events that comprise its story level by revealing at the end a structure that was immanent *all along*" (White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality" 23). Both history and fiction are conventionally unified, coherent, causal and teleological. Once the end has been decided, once the meaning has been determined, the elements of plot can be selected and arranged to "reveal" that meaning. Certainly Wilde often takes time to assure the reader that the pattern of meaning which, from his present (narrative) stance, he can see so clearly was present all along, was, in fact, destiny: "my secret history was already written and . . . nothing I might do or say could alter it in the slightest particular" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 70). Here narrative plot becomes a plot of another kind, a divine conspiracy in which "the gods are cruel and play with us" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 102). Wilde's frequent lapses into determinism and his selection of "facts" that reveal his predetermined fate indicate his own teleological perspective. For the

reader comes to realize that the pattern of meaning that Wilde discerns can only be seen from his present perspective as historiographer and exists only within narrative; telling the past imposes meaning on the past. Thus the text plays the model of history pre-figured, in which events seem to narrate themselves, against the model of history re-figured, in which the order and meaning of events is clearly shown to be dictated by the narrative structure employed:

> Historiography . . . is no longer considered the objective and disinterested recording of the past; it is more an attempt to comprehend and master it by means of some working (narrative/explanatory) model that, in fact, is precisely what grants a particular meaning to the past. (Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* 4)

Wilde's purpose as writer is to explain the way in which the events in the past led to (or pre-figured) his downfall and he plays with several structures (in addition to that of divine destiny) as models for such an explanation. History is alternately linear--"a series of accidents"-revolutionary--"rupture(s) of equilibrium"-- and circular--"I trudge round and round the circle of my personality" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 172, 122, 101). Wilde finds each of these models plausible while they are being employed, though, appropriately, he favours that most teleological of literary structures: tragedy--the rise and fall of Oscar Wilde. What is important is Wilde's desire to explain the past and his simultaneous awareness that any explanatory model

he employs will be a construct or, as the narrator of Graham Swift's *Waterland* says, "by forever attempting to explain we may come, not to an Explanation, but to a knowledge of the limits of our power to explain" (94).

Whichever structure is used, the reader of historiographic metafiction is always aware of the process of structuring because of the repeated references to the acts of investigation, selection, organization and interpretation in plotting history/fiction. In this way, historiographic metafiction continually points to its own paradoxical nature, repeatedly inscribing and subverting the conventions of historical and fictional representations of (past) reality and yet self-consciously revelling in its own status as construct:

> A self-conscious novel . . . is a novel that systematically flaunts its own condition of artifice and that by so doing probes into the problematic relationship between real-seeming artifice and reality. I would lay equal stress on the ostentatious nature of the artifice and the systematic nature of the flaunting. (Alter, *Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre* x-xi)

The repeated references to the process of plotting in *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* constitute a strategy by which the artifice of the narrative is flaunted. It is this problematic relationship between the past and representations of the past, between reality and artifice, upon which Ackroyd's *Chatterton* also focuses. This text

layers representation upon representation, invoking the authority of verisimilitude and historical documentation and then breaking the frames it has constructed in order to reveal those frames as constructs, as artifice. It is at the level of plot that *Chatterton* most systematically flaunts its own status as artifice. *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* embeds one plot within another, Wilde's written past within his writing present. *Chatterton*, on the other hand, consists of multiple plots, embedded within and interconnected with each other to an extent that lays bare the constructed nature of all structures that aim or claim to represent (past) reality. The various plots of the novel are all connected in some way to Thomas Chatterton. But they are all more significantly connected by their obsession with the process of representation (usually of the past) itself. In the eighteenth century, Chatterton imaginatively represents the past by creating Rowley and his works, as well as various "official" documents. In the nineteenth century, Henry Wallis is engaged in the process of representing the past by creating his famous painting of Chatterton's death. He uses as his model another poet, George Meredith, whose wife, Mary Ellen, leaves him to embark upon a liason with Wallis, providing the impetus, it is hinted, for Meredith's sequence of poems collectively entitled (and collectively representing) *Modern Love*. In the twentieth century, yet another poet, Charles Wychwood, believes that he has discovered the "true" story of Chatterton's life and death (a version in which Chatterton did not commit suicide but lived on to forge many eighteenth-

century works). Charles is caught up in the process of finding and interpreting various documents about (or representing) Chatterton, including a painting of an allegedly middle-aged Chatterton and a document that appears to be the poet's signed confession. Within this twentieth-century plot, additional plots (and representations) multiply. Charles's wife, Vivien, works at an art gallery whose owners are trying to conceal the fact that its latest collection of painting by a recently deceased artist, Seymour, are forgeries, painted by his assistant, Stewart Merk. Merk is engaged by the gallery to "authenticate" the portrait of Chatterton in middle age for novelist Harriet Scrope. Harriet has procured the painting from Vivien under false pretenses (that is, by mis-representing herself as Charles's friend) and uses her accidental knowledge of the gallery's involvement in forgery to manipulate its owners into helping her claim Charles's proposed representation of the past as her own. Harriet is also trying to represent her own past in the form of a literary memoir but, since she can neither completely remember nor unproblematically represent the past, she hires Charles to write her autobiography for her. Harriet's friend, Sarah Tilt, is engaged in a seemingly endless historical study of representations of death in English painting, including, of course, Wallis's *Chatterton*. Finally, one of Charles's aquaintances, novelist and biographer Andrew Flint, is trying to represent the past in a biography of George Meredith, which will presumably include an account of Meredith's relationship with Wallis and the painting of *Chatterton*.

The seemingly inextricable connections between the various events, characters and representations in the novel parodies the well-made plots typical of both historical and (realist) fictional texts. *Chatterton* posits a world in which every detail appears to contribute to a coherent and unified pattern of meaning but, in Alter's words, the very "ostentatious nature of the artifice" indicates the extreme self-consciousness with which this pattern is constructed and imposed. Chatterton's over-complicated plot(s), like Wilde's deterministically teleological one, thus makes the text complicitous with and simultaneously critical of totalizing narrative forms. That is, both novels betray an uneasy cognizance of both the appeal of totalizing order and the tyranny inherent in such order:

> A plot, be it seen as a narrative structure or as a conspiracy, is always a totalizing representation that integrates multiple and scattered events into one unified story. But the simultaneous desire for and suspicion of such representations are both part of the postmodern contradictory response to emplotment. (Hutcheon, *Politics* 68)

In *Chatterton*, the pattern of meaning that seems to unite real and fictional events in a manner characteristic of the historical novel continually threatens to disintegrate into fragments joined only by the act of narrativization, by artifice. The need to structure is, in historiographic metafiction, always accompanied by a wariness about the power of such structures to unify multiplicity and to determine

"truth." Thus "there is an urge to foreground, by means of contradiction, the paradox of the desire for and the suspicion of narrative mastery--and master narratives" (Hutcheon, *Politics* 64). The three versions of the death of Chatterton, for example, undermine the unifying authority inscribed through the use of an omniscient narrator that conventionally characterizes both history and fiction. If all structure is artifice, however desirable, the unproblematic representation of (past) reality in both history and fiction becomes suspect. Ackroyd's Wilde is also aware of the problematic nature of emplotment and draws the reader's attention to the way in which the structure of his own narrative imposes meaning on the past, as well as to his own need for that meaning and the control that accompanies it: "I must not lose the thread of this narrative: I must master the past by giving it the meaning which only now it possesses for me" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 75). But, despite both Wilde's and the reader's awareness of the fact that narrative constructs, rather than reflects, the past, neither Wilde nor historiography itself are completely discredited. Historiographic metafiction does not claim that the past did not exist, nor does it posit either history or fiction as utterly meaningless. Rather, "it is the constructed, imposed nature of that meaning (and the seeming necessity for us to make meaning) that historiographic metafiction . . . reveals" (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 112).

In Brian McHale's examination of postmodernism, historiographic metafiction's reworking of the conventions of history

and fiction is emphasized by his use of the term "postmodernist revisionist historical novel," with the emphasis on revisionism:

> The postmodernist historical novel is revisionist in two senses. First it revises the *content* of the historical record, reinterpreting the historical record, often demystifying or debunking the orthodox version of the past. Secondly, it revises, indeed transforms, the conventions and norms of historical fiction itself. (90)

Of course, such revision or demystifying demands both an inscription *and* a subversion of norms. This is certainly true of both *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton*, which, with their verisimilitudinous representations of (past) events, inscribe the conventions of both traditional narrative history and realist fiction, particularly the historical novel. They immediately subvert these conventions, however, by placing (and fictionalizing) real-world figures at the centre of the texts, by playing historical periods against each other, by emphasizing the (present) investigation of the past over the events of the past, and by contesting not only the orthodox versions of those events, but also the status of the documentary evidence upon which those versions are premised. That is, while both texts foreground their own problematically doubled status as "paradoxically fictive historical writing" (Hutcheon, *Politics* 82), they also inevitably problematize the status of the official histories they revise.

The past that historiographic texts attempt to represent is irrevocably absent. This is a fundamental tenet of historiographic metafiction, and one that is often foregrounded by situating the narrative within gaps in the historical record or by offering versions of historical events that, even when the same evidence is used, depart radically from orthodox versions. McHale views such strategies as typical of postmodernist interrogations and revisions of historiography and historical fiction:

> The two meanings of revisionism converge especially in the postmodernist strategy of apocryphal or alternative history. Apocryphal history contradicts the official version in one of two ways: either it *supplements* the historical record, claiming to restore what has been lost or suppressed; or it *displaces* official history altogether . . . . In both cases, the effect is to juxtapose the officially accepted version of what happened and the way things were, with another, often radically dissimilar version of the world. (90)

It is important to note here McHale's emphasis on juxtaposition as the result of alternative or apocryphal history. Historiographic metafiction is not concerned with replacing the official version of the past with another, equally authoritative version. On the contrary, it seeks to maintain "the tension between these two versions" (McHale 90), just as it seeks to maintain, even while calling into question, the tension between factual and fictional genres. Both *The Last*

Testament of Oscar Wilde, situated during Wilde's last, and officially silent, months of exile in Paris, and *Chatterton*, which focuses on the mysterious events surrounding Chatterton's alleged suicide, are apocryphal histories. By not only reinterpreting official evidence, but also self-consciously manufacturing, selecting, organizing, interpreting and even discarding evidence for its alternative version(s), historiographic metafiction invites the reader to reconsider the ways in which and by whom history is constructed. For, if narration imposes meaning, it also facilitates knowledge: "narrating *makes* things real. There is no way to know 'facts' outside the writing/telling of them" (Lee 45). Historiographic metafictive novels like *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton* thus self-consciously inscribe and subvert the very foundation of historical knowledge, evidence, in their postmodernist play with the conventional documentary paratexts of historical writing.

The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde does not produce a great deal of documentary evidence for Wilde's life, though the reader is likely to sense the presence of such evidence in the text's attention to detail, to names, places and events that can (and sometimes cannot) be verified: "That his [Ackroyd's] research has been all-embracing and subtle is clear: the Wilde bibliography is a positive labyrinth of confusion" (Dick 77). The documentary evidence that the fictional Wilde does produce in the form of conventional historiographical paratexts--letters, telegrams, transcribed conversations, excerpts from journal articles--is simply inserted into

the narrative, often with little or no comment by Wilde. What is the reader to make of such insertions? One entry in Wilde's journal consists of a collection of newspaper clippings, loosely joined by Wilde's short, wry comments on journalistic style. Wilde claims that he has just discovered the clippings in his edition of Landor's *Imaginary Conversations of Literary Men and Statesmen*, an ironic comment, surely, on the truth-value of reportorial writing, as well as on *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* itself. More significantly, Wilde admits that he has not included all of the journalistic material since "Most of them were to no account" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 95). This is a blatant example of the selection process involved in presenting evidence. For what Wilde considers to be "to no account" is that which does not fit into the history that he has already determined to write. Certain documents are granted meaning and certain documents are not. But how is the decision made? The reader is not allowed to examine all of the documents but must accept the selection that the historiographer makes within the pattern of meaning that has already been decided. This is by no means unusual in the writing of history; even a more traditional biography must select and order its documentary evidence. What is unusual here is the emphasis on the process, rather than the product, of selection and organization. In another entry, Wilde records his reply to a letter from a friend, Ada Leverson, tells the reader that he has discarded this reply (because "confessions on hotel notepaper are always dreary") and then records the letter he will send instead (Ackroyd,

Last Testament 110-11). Here the strategy of documentation performed by Wilde's deliberate omission of the rest of the newspaper clippings is reversed; with the two letters, there is an excess of documentation for the same historical moment. The first letter, however, though recorded here, ·is officially non-existent, ironically undermining the promise of officiality inscribed in the use of the word "testament" in the title of the novel. Moreover, the reader is made aware that the document that does survive is written with posterity in mind. In other words, Wilde's decision about which letter to send, which document to include, is based not on truth-value, but on appropriateness. This is calculated to raise certain questions: how many documents have been omitted? how many lost? how many manufactured? Moreover, in both entries (the newspaper clippings and the letters) the relationship between the documentary evidence being offered and the narrative as a whole is unstated and, perhaps, non-existent. The newspaper articles provide alternate readings of certain events in Wilde's past; the letters provide alternate readings of Wilde's state of mind in the present (which, for the reader, is also past). In both cases, neither the reader nor Wilde himself knows the "truth" of the events of the past, but must interpret the (often contradictory and always incomplete) textual traces of the past.

· The use and abuse of documentary evidence in historiographic metafiction works to foreground the fact that it is not in the past that gaps occur, but in the record(s) of the past, in the textual traces that

are presented as evidence for past empirical events. *Chatterton* too is aware of both the authority that narrative history derives from its documentary paratexts and the problematic status of those paratexts. By self-consciously employing historiography's paratextual conventions within paradoxically fictive writing, *Chatterton*, like *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, draws the reader's attention to the textuality, the constructed nature, of evidence. Paratextual conventions, as Hutcheon points out, are still powerful markers of "truth" in historiography:

> Although, as we have seen, the validity of the entire concept of objective and unproblematic documentation in the writing of history has been called into question, even today paratextuality remains the central mode of textually certifying historical events. . . . paratexts have always been central to historiographic practice, to the writing of the doubled narrative of the past in the present. (*Politics* 84)

In contrast to such postmodernist texts as John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, neither of the two novels under discussion make use of the most conventional (and most powerful) historiographic paratext, the footnote. *Chatterton*, however, does begin with two conventional historiographic paratexts, the illustration, here a "reproduction," with differences, of Henry Wallis's painting of the death of Chatterton (also called *Chatterton*) and the preface, in which the "official" history of Chatterton is presented in a

scant two paragraphs. Other standard paratexts such as the epigraphs that open the two "parts" of the novel and the quotations, characteristic of most historiography (especially literary biography) that are dispersed throughout the narrative, function to inscribe the authority of historical evidence. Such standard paratexts are always problematic in historiography, however, in that they are marginalized by the main narrative (*para*), yet still contained within the frame of that narrative, and provide evidence for the truth of the text's representation of the past even while they are themselves written representations of that past (*text*). It is this problematic status of the paratext that historiographic metafiction foregrounds. *Chatterton*'s preface and epigraphs, for example, are both set apart from the narrative spacially and typographically: the illustration is on the cover of the novel; the preface precedes the novel's division into parts and chapters; the epigraphs are printed on separate pages; both preface and epigraphs are printed in italics. Yet they are also all contained *within* the outer frame of the novel. In fact, there is no place outside the text for them to exist, except within the frames of other texts. The novel further problematizes the status of the paratext as both evidence and authority in a number of ways. First, the narrative contests the version of events given in the preface not once, but twice, with its two alternative versions of Chatterton's life and death, so that the preface's role of providing evidence for the truth of the text's historical representation is radically undermined. Second, the preface is followed by a series of fragments of dialogue

that precede the narrative, yet are paradoxically part of that narrative; all but one of these fragments are quotations or misquotations from *Chatterton* itself. Presented in association with the preface, as if they are themselves paratexts, these fragments invite the reader to consider the constructed nature of the preface itself. Third, many of the quotations dispersed throughout *Chatterton* which, in a traditional historiographic text, would "support" the authority of the historical representation, are either given without sources, problematizing their extra-textual authority, or are, in fact, quotations from *Chatterton* itself, and thus extremely narcissistic examples of the novel paratextualizing its own content. Fourth, the picture on the cover both is and is not a copy of Wallis's painting of Chatterton; the fragments of Chatterton's writings that, in Wallis's text, are torn and scattered on the floor are replaced on the cover illustration by a representation of a document that, while indecipherable, remains intact. By overtly challenging, altering or fictionalizing its own paratexts, *Chatterton* foregrounds the constructed nature of not only historiography, but the documentation that makes historiography both possible and powerful.

By both inscribing and then undermining the paratextual conventions of historiography, the historiographic metafictive novel invites the reader to participate in the process of selecting and interpreting documentary evidence. Such an invitation works to interrogate the possibility of ever acquiring determinate and authoritative historical knowledge. Given the constructed nature of

historical documents and the gaps and contradictions that result from having only textual traces with which to interpret the past, it is little wonder that historical accounts of the same events can differ so radically from one another. Charles Wychwood, trying to write his own version of Chatterton's history, discovers not the truth about Chatterton, but a truth about historiography itself:

> He could not remember whether all this information came from the documents themselves or the biographies. . . . In any case, he noticed that each biography described a quite different poet: even the simplest observation by one was contradicted by another, so that nothing seemed certain. He felt that he knew the biographers well, but that he still understood very little about Chatterton.
>
> (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 127)

What Charles begins to understand, as does the reader of Ackroyd's texts, is that the perspective from which the past is considered determines the way that past will be represented (determines even what will be considered a fact) and that textual facts will necessarily have to be substituted for the empirical events to which the historiographer has no access. Historiographic metafiction foregrounds contradictions and gaps in the historical record in order to question the status of specific facts and to emphasize the relation of event to fact. For facts are not events; events must be transformed into facts. The foregrounding of the process of this transformation is

one of the strategies by which historiographic metafiction performs the boundary between history and fiction:

> [B]ecause postmodern novels focus on the process of event becoming fact, they draw attention to the dubiousness of the positivist, empiricist hierarchy implied in the binary opposing of the real to the fictive, and they do so by suggesting that the non-fictional is as constructed and as narratively known as is fiction.
>
> (Hutcheon, *Politics* 76)

The construction in narrative that is shared by both history and fiction is foregrounded in both *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton* not only by its focus on the transformation of events into facts, but also by its emphasis on the transformation of events into fictions. The event of Chatterton's suicide, for example, is documented in *Chatterton* more by the text's quotation of poetic sources than historiographical ones. Wallis's painting of the death of Chatterton and quotations from texts such as Wordsworth's "Resolution and Independence" become paradoxically fictive paratexts for the history of Chatterton (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 2-3). And Wilde inserts not only historical documents into his narrative, but also fictions in the form of fairy tales or parables. The relationship of these fictions to the larger, historiographical narrative is not made explicit. Like Wilde's letters and newspaper clippings, they are simply introduced as "evidence" without any overt explanation: "I remember a story," "I have another story," "I must

tell you this fantasy of mine" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 62, 84, 146). These fictions, however, are presumably meant to function both as representations of Wilde's life and as documents supporting his framing representation of that life as tragedy. They function, in other words, in exactly the same manner as the more overtly documentary evidence in the narrative and thus draw the reader's attention to the similarly constructed/artificial nature of history and fiction.

Of course, Wilde's "I remember a story" could begin *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde,* which is itself presented as an example of the form of historical document that is most central to traditional history: the autobiographical memoir. *Chatterton* also focuses on the powerful position that first-hand accounts tend to hold within the context of historical representation. The confessional document that Charles Wychwood and Philip Slack discover in Bristol immediately takes precedence over the other documents presented or referred to in the text. But it is, of course, precisely the centrality of these first-hand accounts that both *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton* work to undermine. In the latter, the powerful position likely to be occupied by any found autobiographical text in Chatterton's own hand is foregrounded by the way in which that paratextual document is introduced in the novel. It begins not only a new chapter, but "Part Two" of the novel, and, though the reader already knows that Charles and Philip have found some documents signed "T. C." (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 59-60), the text performs a *trompe-l'oeil* by inserting the document so that it appears to be a

change in narration and thus on the same ontological level as the rest of the fictional world. But it is, at its end, revealed to be a document that Charles is reading aloud and thus on a "lower" ontological level than the rest of the text. In this way, the reader is allowed to experience the excitement of "discovering" such a valuable document and simultaneously reminded not only of the fictionality of the document, but of the discovery itself. In contrast to the omniscient narration of the rest of the text, Chatterton's confession is immediate and, in a text where representations of Chatterton multiply, the temptation to treat this document as evidence of the presence of the "real" or original Chatterton is strong. In fact, there is always a temptation to fetishize the autobiographical text. Both the characters in *Chatterton* and its readers are, in fact, allowed to circle around Chatterton's confession throughout the text. It is from this document that Charles Wychwood develops his alternative history, in which Chatterton lived on to forge many of the significant works of the eighteenth century. Yet this document is itself revealed to be a forgery and its ability to convince becomes even more ironic when we consider that it is a document forged not (only) by the dead Chatterton's disgruntled publisher, but by the text of *Chatterton* itself. And, even though the forgery is revealed, the uneasiness that arises with the possibility that outright lies can stand as truths in historical representation cannot be dissipated.

Wilde's (fictional) journal, on the other hand, is not presented as merely willful misrepresentation, both because it is the text we

read (and not an inserted "document") and because Wilde's sincerity is inscribed so strongly within that text. The journal, however, based primarily on the evidence of Wilde's memory, is revealed to be increasingly suspect as memory is revealed to be an increasingly problematic strategy. Wilde himself tells Robert Sherard that "an artist's life is determined by what he forgets, not by what he remembers" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 69).2 This warning to the potential biographer is ironic, of course, since Sherard went on to write not one but three biographies of Wilde. It is also a warning to the potential reader of biography, autobiography and this text in particular, since Wilde's memory proves to be both selective and creative. Historiographic metafiction typically problematizes memory as a strategy for reporting the truth of the past, "not just because it magnifies and effaces 'real' events, but because it *creates* its own "truth'" (Lee 44). This is amply demonstrated in Wilde's account of the past. Early in the journal, Wilde informs the reader that, on the eve of his trial, his illegitimacy was revealed to him: "My mother, on that fateful evening, told me that my father was an Irish poet and patriot who had died many years before; his name was Smith O'Brien" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 30). According to Brigid Brophy, if Wilde is speaking of the same Smith O'Brien of the historical record, he (or his mother) is either knowingly or unknowingly fictionalizing the past, since Smith O'Brien left Ireland long before Wilde was even conceived (44). This is a clear example of the way in which "historiographic metafiction plays upon the truth and lies of the

historical record" so that "certain known historical details are deliberately falsified in order to foreground the possible mnemonic failures of recorded history and the constant potential for both deliberate and inadvertant error" (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 114). And Wilde's fictional illegitimacy plays with what is surely considered one of the most fundamental of historical records: lineage. Of course, whether it is a deliberate or inadvertant error, it is a useful one for Wilde's narrative pattern, providing him with a romantic ancestor as misunderstood and persecuted as himself, with a metaphor for the literally illegitimate, or unlawful, life he has led, and with an explanation for his sense of his personality as self-created: "The illegitimate are forced to create themselves" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 30). In short, the fable of Wilde's illegitimacy becomes an appropriate "fact" given the tragic pattern of meaning he wishes to impose on his past.

A far more unsettling example of the vagaries of memory can be found in Wilde's two versions of receiving the ear injury that is presumably killing him as he writes. At first, Wilde remembers receiving the injury while taking exercise in Wandsworth prison: "In my cell I could hide and weep; but I felt the daylight like a sword, and I fell. My ear was damaged in that fall. . . (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 72). But later he remembers receiving the injury while in solitary confinement at Pentonville prison after waking to see an apparition of his mother: "she lifted her arm, as if to strike me, and with a cry of terror I fell back upon the floor and knocked my ear

against the plank bed" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 152). Wilde himself (like the reader) becomes confused when he "remembers" this second version of the story and cannot decide which version is true:

> No, that is not right. . . . Have I not described this already? . . . I see again my mother with her hand raised against me. I feel myself falling upon the stony ground of the yard, and I am in pain. Which is the truth--will it be pain or fear that destroys me? (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 152-53)

The reader has no reason not to accept the first version of this story as true until confronted with the second version and Wilde's own confusion. Coming late in the journal, such overt contradiction and uncertainty forces the reader to reconsider everything that has been presented as "fact" thus far. There is, however, a suggestion as to how such a contradiction might be resolved in a conventional history. Wilde uses the future tense to question the past (not *was* it pain or fear, but *will it be* pain or fear), hinting that the meaning he imposes on the past by narrativizing it, the demands of the structure of the story, will dictate the version of the event that will become fact.

Of course, the most significant moment of doubt comes when Wilde reports his friends' reactions to his journal:

> 'You cannot publish this, 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 own purpose.'

'I have no purpose and the facts came quite naturally to me.' (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 160)

The inclusion of this conversation *within* Wilde's journal is paradoxical, for it reveals the constructed frame of the memoir even while it is enclosed within that frame. Moreover, there is a great deal of irony in Wilde's written report of a dialogue that contradicts everything else he has written. For the repeated undermining of Wilde's own narrative authority is likely to make the reader question even this dialogue, which might also be misremembered or even invented by Wilde. In any event, whether or not the dialogue is taken at face value, the discrepancies between Wilde's version of his life and his companions' versions of that life (in which they all play a written part) and the disagreements about the status of specific facts are not enough to clarify the status of the text as a whole. That is, this questioning of Wilde's truthfulness does not simply change the reader's view of the text, making it fiction rather than history. All narrative history is constructed in the present; all facts are equally vulnerable to suspicion; all memory is necessarily selective and creative. Historiographic metafiction focuses on the process of representing past reality and on the patterns of meaning imposed by particular narrative perspectives, rather than the inaccessible past itself. But understanding that the past is absent and that

historiography, like fiction, is artifice does not necessarily mean that all historical knowledge is simply false or meaningless:

> [T]he resulting postmodern relativity and provisionality are not causes for despair; they are to be acknowledged as perhaps the very conditions of historical knowledge. Historical meaning may thus be seen today as unstable, contextual, relational, and provisional, but postmodernism argues that, in fact, it has always been so. (Hutcheon, *Politics* 67)

Certainly the realization that "it has always been so" frees Charles Wychwood from the restrictions of a single, coherent history which does not admit contradictions or gaps. When Charles, trying to discover the real story of Chatterton, is liberated from the tyranny of unity and determinate historical knowledge, he understands that simultaneous truths can and do exist because narrativization creates truths. There may be no way of ever unproblematically knowing the past or the single, absolute truth about Chatterton, but this does not make the writing of history impossible. Rather, it means that history is continually being and must continually be (re)written and that multiple interpretations, even the contradictory ones with which Charles is faced, exist and are valid:

> At first Charles had been annoyed with these discrepancies but then he was exhilarated by them: for it meant that anything became possible. If there were no

> truths everything became true. (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 127)

This last statement, of course, does not necessarily follow from what precedes it; it is just as likely that the investigator of the past, upon realizing that "anything became possible" would decide that everything is false, rather than true and that, since nothing is certain, no knowledge is possible. But *Chatterton* is a text that emphasizes the adventure of the process of interpretation over the triumph of completing the single, correct interpretation. Harriet Scrope, for example, loses interest in the mystery of Chatterton's death when it appears to have been solved, for "She had always preferred stories in which the ending had never been understood" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 208). The gaps and contradictions in the historical record, then, are indeed "not causes for despair" but possibilities for interpretive freedom and necessary conditions for the endless re-working of both the literary and the historical past. Successful or not, an ending is always an ending, and it is ending that novels like *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton* problematize, sensing, perhaps, in the end of the story (historiographical or fictional) an analogue for the end of storytelling itself, or death. Thus Philip Slack, left with the indeterminate traces of the past, decides not to pursue the death of the story:

> [T]here is a charm or even a beauty in unfinished work

> . . . . Why should historical research not also remain incomplete, existing as a possibility and not fading into knowledge? (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 213)

It is this question that dominates both *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton* and it is manifested not only in the novels' problematizations of historical representation, but also in their consistent obsession with the relationship between artifice and reality in general.

III: Worlds of Words

> But man--let me offer you a definition--is the
> story-telling animal. Wherever he goes he
> wants to leave behind not a chaotic wake, not
> an empty space, but the comforting marker-
> buoys and trail-signs of stories. He has to go
> on telling stories.
>   Graham Swift *Waterland*

Historiography's problematic relationship to the past which it
attempts to master is no less problematic that the relationship
between art, or fiction, and "reality." In *The Last Testament of Oscar
Wilde*, Wilde admits that all his art has been part of an attempt to
somehow master the chaos that he believes reality to be: "So afraid
was I of the formlessness of life . . . that I took it with both hands
and fashioned it into stories" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 49).
Chatterton is even more obviously peopled with those who aspire to
mastering reality, usually by copying it, and yet cannot achieve such
control because "'Everything which is written down immediately
becomes a kind of fiction'" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 40). And, as Charles
Wychwood, reading biographies of Chatterton, and Harriet Scrope,
trying to write her memoirs, discover, everyone who is written down
is immediately fictionalized as well. In fact, the process of
representation of (past or present) reality is problematized to such
an extent in *Chatterton* that it is inevitably that process, and not the
object(s) of representation, upon which text and reader focus. As Lee
points out, this is common to all historiographic metafictive novels:

55

"the self-consciousness of these novels, and their delight in flaunting their own artifice, means that the very act of representation . . . is itself a performance of representation" (80). Historiographic metafictive novels like *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton*, then, pose questions not only about how we know the past when all we have are its textual traces, but about the nature of reality in a world of representations, about the relationship between *world* and *word*.

The focus of representation in *Chatterton*, as the title indicates, is Thomas Chatterton. The text is a multi-leveled performance of representations (and representations of representations) of the boy genius. The official version (or representation) of Chatterton's life and death is given in the untitled preface to the novel. Other representations include the painting of an apparently middle-aged Chatterton, the document appearing to be his signed confession, a plaque and a verse commemorating (and representing) Chatterton inscribed on the wall of St Mary Redcliffe in Bristol, and a tourist's pamphlet that tells the story of Chatterton's brief existence in a manner reminiscent of the preface to the novel. Charles Wychwood reads biographies of Chatterton, and Philip Slack reads advertisements for scholarly works on Chatterton. Fragments of romantic poems representing Chatterton are scattered throughout the text and the fragments of dialogue gathered at the beginning of the novel include one between Chatterton as a young boy and a nameless girl in Bristol. The last section of the novel represents in

(fictional) narrative the alternative version of Chatterton's death by accidental overdose. But it is Wallis's painting of Chatterton's death (or, more accurately, his corpse) upon which the text focuses most intently. The painting is reproduced, though not exactly, on the cover of the novel and is mentioned in the preface: "*Only one contemporary portrait of him is known to exist, but the image of the 'marvellous boy' has been fixed for posterity in the painting,* Chatterton, *by Henry Wallis"* (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 1). The reproduction on the cover of the novel is, as previously discussed, not unproblematic, since it is deliberately altered. Moreover, the title of the novel, printed above the picture, becomes ambiguous. *Chatterton* has as its referent the novel, the painting, and the historical figure himself. The reference to a "contemporary portrait" of Chatterton is also significant; neither reproduced nor even described, it is a missing paratext that haunts the rest of the text with its absence, though there is a suggestion that it is this painting which might be underneath the forged painting of Chatterton in middle-age. Wallis's *Chatterton,* on the other hand, is a paratext become text; it refuses its place at the margins of the text and becomes part of every plot in the novel. Charles Wychwood takes his son to view Wallis's *Chatterton* at the Tate Gallery and Sarah Tilt discusses its representation of Chatterton's death compared with the supposed "reality" of death by arsenic poisoning. Finally, the creation of the painting constitutes the novel's nineteenth-century plot and it is here, in fictional conversations between real-world figures, Wallis

and Meredith, that many of the novel's questions about the relationship between reality and artifice are posed.

Henry Wallis subscribes to a realist aesthetic: "'But how can you experiment with what is real? Surely you have only to depict it'" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 157). George Meredith, on the other hand, argues that the representation of reality is extremely problematic. That is, he is acutely aware of both the impossibility of translating experience into art and the desire to do so: "'[r]eality can only be experienced. It cannot be spoken of. . . . And yet the words for it haunt us, pluck at us, fret us'" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 162). The fictional Wilde has much the same awareness and tells a story of a poet who "had seen reality and . . . could not speak of it" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 63). The possibility that painting, unlike literature, might capture, at least, something closer to reality (because it is sensual) is certainly played with throughout the novel. Wallis argues that his painting will represent the tragic "truth" of Chatterton's death. He sketches the room in which Chatterton died; he purchases "exact" copies of Chatterton's furniture; he consults written accounts which refer to the fact that Chatterton's last writings were found torn and scattered on the floor and so on. As a painter, he believes that if he can copy what he sees, the physical objects associated with Chatterton, he can represent reality, which inheres in what can be perceived: "'There is no reality . . . except in visible things'" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 139). But Wallis's vision of Chatterton's death is based on textual traces (mostly romantic representations of that death) which

are in turn based upon textual traces. Moreover, his painting is a painting of Meredith alive, not Chatterton dead, and even the possibility of unproblematically representing Meredith posing as Chatterton is called into question. For Wallis, contemplating "nature," becomes uncomfortably aware that "immediate" reality, the world he perceives with his senses, cannot be divided into separate, framed images:

> But even as he lay here he began to perceive patterns in the bark of the tree. . . . But the patterns themselves no longer semed to him to be sufficient: their texture and colour came from their place upon the whole tree, and from the line of trees to each side, just as their shade and tone were borrowed from the changing lights of the world itself. But if all this could not be painted -- for what hope was there of capturing the general life of the world upon a canvas--how was he to depict the human form itself? (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 163)

In *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, Wilde is faced with precisely the same kind of problems in his attempt to capture his own personality in either literary or historical writing. If representation of experiential reality is the aim of art, then representation of individual experience and individual identity is paramount. Yet Wilde finds that the answer to his "Who was Oscar Wilde?" is indefinite. The chaotic, frameless reality that Henry Wallis despairs at capturing is matched in *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* by a

chaotic, frameless multiplicity of selves: "I know that it is only in the company of others that one becomes truly oneself, but now I am positively Whitmanesque: I contain multitudes" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 8). Writing in the form of an autobiographical memoir, a form which "has a long history in fiction as a form of asserting the primacy of individual experience" (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 162), Wilde tries to represent the reality of his own experience. But if that experience is neither unified nor coherent, the possibility of either art or history ever representing it is called into question.

Yet Wilde, who knows that his self can only be constructed and not represented, continues to defend his own autobiographical text even though he admits that "perhaps even in this journal I am not portraying myself as indeed I am" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 171). And Wallis, despite his own feeling that there is no hope "of capturing the general life of the world" nor of separating it into framed images, continues to defend realism. Of course, his arguments in favour of realism, or, at least, attempts at realism, constitute his defence against *moral* accusations that art lies, that "'it is all an illusion. . . . Art is just another game'" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 135). Yet Meredith's assertion that "'the greatest realism' is also the greatest fakery'" is not necessarily a condemnation or even a belittlement of the practice of artifice (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 139). On the contrary, Meredith, using the works of both Chatterton and Wallis as examples, emphasizes both the pleasure gained from art and the power of artifice, not to represent reality, but to create it:

'I said that the words were real . . . I did not say that
what they depicted was real. Our dear dead poet created
the monk Rowley out of thin air, and yet he has more life
in him than any medieval priest who actually existed.
The invention is always more real. . . . The poet does not
merely recreate or describe the world. He actually
creates it. And that is why he is feared. . . . And that is
why . . . this will always be remembered as the true
death of Chatterton.' (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 157)

That Wallis's painting is, in fact, remembered as the "true death of
Chatterton" is made overt by its central position in Ackroyd's
Chatterton. And the fact that it cannot represent the reality of
Chatterton's death does not necessarily mean that it is not "true."
Wallis's need to maintain the absolute truth-value of art and
Meredith's claim that the poet is feared both depend, of course, on a
continued belief in an oppositional relationship between history and
fiction. As long as history's ability to represent absolute reality is
maintained and valued, art is seen as fostering dangerous illusions
and is made to look like history in order to counteract its morally
inferior position. But when the representation of reality in factual (as
well as fictional) texts is questioned and shown to be problematic,
even untenable, all texts become artifice and "truth" needs to be
radically redefined. All texts, then, become "true fictions" (Ackroyd,
Chatterton 133), representing not a common, unchanging, empirical

reality that can be perceived and transcribed, but a reality of texts, of artificial worlds created in and by the artifice of words.

. While both *The Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton* question the possibility of ever unproblematically representing reality in texts, they simultaneously interrogate the possibility of knowing reality outside textual frames. That is, these novels suggest that human perceptions of reality are at least partially determined by models constructed by artifice. While Wallis and Meredith, for example, discuss art's relationship to the reality it claims to represent, Wallis contemplates the beauty of Mary Ellen Meredith. But, even while he argues that reality is knowable, constant and able to be represented textually, he can only perceive the "real" Mary Ellen within the frames of various artistic models:

> [S]he seemed to him to resemble a Giotto, whose paintings he had just been studying in Tournier's *History*. . . . No, she is not a Giotto, Wallis thought, but an Otto Runge. . . . Mary got up from her chair, and the rich blue colouring of her dress swirled around her as if she were some Goddess rising from the Mediterranean sea.
>
> (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 133)

Of course, Mary Ellen is neither a Giotto, an Otto Runge, nor a mythological goddess, but Wallis cannot define her beauty, cannot, indeed, even experience it, without recourse to representations of female beauty in art for, as Ackroyd's Wilde asserts, "Nature always follows Art" (*Last Testament* 121). Obviously, *Chatterton*, though it

can by no means simply dispense with Wallis's perspective, favours the argument put forth by Meredith. Meredith claims not only that art can never capture reality because "'There are no words to stamp the indefinite thing'" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 133), but also that art, or textual representation in general, actually provides the structures through which reality is perceived. This does not mean that there is no reality, only that it cannot be categorized or conveyed outside artificial frames, outside the paradoxically "true fictions" that determine the ways in which we see the world.

The possibility that human beings perceive reality according to the models provided by human constructs (including history), that "'we see nature through the eyes of the painter'" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 134), is taken up in *Chatterton* through its emphasis on doubling. Doubling is a strategy characteristic of the self-conscious novel and is, as Alter states, "hardly surprising in a kind of fiction repeatedly concerned with the instructiveness and deceptiveness of similitudes. . . " (*Partial Magic* 21). In *Chatterton*, doubling is everywhere apparent: characters, elements of plot, and specific words, phrases, dialogues and images are repeated and reworked in an overtly parodic manner. In fact, historiographic metafiction uses doubling to great effect in its extremely self-conscious examination of both the relationship between reality and artifice and the opposition between history and fiction:

> A double, of course, is a reflection or imitation, and often
> a covertly parodistic imitation that exposes hidden

> aspects of the original. . . . . A mode of fiction, therefore,
> focused on the nature of imitation and its aesthetic or
> ontological implications, may well find doubles to be of
> great utility. It should be emphasized, moreover, that the
> self-conscious novelist utilizes the double with a
> conscious quality of intellectual playfulness. . . . (Alter,
> *Partial Magic* 23)

Alter's reference to "the original" is, of course, more assured than any such reference would be in the postmodernist novel. In *Chatterton*, for example, instances of plagiarism, forgery, allusion and other kinds of "imitation" multiply until the quests of the various characters to finds originals or origins become caught up in a labyrinthian pattern of copies: "By the end of this novel there's not a document or a picture left that is 'original', and there are fleeting, recurring images that suggest that life, as well as art, gets stuck in certain specially resonant grooves" (Glendinning, "Past and Present"19). Those "grooves" are, in fact, textually constructed and Glendinning's equation of art and life is precisely the equation made by both *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton* in their play with lives that copy textual models.

In *Chatterton*, doubling is most playfully and problematically evinced in the connections between the three poets, Chatterton, Meredith, and Charles Wychwood. Charles, while ironically positing a history in which Chatterton did not die young and unappreciated, is himself dying a similarily untimely and romantic death (of a brain

tumor). As the text makes clear with its numerous allusions to romantic representations of Chatterton (Wordsworth's "marvellous boy" for example), Chatterton has been constructed as an icon of the doomed, young poet and this, along with Charles's own blatantly coincidental research into Chatterton's history, provides a pattern for Charles's own death. The relationship between Charles and his precursor(s) is suggested throughout the text by Charles's frequent encounters with the apparition of a "young man" with "red hair," "an invisible companion," a "someone other" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 47, 78). But, Charles is usually ill when he encounters these figures and, like Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor*, the novel conjures and then "discounts the supernatural as a possibility" (Lee 84). The only ghosts in the novel are purely textual ones and the recurring phrases and images that haunt Charles are fragments of *representations* of the doomed boy genius. In fact, it is Wallis's *Chatterton* that is most consistently echoed in Charles's life and, finally, his death, which, against Charles's will, is a double of Wallis's painting and proof of its power:

> He had torn up the poem and allowed the pieces to drift across the floor where now, with his outstretched hand, he could touch them. . . . he could see it all, the garret window open, the dying roseplant upon the sill, the purple coat thrown across a chair, the extinguished candle upon the small mahogany table. . . . 'No!' he shouted. . . . 'This should not be happening. This is not real. I am not meant to be here. I have seen this before

and it is an illusion!' . . . . His right arm fell away and his hand trailed upon the ground, the fingers clenched tightly together; his head slumped to the right also. . . .

(Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 169)

All the details of this scene are taken directly from the scenes in which Wallis produces the painting of Chatterton. Moreover, the representation of Charles's death is followed by a shift back into the nineteenth-century plot of the novel, which begins "'Chatterton' was finished" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 170). "'Chatterton'" here ostensibly refers to Wallis's painting, but both Charles's deathly imitation of that painting and his historical research are also implied. In any event, Charles's death is presented as a copy of a copy for which no original exists. And, since it is a copy of Meredith's imitation of Chatterton dying, doubling becomes tripling. After the painting of the death of Chatterton, Meredith's wife leaves him for Wallis; after Charles's death (which is an imitation), Charles's wife begins a relationship with Philip Slack, who is, of course, the character most akin to Wallis in his concerns about representing the real world. To further complicate matters, the final version of Chatterton's death (in which he still dies by poison, but accidentally) also echoes, even while it undermines, Wallis's romantic representation. Though the death is portrayed in a more "realistic" manner--including the physical effects of poisoning such as contortions and purging--all of the by now familiar elements of Wallis's painting are there: the half-open window, the dying rose plant, the recently extinguished candle,

the coat on the chair, the trailing hand, the clenched fingers and so on. *Chatterton*, then, inscribes, undermines, reinscribes and undermines again the centrality of Wallis's *Chatterton*. Yet each copy is always a copy with a difference; distance equals distortion.

The premise that all copies are distortive has wide implications for both historiographical and fictional writing. If text is all we have and text always distorts not only the reality it claims to represent, but the very ways in which we perceive reality, then the relationship between reality and artifice becomes, if possible, even more problematic. *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton* perform surfaces, continually reminding us that the real-world referents we seek in texts are always and inevitably absent, even when they are most carefully inscribed. Wilde's record of his last months in Paris cannot represent Wilde himself; the unity and autonomy of the "I" that tells the story is textually constructed, existing only in narration and thus Wilde is set adrift to become "the voice which calls out 'I!I!' without understanding the meaning of its cry" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 143). And neither Wallis's painting, nor the anonymous portrait found by Charles, nor the forged confession, nor any of the other textual representations of Chatterton can claim to have access to the "real" Chatterton. Each representation is, like the house in which Chatterton once lived, but "a painted surface" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 56). But the impossibility of ever knowing the past in history or fiction does not necessarily rule out truth. Thomas Chatterton, who, in his own forgeries of the Rowley

poems, performs the same boundary between history and fiction that is performed by texts like *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton*, paradoxically asserts the truth of his invention:

> I reproduc'd the Past and filled it with such Details that it was as if I were observing it in front of me: so the Language of ancient Dayes awoke the Reality itself for, tho' I knew that it was I who composed these Histories, I knew also that they were true ones. (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 85)

Chatterton's own writings, in other words, are yet another example of "true fictions." And Chatterton's art, described in the preface to the novel as *"a unique conflation of his reading and his own invention"* (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 1), is as close to truth as historiographic metafiction allows.

Does this mean that all the world's a text, that nothing exists outside human constructs? This is certainly one of Wilde's fears. Wilde describes his plays as "gilded creations where, instead of the masks of classical drama, my actors are shielded by perfect sentences" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 123). Wilde himself is a creature of masks, of layers of public personae that conceal the "real" Wilde. In fact, Wilde conceives of himself, like his actors, as shielded or masked by language: "The texture of language itself . . . clung about me and protected me" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 157). But Wilde, like his characters, is not only shielded and described by language, he is also constructed in and out of language. In other

words, the reader watches Wilde constructing his journal, constructing his past, and constructing his self (or selves). Moreover, the reader is aware that Wilde, as a fictional character, is constructed out of language at another level. Patricia Waugh reminds us that "[d]*escriptions* of objects in fiction are simultaneously *creations* of that object" (88), and historiographic metafiction reveals that this is true of historiography as well as fiction. Wilde, searching for his individual identity among the textual traces of the past, finds only more constructs and discovers that, like the events of the past transformed into the facts of the present, the extra-textual self "both do[es] and do[es] not retain [its] status outside language" (Hutcheon, *Politics* 78). Thus, while *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, like *Chatterton*, never explicitly claims that extra-textual reality does not exist, it raises the possibility that, within the limits of human knowledge, all the world *is* a text.

For Wilde, who is, as narrator, a textual construct, the need for an extra-textual identity becomes an obsession. Indeed, as Lee points out, "the issues of individuality and identity are vital for historiographic metafiction" (55). Perhaps this helps to account for the emphasis on the present in *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, for Wilde is concerned not only with knowing the past in the present, but with the death that will render the present itself forever past. More than half the entries in Wilde's journal begin with explicit references to the present and to the writing of the journal. For, as he moves closer to death, to the edge of the frame(s) constructed both

by him and for him, the urgency of his need to dis-cover an essential, extra-textual self and the meaning that would emanate from it is played against the unlikelihood of ever unproblematically knowing anything outside the text. Both Wilde's narrating and narrated selves may be dispersed and fragmented, but the presence of the narrating "I," however problematic, is continually shadowed by the approaching absence of death, when Wilde will become "he." That absence is pre-figured in the very title of the novel (where "Oscar Wilde" is an object) as well as in Wilde's sense of his life as text(s) written, read, and interpreted by others: "I am an 'effect' merely: the meaning of my life exists in the minds of others and no longer in my own" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 2). As long as Wilde lives, the attempt to make meaning continues and, as long as he writes, he lives: "life has been equated with discourse, death with the end of discourse and silence" (McHale 228). It is little wonder, then, that Wilde is anxious about the fact that his journal is "quite exhausting my powers of invention" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 47), for when those powers are completely exhausted (this is, after all, his *last* testament), Wilde dies. Thus "the tensions that exist . . . between the pastness (and absence) of the past and the presentness (and presence) of the present" are intensified by Wilde's (and the reader's) awareness of how soon the present will become the past, how easily presence becomes absence (Hutcheon, *Politics* 73). The chronological organization of Wilde's journal marches toward the date of that death, a date already known by the reader, a death

already written. The gaps in the journal, days on which nothing is written, increase in frequency as Wilde approaches his inevitable demise. He looks forward and sees the moment when he will slip into the last gap, the end of the narrating "I" when his companion, Maurice, "will invent my last hours, and then the transition will be complete" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 180). It is, of course, an ontological transition. The last entries in the text are made by Maurice and Wilde moves from being a real-world figure inserted into a fictional world to being a real-world figure within a fictional world which is contained within another fictional world. Wilde's physical death is reported by Maurice: "*Mr Wilde died at ten minutes to two p.m. on Friday, November 30*" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 185), but his narrational death occurs earlier, when he becomes "*Oscar Wilde talking, taken down by Maurice Gilbert*" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 184). It is the textual death, however, and not the physical one, that Wilde fears, for at that moment, when Wilde ceases to testify, he disappears from view.

The interrogation of knowledge of extra-textual reality performed by Wilde's failure to live outside the text is paralleled in *Chatterton* by Philip Slack's awareness of the seemingly unbridgeable gap between text and world. Philip, who is, appropriately enough, a librarian, has a vision of the infinity of textuality while daydreaming amid the stacks in the library basement:

> [I]t was now with an unexpected fearfulness that he saw
> how the books stretched away in the darkness. They
> seemed to expand as soon as they reached the shadows,
> creating some dark world where there was no beginning
> and no end, no story, no meaning. And, if you crossed the
> threshold into that world, you would be surrounded with
> words; you would crush them beneath your feet, you
> would knock against them with your head and arms, but
> if you tried to grasp them they would melt away. Philip
> did not dare turn his back upon these books. (Ackroyd,
> *Chatterton* 71)

Philip's feeling of terror when facing this "dark world" of words,
however, is not, like Wilde's, a fear that he himself does not exist
outside the text (although, ironically, perhaps it should be, since he is
himself "only" a fictional character). On the contrary, Philip is
dismayed by his sense of the reality that texts do *not*, and, he feels,
cannot, contain. In fact, it is the gap between the patterned, artificial
"representations" of reality and the chaos and apparent
meaninglessness of reality itself that causes Philip such unease, for,
as he attempts to tell Vivien, he sees reality as totally and
incomprehensibly random:

> He told her how he . . . was bewildered by a world in
> which no significant pattern could be found. Everything
> just seems to *take place*, he had said, and there's not
> even any *momentum*. It's just, well, it's just *velocity*. And

if you trace anything backwards, trying to figure out cause and effect, or motive, or meaning, there is no real *origin* for anything. Everything just exists. Everything just exists in order to exist. (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 232)

Philip's sense of the randomness of reality is, of course, an ironic comment on the text of *Chatterton* itself, for the text's "unpatterned world is presented in a frame as elaborately patterned as the novelist can make it" (Dodsworth 976). All texts, however, are patterned, though reality never is. Philip is troubled not just because the world is chaotic, but because texts, fictional or historiographical, do not seem to admit this chaos: "none of them seemed to feel how *odd* it is that life is just the way it is" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 232). But *Chatterton*, with its over-patterned world and its repeated performances of the gap between reality and text, *does* feel how odd it is and there is a hint that Philip might create precisely such a text, might even write the text we are reading now: "with Charles's theory. . . . I must tell it in my own way. How Chatterton might have lived on" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 232).

Thus Philip, unlike Wilde, does not desire a freedom from the confines of textuality. On the contrary, he wants to use his sense of the way in which texts pattern the world to discuss the textuality/reality paradox itself. Waugh, discussing self-conscious fiction, describes the text that "suggests there can never be an escape from the prisonhouse of language and either delights or despairs in this" (53). *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, suffused with the

frustration of Wilde's attempts to find his essential self, to become what he cannot be, extra-textual, expresses despair: "artifice crumbles--an artificial world will dissolve also, and will have to face its own vacancy" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 179). *Chatterton*, on the other hand, delights in its own artifice, accepts "true fictions" as the only way of knowing the world, and understands that all we know of reality are its distorting imitations: "'How could we know that it was real without a copy? Everything is copied'" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 93). Yet if everything is copied, if all texts are made up of traces of other texts, another problem arises. Philip, who wants to capture the gap between reality and text, has abandoned the attempt to write once before because "even the pages he had managed to complete seemed to him to be filled with images and phrases from the work of other writers" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 70). Philip's anxiety about the texts that seem to stretch out infinitely, then, is also a Bloomian "anxiety of influence." For, Philip is a reader as much as a writer, and he knows that texts are comprised of the fragments of the texts that precede them. What then, becomes of the authority of the act of writing, when the boundaries between text and text, author and author, author and reader become problematized? The final image in *Chatterton* is that of Thomas Chatterton, George Meredith, and Charles Wychwood linking hands in apparent solidarity, even, as the doubling throughout the text suggests, as one being. Within the context of its examination of the relationship between text and world, historiographic metafiction self-consciously focuses on the

acts of writing and reading and the figures of author and reader that those acts summon. Authors do not always, of course, fare well in Ackroyd's texts: Wilde dies of an ear infection, Chatterton by poison, Charles of a brain tumor. Whether postmodern novels like *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton* also herald a Barthesian "death of the author" is a question which must now be addressed.

Part Two

I: Authors, Readers and the In-Between Text

> How is it possible to defeat not the authors but
> the functions of the author, the idea that behind
> each book there is someone who guarantees a
> truth in that world of ghosts and inventions by
> the mere fact of having invested in it his own
> truth, of having identified himself with that
> construction of words? . . . If this idea had
> succeeded in imposing itself, if a systematic
> uncertainty as to the identity of the writer had
> kept the reader from abandoning himself with
> trust--trust not so much in what was being told
> him but trust in the silent, narrating voice--
> perhaps externally the edifice of literature would
> not have changed at all, but beneath, in the
> foundations, where the relationship between
> reader and text is established, something would
> have changed forever.
> Italo Calvino *If on a winter's night a*
> *traveler*

If the binary opposition between history and fiction is a tenacious one, it is no more firmly ingrained in discussions of literature than another, often more covertly assumed opposition, that between author and reader. Whether the critic comes, like Plato, to bury or, like Aristotle, to praise the poet, the radically different nature of the artist from the audience is made clear: "Now with regard to authors of genius . . . it must be observed at the outset that, while writers of this quality are far from being faultless, yet they all rise above the human level" (Longinus 147; ch. 36).3 In her highly valuable "The Reader in History: The Changing Shape of Literary Response," Jane Tompkins examines historical conceptions of author

and reader within the framework of the quest for meaning. Tompkins' argument is that the writer is perceived as performing a measurable social function for a known, specific audience up to and including the Augustan age and thereafter "the production and consumption of literature go on independent of any social contact between author and reader" ("Reader" 214), making the act of interpretation paramount. Yet throughout the history of literary criticism, a distinction is made between those who do (or can) write and those who do (or can) not. This distinction becomes more definite around the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the poet's separation from the "ordinary world" is at once threatening (since poetry is increasingly seen as having little material effect on culture and thereby little utility) and elevating (since poetry is now seen to be "free" of the limitations of its cultural context). William Wordsworth, for example, goes to great lengths in his prefaces and appendices to stress the difference between himself and his invisible audience, between writer and reader. Wordsworth believes that his poetry has value, not because it operates within the sphere of social action but because, on the contrary, it is "entirely separate . . . from the vulgarity and meanness of ordinary life" (452). The reader obviously exists within the sphere of that "vulgarity and meanness" and is invited to enjoy the gifts of the poet, who is "possessed of more than usual organic sensibility" (448). Indeed, Wordsworth emphasizes the gap between author and reader in his very description of the poet as

> a man . . . endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him. . . . To these qualities he has added a disposition to be affected more than other men by absent things as if they were present. . . . he has acquired a greater readiness and power in expressing what he thinks and feels. . . . (453)

The poet, then is "more than other men" in almost every conceivable way and it is little wonder that, sensing a huge gap between his "more than usual" sensibility and that of the ordinary reader, Wordsworth feels the need to provide prefaces that both explain his work and attempt to restrict interpretation of it. Less than a quarter of a century later, Percy Bysshe Shelley is driven to describe and defend poets as "the unacknowledged legislators of the world" (490). Arguing against the relegation of poetry to the unprivileged side of the truth/lies opposition (and related accusations that art, in not attending to the "real" world, corrupts), Shelley claims that poets are "the founders of civil society" and that "poetry acts to produce the moral improvement of man" (485). But, despite his claims that poetry has an effect upon the world, and even an ultimate responsibility for "civilization," Shelley is intent upon divorcing art from the plebian particularities of cultural history. The poet

"participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one; as far as relates to his conceptions, time and place and number are not" (485). Poetry, then, partakes of universal truth and, as Tompkins argues, Shelley's impassioned argument signals the ultimate "separation of poetry from ordinary life through a denial of its local origins and effects, and a simultaneous elevation of its function to that of a repository of eternal values" ("Reader" 217). The reader, however, continues to struggle in the mire of "ordinary life," only transiently glimpsing "the power of accumulating and receiving intense and impassioned conceptions" that resides in the poet (Shelley 490). If the poet is "the influence which is moved not, but moves" (Shelley 490), then the reader is that which moves not, but is moved. The acting poet, then, has power over the re-acting audience and that power, like that of a deity, is somehow related to the mystery of the author's absence:

> By making the absence of material influence on the environment an essential characteristic of art, the literary theorists of the nineteenth century turned the artist's progressive alienation from society into a positive principle. (Tompkins, "Reader" 218-19)

It is not surprising that Ackroyd's texts are concerned with precisely this romantic version of the author/reader opposition as it is manifested in the lives of Chatterton, Wilde, Meredith and Wallis, and in the historical periods to which they belong. Chatterton especially has gained a place in literary history that has more to do

with his tragic and noble alienation from the "world" than with his literary production.

The opposition between author and reader continues throughout the critical traditon. It is, for example, later reworked within the context of modernism by T. S. Eliot, who extends the artist's alienation from society to include alienation from the work of art itself. For Eliot, "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not an expression of personality, but an escape from personality" ("Tradition and the Individual Talent" 447). Eliot's vision of the wholeness and unity of art (in contrast to fragmentary and chaotic experience) "lies not so much in the poet's mind as in the poem" (Tompkins, "Reader" 220). Yet, while it may be true that Eliot thus "severs the tie between the poem and its origins more completely than has ever been done before" by making the text itself "the place of order and equilibrium" (Tompkins, "Reader" 220), Eliot's conception of art and artist still facilitates an oppositional relationship between author and reader. The reader cannot escape from emotion; in fact, the reader's experience of the poem should be precisely the opposite of the author's: "If we are moved by a poem, it has meant something, perhaps something important to us; if we are not moved, then it is, as poetry, meaningless" ("The Music of Poetry" 449). In fact, if Shelley's poet becomes transcendent in rising above "time, place and number," Eliot's poet achieves a comparable transcendence in possessing the ability to empty out emotion and rise above the merely personal. Eliot's "process of depersonalization"

("Tradition" 443), insofar as it becomes the defining characteristic of the artist, thus performs a dual function, dividing the poet from the people even as it absents the artist from the art. And despite his insistence that the artist's self does not inhere in the work and hence cannot ever be the object of criticism, Eliot himself does not hesitate to apply qualitative terms to poets (rather than poems) when he speaks of the author's "skill and power" and "individual genius" ("Music" 454). It seems, in fact, that the artist possesses "individual genius" in direct proportion to the ability to commit "a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (Eliot, "Tradition" 443). Thus, though Eliot clears the way for theorists who locate authority and autonomy in the literary text and not in the writer, his formulation continues to oppose artist and non-artist, genius-author and common reader.

By apparently banishing the author from the text, Eliot seems at times to make room for the reader's response in such a way that the reader, or, at least, the interaction between text and reader, might provide the locus for literary meaning. In fact, Eliot not only allows for the existence of multiple interpretations but also raises the possibility that the reader's experience of a text may equal or even exceed the author's:

> A poem may appear to mean different things to different
> readers, and all of these meanings may be different from
> what the author thought he meant. . . . The reader's

interpretation may differ from the author's and be equally valid--it may even be better. ("Music" 450)

Of course, it is still an opposition between author and reader that Eliot addresses here. More importantly, Eliot's nods to the reader are littered with conditional verbs--may appear, may be, may differ, may even be--that ultimately lead back to the inexhaustible authority of the poem. For Eliot finds a way to account for multiplicity of meaning without having to address the different situations of readers, suggesting that different interpretations are "partial formulations of *one thing* [my emphasis]" ("Music" 450). That one thing, of course, is the actual meaning that resides within the text and, if different interpretations exist, this is due to the interpreters' individual inabilities to grasp the totality. Indeed, as Tompkins states, "Eliot's ideas . . . transferred the ultimate locus of value from the context of poetry to poetry itself" ("Reader" 221). Is this transference a sign of a reconciliation of author and reader, since both are in some way discredited as meaning-makers? I think not, despite the fact that it ushers in the New Critical identification of the twin sins of interpretation: the intentional fallacy and the affective fallacy. For, though the New Critics are intent upon excluding both the intending author and the affected reader, they eject them on opposite sides of the text; on the left is the author/sender/origin and on the right is the reader/receiver/destination. This new and powerful status of the text as a closed object amounts to a continued refusal to acknowledge textual production *and* reception as part of

the entire meaning-making process and it is, of course, this status that postmodernism challenges. In other words, postmodernism sees in this ostensible disappearance of the author and reader only the beginning of a reformulation of the dichotomy. For the New Critical insistence that the text's the thing (and a very special thing at that) ultimately leads the way to a reversal that, rather than eliminating the opposition between author and reader, reinforces it by the creation of a new kind of reader--the institutional critic:

> Once the literary work has been defined as an object of knowledge, as meaning not doing, interpretation becomes the supreme critical act. The kind of interpretation that the formalist definition requires, moreover, cannot be performed by the man on the street. Since the literary work is formally and semantically unique . . . it requires interpreters specially schooled in the intricacies of the poetic medium.   (Tompkins, "Reader" 222)

These new interpreters are, in fact, master readers who are superior to the "common" reader (and, it is implied, the author) because they have the ability to construct what Cleanth Brooks calls a "scaffolding" consisting of "an explicit intellectual account of the various symbols, and a logical account of their relationships" around any given text (Brooks 97). Although the text itself is supposed to be the proper focus of attention and thus not to be obscured by laying "more stress on the scaffolding" than the reader "properly should" (Brooks 97), interpretation of a text becomes more or less impossible without

institutional guidance: "there are perhaps still more readers who will be prevented from getting at the poem at all without the help of such a scaffolding" (Brooks 97). Yet, the kind of advanced methods now necessary for the interpretation of poetry can, of course, be learned; in fact,

> [t]he definition of criticism as an activity requiring professional expertise justifies the credentialling system of graduate education and gives support to professors of literature in their competition with natural and social scientists for institutional resources. (Tompkins, "Reader" 223)

In other words, the innate, organic superiority of the author is now replaced by the learned, mechanical superiority of the critic/reader. Thus, though New Criticism attempts to eliminate the "idiosyncracy, emotionality, subjectivity, and impressionism" of the untrained reader (Tompkins, "Reader" 224), it still helps to perform not an eradication of the author/reader opposition, but a reversal of its hierarchy. The poet as "unacknowledged legislator" is now replaced by the critic-reader as acknowledged legislator.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the advent of reader-response criticism appears to revolutionize the institutional practice of literary interpretation. In one way, it does; insofar as the personal and immediate responses of different readers (and their particular cultural and historical situations) are allowed back into the process of interpretation, the text again approaches the possibility of being

something that does, rather than something that is. In addition, reader-response criticism interrogates the apparent elitism of New Criticism, in which the model critic essentially imitates the "process of depersonalization" of Eliot's model poet. Of course, reader-response criticism covers a range of theories and techniques more diverse than its name might suggest, but, in essence, all its manifestations share a desire to locate meaning in the reader and the process of reading.4 It seems to follow that, since every reader responds to any given text, then every reader is worthy of critical attention and, taken to its logical conclusion, every reader is capable of criticism. Yet good readers and bad readers, or, at the very least, good readings and bad readings, continue to exist and the master-critic still stands above the average reader in that the critic is able to analyze that reader. Moreover, in many cases, the restrictions placed upon the reader by authors, texts, or the institutions that have formed the reader in the first place are stressed as much as the "actual" processes of reading and interpreting are analyzed. What is interesting within the scope of my investigation is the position of the author in reader-response criticism. The author is rarely mentioned but, in most cases, the author can still be seen in opposition to the reader. In fact, reader-response criticism reverses the terms of that opposition by privileging the reader over the author, but this reversal in no way constitutes an interrogation of the opposition itself. The term "reader" continues to be dependent on an opposite term, "writer," even if what is now the second half of the dichotomy

is, in effect, hidden from view. Indeed, that second half, author, must be hidden, as the reader was once hidden, if the ascription of power to the reader is to succeed.

Perhaps the best (and certainly the most infamous) example of the attempt to strip the author-figure of its power can be found in Roland Barthes' 1968 essay, "The Death of the Author." Barthes begins by calling for a recognition of the power traditionally invested in the figure of the author:

> The *author* still reigns in manuals of literary history, in biographies of writers, magazine interviews, and in the very consciousness of litterateurs eager to unite, by means of private journals, their person and their work; the image of literature to be found in contemporary culture is tyranically centered on the author, his person, his history, his tastes, his passions . . . *explanation* of the work is still sought in the person of its producer, as if, through the more or less transparent allegory of fiction, it was always, ultimately, the voice of one and the same person, the *author,* which was transmitting his "confidences." (50)

It is interesting to note that the publication of Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman,* which has become a prototypical postmodernist text in Britain, roughly coincides with the publication of Barthes' essay. Whether or not Fowles is influenced by Barthes specifically in this text, the novelist's overt and parodic problematization of author(ity) points to a trend in literature and criticism. Barthes

claims that "the removal of the Author . . . "utterly transforms the modern text" because we now no longer read that text as the end or effect of the author, because the author is no longer the *"before"* of a text that is then necessarily *"after"* (Barthes 52). The author has been replaced by the *"scriptor,"* a being coterminous with the text itself:

> [T]he Author . . . has the same relation of antecedence with his work that a father sustains with his child. Quite the contrary, the modern *scriptor* is born *at the same time* as his text; he is not furnished with a being that precedes or exceeds his writing, he is not the subject of which his book would be the predicate; there is no time other than that of the speech-act, and every text is written eternally *here* and *now.* (Barthes 52)

Barthes' notion of the death of the author facilitates two more deaths. Not only are the restrictions of author-centred criticism eliminated, since now there is no longer "a final signified" imposed upon the text (Barthes 53), but certain longstanding assumptions about what writing is are overturned: *"writing* can no longer designate an operation of recording, of observation, of representation, of 'painting' . . . " (Barthes 52). This last, of course, follows from the fact that there is no longer a representing entity outside the text and so the gesture of expression is replaced by a "gesture of inscription" (Barthes 52).

Of course, the *scriptor,* born at the same time as the text, has a sibling who may also be identical: the reader. The reader still exists

in opposition to the author, especially since now the one lives when the other dies: "the birth of the reader must be requited by the death of the Author" (Barthes 55). The death of the author is not so much the death of traditional authority as its transference from one site to another, from the (absent) author to the (present) reader. However, releasing the text from the author has the effect of releasing it from singularity, originality, autonomy:

> We know now that a text consists not of a line of words, releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of the Author-God), but of a multi-dimensional space in which are married and contested several writings, none of which is original: the text is a fabric of quotations, resulting from a thousand sources of culture. (Barthes 52-3)

This, of course, is intertextuality, and constitutes a fundamental challenge to the supreme being the author once was, as well as to the unique and autonomous text, closed off from all other texts and standing alone as the object of inquiry. When we dispense with the author, we are able to "discern the total being of writing: a text consists of multiple writings, proceeding from several cultures and entering into dialogue, into parody, into contestation" (Barthes 54). Barthes' interrogation of the authority and the autonomy of both author and text seems to interrogate the opposition between author and reader in which the text stands as the barrier between the two. Yet, though the author may have been murdered, the position once filled by the author continues to exist, and to exist still in opposition

to the reader-position. In fact, the reader who is born when the author dies is now the privileged half of the opposition and an authority different in kind, but not in degree, from the traditional author:

> [T]here is a site where this multiplicity [of writings] is collected, and this site is not the author, as has hithero been claimed, but the reader: the reader is the very space in which are inscribed, without any of them being lost, all the citations out of which a writing is made; the unity of a text is not in its origin but in its destination. . . . (Barthes 54)

To speak of destinations and origins undermines, to a certain extent, Barthes' argument against the linearity of the text. Of course, Barthes' reader here is "no longer . . . personal: the reader is a man without history, without biography, without psychology [though, apparently, not without gender]" (Barthes 54). But does this reader, then, who is not a person, but a site, manage to enact the very "process of depersonalization" that Eliot claims for the (dead) author? Oh brave new world that has such readers in it! On the other hand, Barthes' attempt in this essay to characterize the text as a site of multiple writings does suggest a way to question the author/reader dichotomy and its inevitable privileging of one of the two terms. For, as Barthes suggests, to question the possibility of the author as divine creator is to question the status of the text itself. In critical formulations in which the text is the autonomous, unified, original creation of the author, the text is both boundary, standing between

author and reader, and bound, cut off from the "world" and other texts. And it is, in fact, this dividing and divided status of the text that postmodernist fiction, particularly historiographic metafiction, problematizes. In subjecting the author/reader opposition to critical scrutiny, historiographic metafiction turns its attention to the entire process of the production and reception of texts and to other oppositional pairs such as originality/influence and text/world that derive from or support the author/reader opposition. Thus historiographic metafiction performs the boundary between author and reader, a boundary that, because it is typically constituted by the text itself, must be interrogated by a focus upon the concept of textual autonomy.

II: Intertextual Play, Intratextual Constructs

> I know there is nothing to be written: all writing
> is rewriting. That old dream: completed books
> will never be transcribed, made redundant by
> their own conception.
> Iain Sinclair *White Chappell, Scarlet
> Tracings*

In both *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton*, the boundary between authors and readers is blurred first and foremost by the positioning of historical authors as fictional characters. By inserting these historical figures into the fictional world and thus performing the boundary between history and fiction, Ackroyd's texts reconstitute author(s) as text. As characters, authors like Wilde, Chatterton, Meredith and Wallis5 are used to foreground Waugh's "creation/description paradox" (92) by drawing attention to the always problematic status of the author. That is, historiographic metafictive novels which include historical authors among their real/fictional characters perform an extended pun on the notion of reading authors. If a reader says "I am reading Wilde" s/he is usually understood to mean that s/he is reading a text or texts "signed" by Wilde. But the reader reading *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* is, in fact, reading *Wilde*, for Wilde here is not a producer of words but constituted by words. Such transposition from author to text is also a way of playing with the traditional concept of the·text as expression of the author. If the reader believes that s/he

can or should gain direct access to the author "behind" a given text, then every reading is necessarily a reading of the author and the best interpretation of a text becomes that in which the author's person and intentions seem most adequately deciphered. The author is then the end of (and to) all interpretation and the text is both a manifestation of the author's self and a barrier between the reader's understanding and the author's self. When the author is absorbed into fiction and becomes text, however, then "author" is revealed to be a construct.

Of course, the most conventional manifestation of author as text is the literary biography, a genre at which, the critics agree, Ackroyd excells.6 Ackroyd's historiographic metafiction makes little distinction between writing biography and writing fiction. In both genres, the text organizes separate and often disparate elements into a unified, coherent, causal narrative pattern. In fact, *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton*, in positing both history and fiction as human constructs and in questioning the status of the historical fact, present biography as a kind of fiction. Yet there is little doubt that a literary biography such as Ackroyd's *Dickens* participates in an industry overtly concerned with marketing genius, with differentiating the artist-figure from the "ordinary" person, and with reading literary works as self-expression. The practice of literary biography is founded upon the final authority of the author and thus only seeks that which is already assumed to exist:

> The unitary consciousness hidden within the literary work
> is a re-creation of the interpreter, but the interpreter
> cannot proceed unless he assumes from the start that a
> unitary consciousness lies within the work.   (Kronick 108)

Thus, even though *Dickens* includes such unconventional passages as a conversation between biographer and (dead) biographee and an introduction of Dickens into one of his "own" novels, these briefly metabiographical elements of the text can exist only within its continuance of the tradition of the author as genius and the works as expression. *Dickens* begins, indeed, with the death of the author: "Charles Dickens was dead" (Ackroyd xi). Yet the text denies the "death of the *Author*" and the literary texts that it quotes are presented as ways of reaching Dickens "the man" in order to understand the works. This is perhaps most obvious when the text deals with the mystery of Dickens' relationship with an actress, Ellen Ternan. Contradicting the prevalent interpretation of their relationship as a discreetly illicit sexual affair, Ackroyd's text posits a "pure," non-sexual relationship between the two. The evidence for this interpretation is, of course, to be found in Dickens' novels:

> The whole parade of his heroines might come to this, then--
> this sexless marriage between brother and sister, or father
> and daughter. . . . [I]t seems almost inconceivable that theirs
> was in any sense a "consumated" affair. . . . [T]he
> relationship between them acted for Dickens as the
> realisation of one of his most enduring fictional fantasies.

That of a sexless marriage with a young, idealised virgin.
(Ackroyd, *Dickens* 915-16)

The text is thus caught in a circular bind in which the works are read back to the author in order that the author might be read forward into the works. This treatment of Dickens' relationship with Ternan is but one example of the convention of aligning the meanings of texts with the particular "facts" of the author's life. Despite its explicit, though brief, attempts to examine from within the process of researching and writing biography, *Dickens* does not escape a tendency "to close writing" (Barthes 53) because it still participates in an interpretive model in which "The life is assumed to be the cause, or generating source, for the works" (Kronick 114). Literary biography, then, seeming to present author as text, actually constructs the author as pre-text, original and originating entity from which writing emanates.

Both *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton*, however, attempt to collapse the author-figure into language and problematize its extra-textual and super-textual status. The Oscar Wilde who writes *The Last Testament* is, like Barthes' *scriptor*, present only in the here and now of writing, a Wilde of words. And the seekers of Thomas Chatterton have access only to text. At St Mary Redcliffe, the disappearance of Chatterton's body--"'no one knows where *he's* gone and buried himself'"-- acts as a warning to the reader(s) seeking the author buried in the works, for the author in dying has vanished from the text even while he has become text:

"'They looked all over, but they never found *him*. . . . He's all written down, *he* is'" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 55). The dead author leaves no corpse within the corpus and the absence of Chatterton belies the texts that claim to read him, for no determinate author (with the associated determinate meaning) lies "behind" Chatterton's works. This is why Charles finds that "each biography described a quite different poet" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 127). And, lest we assume that the fault here lies with the biographer(s) rather than with the nature of biography, a fictional Chatterton states that "tho' I was young Thomas Chatterton to those I met, I was a very Proteus to those who read my works" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 89). The problematization of the extra-textual status of historical figures is exacerbated by the missing author, whose extra-textual existence is called into question not only at the moment of being written but at the moment of writing. Both *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton* inscribe the conventions of autobiography and biography that depend upon the continuance of the expressive theory. Those conventions are then undermined, however, by the questioning of that very theory. Wilde initially affirms the work as singular expression of the artist, declaring that the artist differs from other writers precisely because "his own personality enters and defines his work" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 122). Yet, in response to the interpretive model in which the texts that bear his name, including the journal we are reading, are "taken as an extraordinary form of self-revelation," Wilde recites "the first law of the imagination, that

in his work the artist is someone other than himself" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 131). Chatterton too warns against reading the text as the expression of the author's feelings, attitudes, philosophy. When a statesman dies, Chatterton pens both an elegy and a satire, forms which have their own "attitudes" unconnected with the author, and Chatterton states: "I hold that Man in contempt who cannot write to Measure" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 89). Moreover, this warning against reading authors in and out of texts is given in an autobiographical fragment that is revealed to be a forgery, a fiction, framed by a text that is paradoxically both history and fiction, making Barthes' "Who speaks? . . ." (49) a question that reverberates throughout the text. It is not a question, of course, that demands or allows a definitive answer. Rather, it gestures toward the danger of seeking and valorizing the origin of writing, for, once given a single, extra-textual source, the text's meaning becomes also single, becomes in fact, final.

Is the canon made up of texts or authors? The qualities typically ascribed to "works of art" are often identical to the qualities ascribed to the producers of art, the authors who, within the cultural institutions responsible for dispensing and maintaining texts, have been constructed as the single, unified, autonomous, authoritative sources of the texts which they conceive, nourish and bear in solitude. This is why Barthes' challenge to the notion of the literary text as "a line of words releasing a single, 'theological' meaning" must be concomitant with a challenge to the enthronement of the "Author-God" who reigns over text and reader (52-3). Postmodernist fiction's

explicit play with(in) intertextuality facilitates an interrogation of textual autonomy within a problematic, because paradoxical, inscription and subversion of the conventional boundaries which divide texts from other texts, text from world, and author from reader. If, as historiographic metafiction posits, all that remains of the past are its textual traces, then history is always necessarily intertextual. Whether it quotes, as it must, other (documentary) sources or implicitly refers to and recontextualizes its "tradition," the historical narrative's supposed recreation of the world is clearly dependent on its rereading of the word. Fictional texts, on the other hand, even when they are perceived as representing "reality," have been and continue to be more powerfully constructed as unique and separate objects. Yet recent practice and theory have focused more intently on the practice and function of intertextuality. Of course, it is important to note here that intertextuality is by no means an exclusive property of postmodernist fiction:

> That one cannot find the word "intertextuality" in any but the most recent dictionary of literary terms does not prove that the thing (let us call it the practice) has not been part of literary activity ever since the first book was written. . . . (Gresset 3)

Yet, it seems that the relatively recent acceptance of the word into critical discourse speaks to a related increase in the extent and intensity, not only of recognition and theorization of the practice, but of the literary foregrounding of the practice. Historiographic

metafiction foregrounds its own intertextual relations to interrogate textual, authorial and readerly autonomy and the originality/influence dichotomy that makes the boundary between author and reader both possible and necessary. Umberto Eco, here the narrator of *Postscript to The Name of the Rose*, finds he must rethink his own concept of originality when he reads the medieval chroniclers who will play such a large part in *The Name of the Rose*:

> They would speak for me, and I would be freed from suspicion. Freed from suspicion, but not from the echoes of intertextuality. Thus I rediscovered what writers have always known (and have told us again and again): books always speak of other books, and every story tells a story that has already been told. (19-20)

In historiographic metafiction, it is this very moment of (re)discovery that is played out again and again. In these texts the process of "weaving" texts from fragments of other texts, other discourses, is foregrounded to facilitate an extremely self-conscious examination of the production/reception process. The exhaustingly intertextual nature of historiographic metafictive novels is not presented as the working within the tradition of the individual talent, but as an interrogation of the very concepts of influence, originality, tradition, and canon.

I have obviously stolen from (or alluded to) Eliot's essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," a modernist approach to the "problem" of individuality within the tradition. Eliot's analysis of this

problem begins with his observation that it "is our tendency to insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else" (439-40). Eliot argues that we must "approach a poet without this prejudice" because we will often discover that "not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously" ("Tradition" 440). The most interesting aspect of Eliot's discussion is his definition of tradition:

> It involves, in the first place, the historical sense . . . and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. ("Tradition" 440)

Eliot's insistence on the presence as well as the pastness of the past has definite affinities with the postmodernist approach to precursors. Yet the concept of the tradition as canon, where certain poets achieve immortality in a poetic hall of fame, is one that postmodernist fiction calls into question. Eliot's tradition consists of immortal poets who develop a "main current" to which the poet commits a "continual surrender of himself" ("Tradition" 442-3). The question of the formation of a literary canon is one that is continually addressed in

postmodernist literature, for, in contrast to the view that the canon exists and will always exist independent of the recontextualizations performed by succeeding poets, postmodernist art posits the canon as constructed in the present by particular centralizing forces. Eliot's discussion of the "main current" in literature does address this process of canon-formation:

> [W]hat happens when a new work of art is created is something which happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. . . . [F]or order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new.
>
> ("Tradition" 441)

But it is precisely Eliot's solution to the problem of individuality and tradition--his insistence that "order" must "persist" and that "conformity between the old and the new" is a condition devoutly to be wished--that presents difficulties within the postmodernist literary enterprise. The achievement of that conformity requires knowing the past in the present, but more or less precludes interrogating the very concept of "the existing order" which is, after all, already "complete before the new work arrives" (Eliot, "Tradition" 441). Although "the new (the really new)" work of art modifies the tradition by its inclusion, that tradition consists of "monuments" which "form an ideal order among themselves" (Eliot, "Tradition"

441). Apparently, the tradition allows new additions, when they measure up to the standards set by the "ideal order" of their precursors, but the possibility of new works, or talents, leading to a subtraction from the gallery of great works is not addressed. Nor is the inclusion in the present of past works which have traditionally been excluded from the canon admitted. Tradition, then, begins to appear more ahistorical than historical, for, despite the possibility of a new work's entry into the order of the canon, the process of canonization itself appears to be beyond interrogation.

Eliot makes quite clear the fact that works, and not authors, gain entry into the canon. But he does not entirely escape the notion that it is a certain kind of poet who produces the newly canonized work. Thus it may be great poems, rather then great poets, which ostensibly form the canon. But, since such works of art can only be created by the *poet* who has the proper historical awareness and is, as a poet, "very conscious of the main current," the author is still implicitly valorized (Eliot, "Tradition" 442). Yet it may be that this continued inscription of the author is not entirely at odds with postmodernist intertextuality. For the poet in Eliot's essay who maintains such a strong awareness of the tradition is the poet as reader. The author may not have exactly conceded authority, but the concept of author as reader is one that postmodernist fiction exploits to great effect. In the two historiographic metafictive novels under discussion, it is precisely this author-reader who emerges and makes possible the construction of the reader-author who participates in

the process of making meaning and calls into question not only the opposition of author and reader, but the positioning of either entity outside the web of (inter)textuality itself. However, the foregrounding of intertextuality in historiographic metafiction does not function to simply eradicate conventional constructions of author and reader. The concepts that historiographic metafiction problematizes--concepts such as intention, autonomy and authority-- cannot be radically discarded. Historiographic metafiction's problematization of the categories of author and reader includes an overt awareness that the traditional need to locate the site of meaning--be it in author, reader or text--continues to exist, especially as long as author, reader and text are constructed as separate, autonomous and conflicting entities.

The theoretical examination of intertextuality is less extensive than the field of reader-response criticism with which it has been implicitly or explicitly associated. Critical definitions of intertextuality are varied and often vague. Barthes' description of writing as a "field without origin" or "multi-dimensional space" replaces the author with the *scriptor* who "can only imitate an ever anterior, never original gesture" and who contains "that immense dictionary from which he draws a writing which will be incessant" (52-3). Barthes, then, sees intertextuality as a condition of textuality and does not actually allow for explicit authorial manipulation of the written past. Instead, he situates the multiplicity of writing in the reader, an ideal reader, moreover, who contains all the citations out

of which a writing is made. In contrast to this reader-centred intertextuality, Harold Bloom constructs a model in which "strong" poets confront their precursors while "weak" poets merely imitate them. Bloom's model, then, is one of author-centred intertextuality:

> Poetic Influence is the sense--amazing, agonizing, delighting--of *other poets*, as felt in the depths of the all-but-perfect solipsist, the potentially strong poet. For the poet is condemned to learn his profoundest yearnings through an awareness of *other selves*. The poem is *within* him, yet he experiences the shame and splendour of *being found by* poems--great poems--*outside* him. (26)

Bloom's strong poet is an arresting figure, the ephebe who wrestles with the dead by "misreading" his precursors. Bloom's emphasis is on "*priority*, for the commodity in which poets deal, their authority, their property, turns upon priority" (64). Thus Bloom constructs a theory of intertextuality in which the author, seeking priority because poets "own, they are, what they become first in naming" (54), continually performs willing misprision of the precursor. Within the context of intertextuality, then, Barthes and Bloom represent the two poles of the reader/author opposition, an opposition in which the two sides struggle for interpretive authority. In most critical considerations of intertextuality, it is the reader who emerges victorious from this struggle, largely because, as Jim Collins points out, "The chief issue that differentiates users of the term is the degree of perceptibility of intertextual relations" (44). Perceptibility

is a reader-focused issue and theorists who concentrate solely upon the reader as activator of intertextual relations implicitly or explicitly privilege that half of the author/reader dichotomy. Postmodernist fiction, however, does not exhibit such certainty about the site of meaning, nor, for that matter, the differentiation of writing and reading. The historiographic metafictive novel, concerned first and foremost with its own status as text, foregrounds the entire production/reception process. Cognizant of its own boundary position between reader and author, such fiction continually performs that boundary. In other words, it performs itself. In doing so, it inscribes and subverts the conventions of both the intending author and the inferring reader. Whether either of these entities can claim responsibility for the meaning of the text is an issue that explicitly concerns postmodernist fiction. By overtly alluding to or quoting from specific precursors, generic or thematic, the historiographic metafictive novel attempts to resist its position as boundary between, positing instead a condition of being the boundary *around* the acts of writing and reading.

Both *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton* are overtly concerned with the process(es) of writing and reading. From the titles onward, of course, both novels seem to emphasize the role of the author. Yet in neither novel are the acts of writing and reading presented as opposed, as divorceable from each other. Authors abound, yet characters like Wilde, Chatterton, Wallis, Meredith, Harriet Scrope, Sarah Tilt, Andrew Flint, Stewart Merk, and Charles

Wychwood are, in fact, all equally authors *and* readers. (A more ambiguous figure, perhaps, is Philip Slack, reader definitely, but author ostensibly only in the future tense.) Among this group of reading writers, or writing readers, "influence" is an obssession. Wilde and Chatterton, who lend their names and their problematic extra-textual status to the titles of the novels are, respectively, a plagiarist and a forger. Plagiarism and forgery are legal crimes, distinguished only by the fact that the former is conventionally seen as a crime against authors, while the latter is more usually seen as a crime against readers. Both crimes, however, are presented here as ultimately having the same "victim," the literary canon. That is, both plagiarism and forgery, by linking the wrong authorial signature to the text in question, reveal canonization as an author-centred process while denying the text the "proper" name that would stamp it with the necessary author(ity) and origin(ality) to facilitate its entry into the canon. Historiographic metafiction's foregrounding of its own intertextual relations works

> to put into question the authority of any act of writing by locating the discourses of both history and fiction within an ever-expanding intertextual network that mocks any notion of either single origin or simple causality. (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 129)

The existence of a central and centralizing canon presupposes both simple causality and single origin, both similarities between texts (influence, tradition) and boundaries between texts (autonomy,

originality). It is this very concept of canon as a linear tradition of authorized, unified origins that is under interrogation in both *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton*.

It is with reference to another canon that Wilde's journal begins. Wilde relates the story of St Julien-le-Pauvre, canonized, Wilde claims, because "They pitied him and, in their pity, they made him a saint" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 1). The text here inscribes one of its most explicit generic intertexts, hagiography, which, incidentally, shares with historiographic metafiction a tendency to balance on the border between history and fiction. The story of St Julien told by Wilde is especially significant, since Julien was remembered not for his works, but for his life: "those who had scorned his miracles then worshipped his poverty. . . . His miracles have been forgotten absolutely" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 1). Later, Wilde refers to the the story of the messiah himself. Wilde spends "three days and three nights" in solitary confinement (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 152) and a friend, Wilde says, "betrayed me three times-- I will not draw the obvious conclusions" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 105). Despite Wilde's "dark night of the soul" and his "crucifixion" by his culture, he is denied canonization. Of course, *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* is hardly the first novel to link its protagonist's fortunes with the story of Christ. It is Wilde's coy refusal to "draw the obvious conclusions," however, that draws the reader's attention, because it economically mirrors the text's exploitation of the

intention/inference game of gaps that constitutes the process of interpretation:

> The author of the text may, of course, exert plenty of influence on the reader's imagination--he has the whole panopoly of narrative techniques at his disposal--but no author worth his salt will ever attempt to set the *whole* picture before his reader's eyes.   (Iser 57)

Of course, Iser here invokes the opposition of author and reader even while he constructs the two entitites as co-producers of the text. *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, by using Wilde as its narrator, both inscribes that model and immediately subverts it. The text uses the conventions of autobiography and confessional literature to summon the Barthesian *Author* who limits or closes writing: "I can of course begin this apologia with some confidence. De Quincey has done it, Newman has done it--some people say that even St Augustine has done it" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 5). Yet it simultaneously abuses those conventions by openly fictionalizing Wilde's past, by focusing more upon the act of writing than the events written, and by making Wilde a seeker, rather than a maker, of meaning. When a friend tells him that he has written some "'quite remarkable poems,'" Wilde replies, "'Yes . . . but what do they mean? What do they mean?'" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 4). Throughout his testament, then, Wilde repeatedly undermines his own testimony, asking the questions that readers of autobiography expect him to answer. Moreover, those question are directed at a "you" to whom

Wilde seems to turn for interpretation of both his life and his work. The reader is explicitly addressed several times in the text, usually in the form of a question such as "Do you find this dishonourable?" or "You can understand, can you not . . . ?" or "Did I tell you that I have visited the Exhibition?" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 9, 108, 179). Such reversals of expectation (asking rather than answering) constitute a parodic stance toward the genre of (literary) autobiography for, as Iser points out, "defamiliarization of what the reader thought he recognized is bound to create a tension that will intensify his expectations as well as his distrust of those expectations" (63). Iser, of course, is speaking generally about all literature, but the postmodernist text is both overt and specific in its intertextual play with literary convention, not only setting "the familiar against the unfamiliar" (Iser 62-63), but using the unfamiliar to recontextualize, and thus challenge, the familiar. Wilde's refusal to "draw the obvious conclusions" is both authoritative, since, by so saying, he demands that his readers draw conclusions that he has made *obvious*, and subversive of his own authority, since he openly admits the reader's role in both inferring authorial intention and drawing conclusions, in making connections and producing the text.

Chatterton also inscribes and subverts the conventions of generic intertexts that inscribe the author as pre-text, the primary one being, of course, literary biography. The text presents three conflicting biographies of Thomas Chatterton, thus permanently problematizing the issue of historical truth. It is within the fictional

story of Charles Wychwood, however, that the conventions of literary biography are used and abused to the greatest critical effect. Charles, like Chatterton, has the attraction of morbidity, and the practice of reading the author out of/into the works is played with in the novel's exploitation of the story of the doomed artist. Yet, the story that would normally function to explain the works is problematized in *Chatterton* by the fact that the reader does not see the works, except for one line of poetry: "the bridges of contentment" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 14). The scarcity of texts "signed" by Charles parodically emphasizes the very position of primacy that authorship has traditionally held. Charles is the yet untapped source of his poetry and his death closes, rather than opens, in the Barthesian sense, textual production. This model of authorial primacy implicitly makes reference to another genre in which the author is the pre-text of the work. The künstlerroman, the most famous example of which is probably James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, is another intertext for *Chatterton*, one in which the author's development up to the point of production reinscribes the model of the text as the effect of the author. The story of Charles Wychwood, however, undermines this notion that the author's development as a person determines the meaning of the works. Besides the problem created by a lack of texts to associate with the author, Charles can hardly be said to develop at all. In fact, the only thing that assures us that Charles is a poet is the fact that the narrator and other characters call him a poet and the fact of his illness, which parallels

the romantic doom that hangs over the figure of Chatterton. That is, Charles is only an author because we read him as an author. He is also, of course, a rather hapless literary biographer, making Charles's story a kind of *Portrait of the Reader as a Young Man*, complicitous with and yet subversive of the author-centred models which precede it. In any event, Charles's story functions as a parody of the lives of Wilde, Chatterton and even St Julien-le-Pauvre, those whose lives not only are meant to explain their works, but actually overshadow them. Certainly Wilde's trial and exile and Chatterton's suicide are literary events that have received far more attention than the texts signed by those infamous names. Both *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton* self-consciously situate themselves as dependent upon, but different from, their primary generic intertexts. And because those intertexts are explicit inscriptions of the author-figure who is always constructed both as the pre-text of the work and as the opposite of the reader-figure, the texts that posit such intertexts also posit an interrogation of the very function they perform in critical discourse and canonization.

Both *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton* perform the literary past even while they perform the act of representing the historical past. Scarcely a page of text in either novel is without explicit reference to particular (and usually canonical) precursors. In this way, the textual past is both questioned *and* confirmed. Hutcheon argues for postmodernism's doubled stance toward the past and against critical views that see in

the postmodernist enterprise "a form of ironic rupture with the past":

> [T]here is always a paradox at the heart of that "post": irony does indeed mark the difference from the past, but the intertextual echoing simultaneously works to affirm-- textually and hermeneutically--the connection with the past. (*Poetics* 125)

Rupture with the past, though it may be seen as desirable, would also be naive, and naivety is not a quality to be found in historiographic metafiction (though *performance* of naivety is often apparent). Thus historiographic metafictive novels are both complicitous with and subversive of the canonical texts from which they quote:

> [I]f intertextuality functions within the literary system as an oppositional gesture toward (socially) canonised texts of the 'tradition', it constitutes at the same time, by virtue of its own implicit but necessary address to a readership that will so recognize it, an appeal for canonisation on its own behalf, that is for the (social) acceptance of its own (socially and literarily) oppositional gesture. (Chambers 145)

The fictional Wilde uses his journal to bring the canon, into which he is denied entrance, into his own writing. Both precursors and contemporaries are brought forth, from Shakespeare and Dante to Whitman and Baudelaire, from ancient Greek drama to French Symbolism. The list consists not only of important literary

precursors, but also art theorists like Pater and Ruskin. Wilde's references to his precursors are usually explicitly comparative. He seeks to understand his exclusion from this gallery of greats even while he repeatedly denies that exclusion, claiming "I was the greatest artist of my time" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 170). Wilde's assertion of his own greatness is based on his belief that his manipulation of literary form constitutes his originality:

> 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 it into an independent enquiry, just as I wrote the only modern novel in English. (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 46).

Wilde's grandiose claims for reformulating the predominant genres of his time are extremely defensive in tone and hint at the author's "horror of discovering his own incurable case of continuity" (Bloom 62). Yet throughout Wilde's journal, his claims to originality are deliberately undermined by his ceaseless quotation, often parodic, of other texts. Wilde himself says of one of his plays: "There was poetry in it, but unfortunately none of it was my own. One can forgive Shakespeare anything but one's own bad lines" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 46). Wilde's texts, like *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* itself, are made up of fragments, echoes from other texts. But these are never presented as unconscious echoings of style or theme; rather, Wilde and the journal in which he is inscribed overtly use

other texts, dissecting them into bits and pieces, juxtaposing them with each other, mocking their precedence even while paying homage to them. Wilde gives the reader, in fact, a full account of his past reading and records his indebtedness to other art, other discourses, including such "low" discourses as advertising: "I was astonishing: like Pears Soap, there was no substitute" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 48). Wilde finds that the stories he writes--whether he is writing a parable, a fairy-tale, even a journal--are already written. The particular texts and authors from which Wilde quotes or to which he alludes are less important than the effect that Wilde's list-like recitation of names has on the reader. Wilde, in fact, relates not the story of himself as author, but as reader. And everything he has to say is already said in the universe of textuality which has so many interconnections, so many cross-references, that the possibility of assigning an origin to any given text becomes as impossible as assigning an origin to any given language. At every turn the reader is directed out of the text, but those extra-textual referents are paradoxically other texts, and thus not truly extra-textual at all. We become aware as we read that the production of a text is necessarily also the production of intertextual relations by both author and reader. Thus the desire to stand outside both the text in hand and the textual past is always concomitant with an understanding that this standing outside is an impossibility, a dream of separateness contradicted by the labyrinthian connections of texts themselves.

For more evidence of labyrinthian connections, we need only turn to *Chatterton*, a text that deploys its intertextual references with a citational explicitness usually reserved for more standard examples of literary criticism. Like *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, *Chatterton* is a veritable cornucopia of quotation, although it is less inclined than the former to display its intertexts in lists. *Chatterton* is also more playful with its intertextual relations, more prone to deliberate misquotation and less likely to explicitly link textual fragments with titles or author's names. It makes more use of puns too, as when Charles mistakes the word "RACING" for Racine on a book cover and innocently asks "'Have you been reading *Andromaque* or *Bérénice*?'" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 38) or Harriet describes her weepy eyes with the phrase "'Rheum at the top'" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 179). Such playfulness posits a canon that is easily fragmented and easily mocked, as well as a rather erudite reader. The intertextual references in *Chatterton*, however, though they may be more playful and are often more difficult to identify, are no less effective in both inscribing and questioning the literary canon. They are, in fact, references to a tradition in which the artist is valorized (particularly to that period of literary history dominated by the Romantic movement). From Marlowe and Shakespeare to Wordsworth and Keats, the names of the great dead constitute *Chatterton*'s anxiously playful litany of canonical precursors.

It is from that litany of greats that Thomas Chatterton, like Oscar Wilde, has traditionally been excluded. *Chatterton* makes great

use of the attempts by the Romantics to re-place Chatterton among the literary greats, but also reminds us of the fact that Chatterton still exists at the margin of the canon as a literary criminal. Chatterton's forgeries and Wilde's plagiarisms have been and continue to be reasons for their exclusion from the canon (though Chatterton's position as lower-class upstart from Bristol, like Wilde's as homosexual aesthete from Ireland, must be kept in mind as well). In any event, both Wilde and Chatterton have been "punished" for their literary crimes, but, in the two novels under discussion, these two writers are deemed suspect because of their implicit challenges to the notion that great art consists of original, autonomous expressions of universal truths about humankind. Ackroyd's Wilde maintains that "art, and the ideas of art, are the property of no one" (*Last Testament* 16). And Charles and Philip read a pamphlet concerning Chatterton that states: "'Chatterton knew that original genius consists in forming new and happy combinations, rather than in searching after thoughts and ideas which had never occurred before'" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 58). This is not only the premise upon which a re-evaluation of the merits of Wilde's and Chatterton's writings would be based, but also a subversion of the entire tradition which structures the canon around originality and authenticity, around literary property, around, in other words, author(ity). It is also, of course, the premise upon which *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton* themselves are founded. It demands a rethinking of the process of interpretation that takes into account the

positions of both producer and receiver as they are inscribed within the text. Moreover, if "original genius consists in forming new and happy combinations," then it is precisely the kind of text exemplified by Ackroyd's novels that becomes dominant. That is, these novels focus on authors who both inscribe and subvert the conventions of their precursors, who conflate the acts of writing and reading, who refute both the desirability and the possibility of linear influence and originality and posit instead a shifting space of interconnected discourses. By so doing, both *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton* perform themselves and self-consciously reflect both their own structures and their own problematic, because paradoxical, parodic relationships to the literary past. It is within this postmodernist parody that the boundaries between author and reader, text and text, and text and world are performed and, in performance, trangressed.

Stewart Merk, the character in *Chatterton* who is revealed to have forged his late employer's final paintings, feels no need to create a work of art unique to himself: "For him the pleasure of painting rested entirely in formal execution and not in imaginative exploration, in mimesis rather than invention" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 205). The use of the word "mimesis" is deliberately playful, since mimesis is usually associated with imitation of reality, of the world. Imitation is a practice that looms large throughout both *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton* but it is not imitation of an extra-textual empirical reality that the text's artist-figures perform,

but imitation of other texts, other discourses. Oscar Wilde steals from Shakespeare and rewrites the biblical story of Salome. Stewart Merk copies the late Seymour's style as well as his signature. Harriet Scrope borrows her plots from the novels of Harrison Bentley. Henry Wallis paints a picture of the death of Chatterton that is actually a picture of George Meredith imitating the death of Chatterton. And, of course, Thomas Chatterton's imitation of medieval writing in the Rowley poems seems mild compared to the theory that he has forged the later works of "'Thomas Gray, William Blake, William Cowper and many others'" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 127). Yet this theory has as its evidence a "document" that is itself an imitation of Chatterton by his publisher, Joynson. And that fictional confession is discovered by Charles after he stumbles upon a painting of a middle-aged Chatterton that is, of course, a forgery. Moreover, Charles obtains this painting by exchanging for it a two-volume work entitled *"The Lost Art of Eighteenth-Century Flute Playing* by James Macpherson" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 9). James Macpherson is the name of the Scottish poet who forged the epic works of Ossian. Amid all this copying and deception, Philip Slack's decision to abandon his own attempt at writing a novel because of "the overwhelming difficulty of recognizing his own voice" among "a patchwork of other voices and other styles" seems rather naive (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 70). Indeed, Philip represents the more traditional view that genius, originality and autonomy are necessary conditions for the production of literature: "He understood the phenomenon of *déja vu* but he did not

believe that it could be applied to books: how could he trust his reading, if that were so?" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 69). Well, in fact, perhaps he cannot, for the practice of imitation is elevated to a positive principle of artistic production by its practitioners. Wilde claims that his artistic career has been founded upon the belief "that almost all the methods and conventions of art and life found their highest expression in parody" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 50). And Thomas Chatterton asserts that "the truest Plagiarism is the truest Poetry" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 87). The moral/legal prohibition against non-originality is discarded by the artists in these texts and imitation becomes not a failure to create original art, but a refusal to believe that such creation is possible or even desirable. In the preface to his projected study of Chatterton, Charles claims that the poet "believed that he could explain the entire material and spiritual world in terms of imitation and forgery" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 126). This is itself an imitation, though not a conscious one, since earlier in the novel an artist whose works are showing at the gallery where Vivien Wychwood is employed is described in almost exactly the same words: "'She wanted to explain the entire material and spiritual world in terms of imitation. . . '" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 110). Thus, besides constructing a "tradition" of great imitators to set against the tradition of great originators, Ackroyd's texts perform the feat of imitating themselves and each other. The novels by Harrison Bentley from which Harriet Scrope has "stolen" her plots have titles that are parodically similar to Ackroyd's other novels. One is called *The Last*

Testament (a story about a poet whose acclaimed last works turn out to have been written by his wife); the other is called *Stage Fire*, which echoes not only the title of Ackroyd's *The Great Fire of London*, but also its climactic scene, in which a film set is burned down by a woman who believes herself to be, and thus imitates, the title character of Dickens's *Little Dorrit*. In addition, the reader who is directed to *The Great Fire of London* will find therein a character who points out that "'if you drew a line between all of Hawksmoor's churches, they would form a pentangle'" (Ackroyd, *Great Fire* 16). It is around this observation that Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor* is structured and, to further extend the web of intertextuality, it is an observation that Ackroyd openly attributes to a text by a colleague, Iain Sinclair's *Lud Heat* (Ackroyd, "Acknowledgements," *Hawksmoor*). Sinclair returns the favour of citation in a typically postmodernist way in his novel, *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings*, which not only echoes formally and thematically both *Hawksmoor* and *Chatterton*, but also makes direct reference to the former when a book-dealer hunting bargains is delighted to find "an inscribed copy of Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor* for a fiver" (Sinclair 20).

It would be easy, and it is certainly tempting, to carry on with this tracing of traces. In fact, this is what a text like *Chatterton* invites its reader to do. For, as one of Ackroyd's reviewers points out with some irritation, "virtually every page contains some instance of the fact that we are all, inevitably and continually, borrowing from each other" (Christiansen 22). And, of course, it is not only the texts

written by the novels' fictional characters that exhibit such borrowing, but also the novels themselves. *Chatterton* in particular is "not only . . . about imitation--it is also . . . an imitation of something . . . it is done in a spirit of play and emulation" (Miller 92). Ackroyd's texts play with various discourses, bringing into unresolved confrontation autobiography and fairy tales, biography and detective fiction, romantic poetry and eighteenth-century narrative. The process of identifying and connecting these instances of borrowing and the gaps between them is the process of reading. It is at once a process of pleasure and a process of frustration, for the text is never closed; when boundaries between texts become blurred, reading is never finished: "among the many things that postmodern intertextuality challenges are both closure and single, centralized meaning" (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 127). Not all readers, however, agree that the kind of excessive intertextual play performed by texts like Ackroyd's is a valuable exercise in literary exploration. For Martin Dodsworth, this opening up of the text brings it dangerously close to meaninglessness and he criticizes *Chatterton* because it "totters on the verge of saying nothing in a way that is perilous for Ackroyd's enterprise" (976). And Rupert Christiansen, who praises the text for being "ceaselessly entertaining, dazzlingly clever" is reluctant to assign it any "higher" merits: "Whether it rises to any other level--as a significant work of novelistic art or as a rich statement of its purported themes--is less easy to determine" (22). Since *Chatterton*, like *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, calls into question the very

critical models that have been used to determine which texts are significant works of art, it is hardly surprising that it has been criticized in this manner. The uneasiness as to whether *Chatterton* is "significant" or not is a manifestation of the originality/autonomy requirements for canonization, made more explicit in Christiansen's "ultimate disappointment" with *Chatterton*'s failure to "settle the doubt . . . as to whether Ackroyd is simply a brilliant pasticheur . . . or whether he is in pursuit of something *genuinely distinctive* [emphasis added]" (22). As Karl Miller says, "Those who prefer to believe in an indivisible single self capable of originality will be sceptical of the Ackroyd scepticism" (90). And, of course, those who believe in (or desire) an indivisible single text will be sceptical also, for postmodernist fiction, while maintaining its autonomy, as artifice, from empirical "reality," simultaneously refuses to separate itself from the world of words: "what is both instated and then subverted is the notion of the work of art as a closed, self-sufficient, autonomous object deriving its unity from the formal interrelations of its parts" (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 125). Since its parts are made up of prior discourses, textual fragments, historiographic metafiction points to the impossibility of its own containment. The text can no longer be discussed as a fixed object bound on one side by the author and on the other by the reader.

In fact, historiographic metafiction seeks to recontextualize the author and the reader as discursive positions, as textual functions rather than extra-textual combatants for interpretive authority. In

order to do this, however, such fiction first inscribes the figures of both the explaining author with all its mythical power and the passive reader, whose only act is to seek the author and the final meaning that author provides. Postmodernist fiction examines the constructs of author and reader as intently as does literary theory. In fact, postmodernist fiction, constituting, like all metafiction, its own first critical comment, takes into account, as all criticism must, the theories that precede it. Ackroyd's fiction in particular takes Barthes' "The Death of the Author" and Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* as intertexts. Bloom's text is directly quoted in *Chatterton*, when Charles soothes Harriet Scrope's fears of being branded a plagiarist by assuring her that everyone steals: "'It's called the anxiety of influence'" (Ackroyd 100). This is a laughable simplification of Bloom's theory of poetic misprision, since Bloom's ephebe does much more than steal in the search for priority. Wilde's descriptions of his poetic progression are more explicitly Bloomian: "I found myself by borrowing another's voice" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 37-8). There is also an echo of Bloom's priority of naming in Wilde's "The problem, as always in modern thought, is one of nomenclature," which, although it also refers to Wilde's refusal of the label of "diseased" in reference to his homosexuality, can simultaneously be read in relation to Wilde's own struggles with the dead whose voices he has borrowed (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 12). In both novels, a "someone other" haunts the poet. Charles wanders through London with his "invisible companion," who is at once the

ghost of Thomas Chatterton/George Meredith, the presence of precursive poetry, and a manifestation of Charles's brain tumor; when he speaks, Charles realises "that these were not his words but those of someone other" (Ackroyd, *Chatteron* 78). Perhaps, as Wilde claims, "the true artist is always looking for that hooded figure who is 'the opposite of himself'" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 92). That hooded figure, besides being the romantic other side of the poetic self, is also the poetic precursor. The strong poet, however, eventually may reach the point where "the new poem's achievement makes it seem to us, not as though the precursor were writing it, but as though the later poet himself had written the precursor's characteristic work" (Bloom 16). Or, as Wilde maintains, "Imitation changes, not the impersonator, but the impersonated" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 55). Barthes' "The Death of the Author" is also a text with which the novels play. First and foremost, what are these texts "about" if not the death(s) of the author(s)? From the citing of the illustrious dead to the obsession with the deaths of Wilde, Chatterton and Charles Wychwood, it seems that authorship is, indeed, a terminal illness. The literal death of the author always signals the production of lives of the author, for when the author dies the text of the life is closed and can be written. It is interesting that it is precisely those poets who fit the romantic image of the doomed and alienated sufferer--Wilde, Chatterton, and Charles Wychwood-- whose deaths haunt the texts. For that image is one in which the author/reader opposition (and the traditional valorization of the first

term) has its strongest inscription. Yet these three authors, particularly Wilde and Chatterton, are characterized as unoriginal, as those who combine, not create, discourses. They are all diseased, infected with both physical illness and the web of intertextuality that challenges their very centrality.

Hutcheon argues that the concept of intertextuality proves useful precisely because it fills the gap left by this (critical) death of the author:

> [E]ven though we may no longer be able to talk comfortably about authors (and sources and influences), we still need a critical language in which to discuss those ironic allusions, those re-contextualized quotations, those double-edged parodies both of genre and of specific works. . . . [I]ntertextuality replaces the challenged author-text relationship with one between reader and text, one that situates the locus of meaning within the history of discourse itself. (*Poetics* 126)

It is true that the concept of intertextuality has provided literary theory with a way to shift the locus of meaning away from the omnipotence of authorship and thus from the tyranny of the single meaning (tyrannous precisely because it is ultimately inaccessible). Confirmation of the fact that users of the term "intertextuality" generally presuppose the death of the author can be found in Robert Alter's reluctance to employ the term. Alter prefers the term (and

the concept) allusion precisely because it is a critical term in which authorial intention (and meaning) remains inscribed:

> [T]his more abstract term [intertextuality] finesses the crucial question of authorial intention: you can allude to a poem or a play but you can't "intertextual" it. Whereas allusion implies a writer's active purposeful use of antecedent texts, intertextuality is something that can be talked about when two or more texts are set side by side, and in recent critical practice, such juxtaposition has often been the willful or whimsical act of the critic, without regard to authorial intention. (*The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age* 112)

Alter is correct, of course, in perceiving the challenge to author(ity) in most theories of intertextuality. However, the notion that allusion as a critical term is directly opposed to intertextuality is an oversimplification of both concepts. It is true that allusion can be made to act as a verb for the author-subject while intertextuality generally cannot. It is also clear that explicit references to other texts demands a different kind of analysis than, for example, the textual interconnections intrinsic to the fact of writing within genre. Is not Alter's distinction, however, based on that old opposition between author and reader? Allusion is something the author does, while intertextuality is something the reader perceives or, even worse, imposes. Curiously, then, the title of Alter's book suggests a valorization of the reader that he does not actually perform, for Alter

here seems to fear the proliferation of meaning that is a result of the reader's (willful or whimsical) perceptions of relations between texts that the author may not have intended to make. But surely both the explicit allusions made by the author and the implicit intertextual relations perceived by the reader can both be part of the meaning(s) of any given text. After all, just as the author may be unaware of intertextual relations perceived by the reader, so may the reader be unaware of allusions intended by the author. Intertextuality is a condition not of writing *or* reading, but of both, and neither the author nor the reader alone can finally determine the meaning of the text. It is for this reason that meaning continues to proliferate. Each time a text is interpreted, author and reader are recreated within the text itself. The text, then, is not an inert object, but a continually shifting space in which author as reader and reader as author perform.

Yet it is precisely those seemingly intended intertextual relations--allusion, quotation, parody--that Ackroyd's novels foreground. The intertextual play exemplified by the historiographic metafictive novel is part of a thematization of the entire production/reception process and one of the strategies employed in order to foreground that process is an inscription of both authorial intention and readerly inference. When the narrator of *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* reveals the fact that his journal is a fiction, the frame around the fictional world created by that journal is broken. At this point, the reader exchanges a knowing glance, not

with the character, Wilde, but with the author. The references in *Chatterton* to other texts by Ackroyd have the same frame-breaking effect. This is fiction, the reader and author agree, this is artifice. In historiographic metafiction, with its "over-plotting and over-determined self-reference" (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 133), that knowing glance is an important textual strategy, one that causes problems for the concept of the death of the author. For patterns imply patterners and the more overtly self-conscious the pattern, the more present the patterner:

> Whenever some element of ontological structure or some ontological boundary is foregrounded, the author's role and activity is inevitably foregrounded along with it. Who else could be held responsible for the practice of foregrounding, who else could be credited with the *intention to foreground* if not her or him? (McHale 198-9)

It is a good question, and one that implies that, contrary to Barthes' assertions about contemporary writing, the author is presiding over the text more visibly than ever before. But it is important to note the fact that these collaborative glances and nods between author and reader are part of the text and not, in fact, extrinsic to it. "Ackroyd" here is emphatically *not* the actual author, the extra-textual Ackroyd who is alive and well and living in London; nor is the reader here the actual reader, the extra-textual Pitman with a life outside the text. On the contrary, these are textual entities, "essential constitutive factors of the text," created in the text by the conventions of

language (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 81). This is not to say that these textual positions are not affected by the particular historical situations of the actual people writing and reading. Different authors produce different texts and different readers produce different interpretations. That much is obvious. But both the acts of writing and reading as they are structurally and thematically foregrounded in postmodernist fiction are acts of authority that, rather than opposing each other, produce and receive each other.

III: Product(ion) and Reception in the Marketplace

> But you cannot build out of Books, unless it be
> Castles in the Air. . . .
>   Peter Ackroyd *Hawksmoor*

Like the real-world figures that populate the pages of historiographic metafiction, authors and readers too have their extra-textual (and oppositional) status problematized in historiographic metafiction. That problematization is further evinced in these texts' self-conscious focus on what can be called the pragmatics of textual production and reception within extra-textual cultural institutions that regulate and disseminate texts and interpretive strategies. "[W]riting is all a Lottery," says the fictional Chatterton, "and Taste very changeable" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 89). Ackroyd's novels are specifically concerned with the nature of this "Lottery" and the regulation of taste. Thus their performance of the boundary between author and reader (as well as that between history and fiction) is both complemented and complicated by an examination of the cultural institutions that market and canonize texts. Wilde's assertion that "art, and the ideas of art, are the property of no one," then, must be seen in a new light, for texts are commodities, bought, sold and owned in a very real way. Thus historiographic metafiction's emphasis on the production/reception *process* cannot be examined without some consideration of the text as cultural *product*.

The individual writer who, like Charles Wychwood, has "no intention of yielding to the conventional anxieties about recognition" must be very rare indeed (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 15). Ackroyd's Wilde, on the other hand, is just as defensive about his commercial success as Charles is about his lack of it: "I had a reputation as an artist both in Europe and in America, and in England my work was always a commercial success--I am not ashamed of that" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 170). In fact, most of the author-figures in these texts are portrayed in the decidedly unromantic pursuit of acclaim and material success. Harriet Scrope, on meeting Philip, immediately asks of the librarian, "'Tell me, how many of my books do you actually have? In round numbers, I mean'" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 148). And Andrew Flint is more preoccupied with his own financial success than with the biography he is presently writing: "'It's amazing how much money you can make out of writing. Do you want to know how much I got for my novel?'" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 77). When Charles, to whom Flint is speaking, refuses to guess, Flint insists on displaying his expensive computer at least. The end of this scene has Flint gazing at the screen of this computer, which "seemed to have sobered Flint a little" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 77). As, indeed, it should. Alone in front of that screen, Flint must continue to produce his wares and, despite *Chatterton*'s undermining of the originality/autonomy model of the literary canon, the fact of any text's production and survival in the marketplace is one to which the authors in both *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton*

pay anxious attention. This is even more clear in the sections of *Chatterton* that deal with Chatterton himself. For Chatterton is poor and writes not only for posterity, but for money. Adding a new dimension to Wordsworth's "marvellous boy," the text approaches Chatterton as a craftsperson with particular marketing skills and financial priorities:

> [H]e remembers that, last night in the coffee-house, he heard of the death of Alderman Lee, who was set fair to become one of his patrons. Well, what of it? One patron dead, but more to fill his place. He takes up the paper and lead-pencil and writes:

> Lost by Alderman Lee's death in promised work .£1.11.6
>
> Will gain in elegies for Lee. £2. 2.0
>
> Will gain in satires against Lee £3. 3.0
>
> Thus £5. 5.0
>
> So am glad he is dead by £3.13.6

(Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 192)

The immediate effect of this treatment of Chatterton is a subversion of the romantic ideal of the poet, who is typically characterized as a loftier soul, unable or unwilling to wallow in the vulgar mire of everyday material reality (in which, of course, the reader exists). The reality of Chatterton's particular cultural milieu, in which the poet is well aware of the practical importance of patronage and in which the fortunes of artists and statespersons go hand in hand, is emphasized in ironic contrast to the romantic construction of Chatterton as the

doomed genius, so sensitive that he was unable to cope with the "real" world. Ackroyd's *The Great Fire of London* plays with the idea that the alliance between an artist's ideas and commercial reality is a fact of literary production. As one of its central characters, Spenser Spender, scrambles all over London trying to find funding for the production of a film adaptation of *Little Dorrit*, he finds that, with the interventional assistance provided by the Film Finance Board, the restrictions placed on his project are those of the marketplace:

> Spenser Spender left the Film Finance Board in a state of profound depression. . . . He had gone in as an inventor, as a free agent, and had come out as a servant--or, rather, as an employee. *Little Dorrit* now encompassed the Board, the British Theatre . . . it had become anonymous and threatening. . . . but he knew also that this transition was an inevitable one. *Little Dorrit* was no longer his fantasy.
>
> (Ackroyd, *Great Fire* 54)

Spenser faces in the twentieth century, then, much the same situation that Chatterton faces in the eighteenth; he must consider the nature of the audience if his works are going to be successful or even to reach that audience at all. Of course, the traditional complaint of the artist is that "the public never understands anything" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 170). But what, or who, is this public? And, more importantly, what control does the "public" assert over the production and reception (the survival) of particular texts? It is, in fact, at this level, where the text is a commodity in the

marketplace, that the author/reader opposition seems most resistant to challenge. It has already been said that the authors in both *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton* are also explicitly readers. Of course, this does not simply mean that authors read when they are not busy writing. Authors read as they write, in order to write; in each word inscribed on the page, the author as reader is also inscribed for "'Where there is no tradition, art simply becomes primitive'" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 110). That readers are also authors (and authorities), however, and participate in the process of producing texts as patterns of meaning, is a fact of which Ackroyd's texts are acutely conscious, manifested in "allegories of textual production and reception within the narrative plot" (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 84).

One of the strategies employed by these texts in their interrogation of the author/reader dichotomy is a problematization of the concepts of singularity and plurality as they are conventionally applied to the oppositional terms of author and reader. The author is conventionally conceived as singular, named, and, therefore, bound to the text. The reader, on the other hand, is an unnamed mass, plural and promiscuous with texts. One of the results of reader-response criticism has been a valorization of the plurality of meaning that accompanies a plurality of readerly perspectives. The reader(s) of any given text can recognize the author as a brand name, can (and does) make inferences based on the data unified by that name:

> [A]n author's name is not simply an element in a discourse
> (capable of being either subject or object, of being replaced
> by a pronoun and the like); it performs a certain role with
> regard to narrative discourse, assuring a classificatory
> function. Such a name permits one to group together a
> certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them
> from and contrast them to others. In addition, it establishes
> a relationship among the texts.   (Foucault 147)

The author's name, then, performs the function of classifying texts for informed consumption. Indeed, the construction of the author as single, unifying entity is necessary not only to the canonization of texts, but also to the dissemination of texts. Foucault, summarizing Saint Jerome's criteria for identification of authorship within the Christian canon, asserts that the traditional author is "defined as a constant level of value . . . as a field of conceptual or theoretical coherence . . . as a stylistic unity . . . as a historical figure at the crossroads of a certain number of events" (151). Within the context of the text as product, however, the author is not merely *defined* as this unifying force, but is *marketed* as such. Included in the marketing of the author is a mystification of the writing process that emphasizes the special nature of the artist rather than the production of the text (from other texts): "The process of production is called creation, a mystical and mysterious occurrence conceived rather as a state of mind than as work" (Belsey 127). The reader, on the other hand, ostensibly remains anonymous and multiple. Authors

cannot name their readers, nor can they restrict them to historical periods, economic classes, national locations or theoretical perspectives. Yet both *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton* attempt to unsettle (though they cannot eliminate) such distinctions between authors and readers. First and foremost, the brand name of the author, its recognizability, is problematized by the texts' play with intertextual imitation and the literary crimes of plagiarism and forgery, crimes that Thomas Mallon sees as equivalent to bodily harm: "To see the writer's words kidnapped, to find them imprisoned, like changelings, on someone else's equally permanent page, is to become vicariously absorbed by violation" (xiv)7. Such play interrogates the stability of the canon, but, more significantly, it also proves problematic for the reader who seeks to define the author "Peter Ackroyd" as a stylistic unity, as the title of Miller's article on Ackroyd, "Long Live Pastiche," clearly shows. Moreover, these texts attempt to reverse not only the singularity of the author, but also the anonymous plurality of the reader. Readers are named--Oscar Wilde, Thomas Chatterton, Charles Wychwood and so on--and made subject to the very biographical/historical particularities that have traditionally been used to fix authors. The historiographic metafictive novel, which inscribes within itself both the act of writing and the act of reading/interpreting, ultimately addresses the issue of the control of interpretation that is central to the production/reception process.

Among the many names and titles that Ackroyd's Wilde scatters throughout his journal, references to the community of reviewers appear frequently. Wilde repeatedly refers to journalistic publications like "*Nineteenth Century, Petit Journal, Pall Mall Gazette, Woman's Age, St James Gazette*" and so on (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 45, 59, 80, 96, 131). Such references to a specific reading community, the review media that, in Wilde's time and also in Ackroyd's, maintains a significant amount of control over the reception of texts, serves to remind the reader that texts do not come to the individual reader unmediated by institutional interpretive models. D. J. Taylor, himself, like Ackroyd, both a novelist and a reviewer, sees in the reviewing industry a "middlebrow conspiracy":

> Consequently, to talk of encouraging 'an aesthetically invigorating environment' and 'a serious critical measure' is to posit a situation which in the context of popular journalism and medium-level cultural debate--the sort of debate which the average fiction reader pays attention to-- can never exist. (75)

Leaving aside for the moment the criteria which would define the "average fiction reader," Taylor's point, that cultural media are more than neutral describers of cultural artifacts, are, in fact, repositories and enforcers of a "scale of values . . . by which to differentiate, classify and influence" (74), is well-made. Interpretive communities construct that which is to be interpreted. And, in fact, the fictional Wilde sees himself as not only an occasional victim of "public

opinion" as it is manifested in reviews, but as created by it, "doomed to lead the life which others imagined for me" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 55). *Chatterton* too inscribes certain reading communities in the rejection of both Chatterton and Charles Wychwood by the publishing industry and, more obviously, in the litany of canon as it is created and maintained by academia. That Charles as a reader is (in)formed by the interpretive models institutionalized by academia is clear. His apartment "looked as if it were being occupied by a student" and its furnishings "had all come from Charles's lodgings at university" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 13). Charles's discussions of literature, and particularly of the assumptions underlying literary realism, are extensions of "the sort of theoretical discussion he had once had at university; in fact, his understanding of such matters had not significantly advanced since that time" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 40). Ackroyd is very adept at characterizing that university scene; the academic construction of Dickens as a canonical author, for example, is thematized in *The Great Fire of London* and implicitly compared with a non-academic reading of Dickens by a girl who is not only insane, but uneducated. The interpretive community of which she is a part has little concern with issues such as realism or even literary greatness. A reader's "imprisonment" within the boundaries of a certain interpretive model is not, however, a personal fault; on the contrary, it is a condition that all readers share:

> [M]eanings are the property neither of fixed and stable
> texts nor of free and independent readers but of

> interpretive communities that are responsible both for the
> shape of a reader's activities and for the texts those
> activities produce. (Fish, "How to Recognize a Poem When
> You See One" 322)

Thus the romantic construction of Chatterton as martyr is necessarily a construction that can only take place within an interpretive milieu in which authors are said to exist as special individuals. And a discussion like the one between Wallis and Meredith regarding the relationship between reality and art has meaning only within an interpretive community that constructs text and reality as separate categories and ascribes significance to any of the relationships those two categories might have. For that matter, both *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton* inscribe within themselves the interpretive community to which such learned debaters as Charles Wychwood belong. Charles, like any reader, cannot interpret literature outside the theoretical frameworks within which he has been trained, frameworks which include debates upon the worth of literature, and the institutional acceptance of literature as a coherent field of study and as an object requiring interpretation.

A text is also, of course, an object that asks to be purchased, to be made physical and thus accessible, and the historiographic metafictive novel is typically paradoxical in its attitude toward the text as commodity or as property. On the one hand, the postmodernist problematization of the status of the document and of the boundaries between texts (boundaries partly made possible by

the physicality of texts), as well as its subversion of the original and originating voice that marks and sanctifies the text, leads to a typical postmodernist interrogation of the text (and the author) as fetishized object. On the other hand, the historiographic metafictive novel depends on the continuing production of documents and boundaries for this very act of interrogation. More significantly, perhaps, the postmodern text, like every text, is itself a commodity that must be published and disseminated, that must, in other words, reach readers in order to be co-produced. Ackroyd's texts in particular are overtly aware of their status as commodity and aware that such status presupposes a value system. Thus both *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton* focus on the institutions responsible for disseminating and assessing texts as cultural (and sometimes perishable) goods.

Charles Wychwood is a consumer of books, not just figuratively, but literally:

> He looked around with satisfaction at the other people in the carriage, then he tore a small piece from a page of *Great Expectations*, rolled it into a ball and popped it into his mouth. This was an old habit of his: he could not resist eating books. (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 48-9)

It is a humorous passage, but one that also carries within it some anxiety, an anxiety later made more immediate when Charles alarms Philip by exclaiming over the papers that appear to be Chatterton's signed confession: "'I love them so much I could swallow them

whole!'" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 93). Philip's alarm abates when he discovers that Charles holds only copies, but, given the text's deliberate confusion of originality and imitation, it is understandable that Philip cannot tell the difference. Moreover, Philip, as a librarian, understands better than anyone the possibility of a text's disappearance. There are so very many texts and so little room in which to store them and so few resources with which to obtain them. One of Philip's tasks at the library is "to read all the announcements of new books and to order those which seemed most suitable" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 72). It is not an enviable task, but the question as to how Philip manages to make such choices is left unanswered. The point is that choices must be made and this produces anxiety from either an authorial or a readerly perspective. Andrew Flint certainly experiences anxiety and, unlike Chatterton and Charles, scoffs at the idea of the permanence of art:

> 'There are no standards to encourage permanence--only novelty, and the whole endless cycle of new objects. And books are simply objects--consumer items picked up and laid aside. . . . Yes, they survive. But don't you realise that it's just another kind of death? Five hundred books of poetry published in any one year--they're piled up in the library stacks, or they gather dust on the shelves. . . . They are preserved, yes, but only as reminders of everything that remains unread, will never be read. A monument to

> human ambition and human indifference.' (Ackroyd,
> *Chatterton* 150)

Charles protests vehemently against Flint's pessimistic view and argues instead for the permanent value of art as "a dream of wholeness, and of beauty" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 152). But many texts do not seem to contain (or to stimulate) that dream and fail to survive in the marketplace. Flint's vision of "all that remains unread" is a very real one for anyone even slightly acquainted with the publishing industry or, for that matter, the institution that is charged with the duty of democratically representing all constituents, be they author or readers: the library. It is not surprising that Philip's frightening vision of a textual infinity takes place in the library stacks, where the disappearance of texts from the reader's grasp becomes a reality:

> He was in 'the stacks', the basement of the library in which he worked, where all the forgotten or neglected volumes were deposited. Some of these had been piled in corners, where they leaned precariously against the damp stone walls of the basement; but some were scattered across the floor, and it occurred to him that they had been dragged from the shelves by vermin before being eaten. Within this place there lingered the musty, invasive odour of decay. . . .
> (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 68)

Again, texts are in danger of being consumed and it is difficult not to read this as a pun on the activities of consumers of books-as-

commodities. For the consumption of books is here equated with death, rather than purchase and survival. Indeed, if texts are physically vulnerable to environmental factors, they are no less conceptually vulnerable to the changing needs of the marketplace. The postmodernist text is acutely aware of this fact and thus, while calling into question the marketing of books as the marketing of authors, they cannot dispense with the very real problem of their own survival in that author-centred world. Thus the postmodernist novel seeks that audience that will not consume it, but continually re-produce it.

A text will move through different interpretive communities and thus become different texts. Postmodernist texts are overtly cognizant of that fact, and are typically paradoxical in their doubled attitude toward their own status within the realm of interpretation. On the one hand, Ackroyd's texts delight in the endless possibilities for meaning that arise from the formation of new interpretive communities. The literary crimes and mutual marginality of Chatterton and Wilde, for example, provide productive sites for an interpretive community explicitly concerned with reassessing the process of canonization and textual boundaries. Yet these texts, while they may have recontextualized notions of originality that allow them to exorcize a Bloomian "anxiety of influence," are still shadowed with an anxiety of interpretation. Barthes' "who speaks" is accompanied in historiographic metafiction by another question: who answers? For interpretive communities do not only provide new

interpretations; they continually reassess the value of the text, as well as its meaning. Historiographic metafiction, by overtly foregrounding the text as process, paradoxically attempts to maintain its privilege as product. Inscribed within such texts is a direct address to the audience most likely to view the text as an ongoing process requiring endless re-production, academia. Ackroyd's texts perform the very re-evaluation of the canon most commonly performed within the industry of academic criticism. Indeed, metafiction, by containing within itself its own first critical comment, its own theoretical discussions of the production, reception, and value of literary discourse, raises a baton specifically in order to pass it on to its inscribed interpretive community.

Does this make the postmodernist novel, and Ackroyd's texts in particular, élitist? In a sense, yes. The literary canon as it is presented in both *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton* is primarily an academic one, aimed at what Frank Kermode calls *"We* who *know"* (158). Hutcheon claims that the tendency of the postmodernist novel to use and abuse both "high" and "low" discourses makes postmodernism "both academic and popular, élitist and accessible" (*Poetics* 44). Yet, while it is true that postmodernism plays with various discourses, it is not true that this necessarily makes it accessible, or even interesting, to all readers. *Chatterton*, for example, is, in effect, a literary mystery and uses (and abuses) the detective novel as a model for the search for the author-criminal, Chatterton. But the novel recontextualizes that model within its

extremely academic perspective and the effect of the parodic reworking of the literary canon in Ackroyd's texts is quite plainly dependent on the reader's institutional competence:

> [T]he claims of schools and universities to offer literary training cannot be lightly dismissed. . . . for it is, alas, only too clear that knowledge of a language and a certain experience of the world do not suffice to make someone a perceptive and competent reader. That achievement requires acquaintance with a range of literature and in many cases some form of guidance. (Culler 108-9)

In Ackroyd's texts, the issue of literary competence is perhaps made most clear by the way in which those texts inscribe within themselves an awareness of figures who do not (and can never) have such competence, who are marginalized in an entirely different way and to a greater extent than figures like Wilde and Chatterton. Wilde's present companion, Maurice, enjoys listening to the writer, but has never heard of Wilde before meeting him. Indeed, most of Wilde's companions "believe literature to consist entirely of stories from the *Petit Journal*" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 59), and, cut off from the society in which he once moved, Wilde moves among the poor who have never read his books, who are "truly the outcasts of the world" (Ackroyd, *Last Testament* 98). Those outcasts occupy much of the narratives of both *The Great Fire of London* and *Hawksmoor* as well, where they provoke guilt, fear, outrage and even amusement in their more fortunate counterparts. In *Chatterton*,

Philip's experience in the basement stacks, where all the unread books decay, is followed by a description of some of the library's "patrons," people who are completely out of place among the other characters in the novel. A muttering vagrant and a moaning old woman inhabit the library, though they do not read anything, and these figures culminate in the figure of the red-haired man whose appearance echoes Chatterton but who does not, or cannot, read:

> Close to Philip's desk was a long table, at one end of which a young man with bright red hair always sat; he had his elbows on the table (there were holes in the sleeves of his jacket, where the fabric had been worn away) and, as usual, he was staring down at an unopened book. Philip had once asked him if there was anything in particular he wanted to read and he had replied, very quietly, 'Oh no, nothing really'. And still he came every day. (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 72)

There is a suggestion that he comes for warmth and not for books. In any event, he adds to "the keener scent of unwashed bodies" that creates "'the steam of the social soup'" in the library (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 72). These are not representatives of the community that will buy, or even borrow, a novel like *Chatterton*. In any case, the élitism inherent in the very existence of the supposedly democratic library puts Hutcheon's description of the postmodernist text as "accessible" in an ironic new light. There are people for whom no text is accessible or even important and they contrast starkly with

the other characters in the novel and, most likely, with the reader(s) of the novel. The library which preserves specific texts for specific people (like the postmodernist text, which preserves, even while it subverts, the literary canon) is revealed to be accessible and significant only to the figures at one end of a very wide social spectrum. For Philip, there is horror in this image and he is acutely aware of the irony of having to decide which books to buy for the library in the presence of those who will never read them:

> Philip recalled a poem in which the world was compared to a vast hospital, but what if it were a vast public library, in which the people were unable to read the books? And yet those now around him seemed resigned to this; they were quiet, helpless, and poor. It might have been better if they had risen up in a fury and destroyed the library but, no, they sat here and left at closing time. (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 72)

The reference to Baudelaire in the first sentence of this passage is supremely ironic; the figures huddled in the library are not likely to "get" the allusion and thus it only proves the aptness of Philip's view of the world. The world is, indeed, a vast library, and, by including within its covers characters who cannot read all the books, Ackroyd's novel emphasizes even more strongly the readers for whom he writes. The postmodernist text may take the canon to task, may problematize genre, may question the supremacy of the author and the passivity of the reader, but it can only do this within the context

of a reading community that can afford not only the books, but the competence necessary to co-produce them. Both *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton* are commodities and, though they transgress the boundary between author and reader in an attempt to interrogate the hierarchy inherent in that opposition, they are also aware that that very hierarchy only has its meaning within a world which has other hierarchies which are much more imperative and much more difficult and, perhaps, more important to interrogate. Our knowledge of reality may be textual, but there are some for whom knowledge of texts is not a reality. Thus Ackroyd's texts interrogate not only the opposition between author and reader, but the opposition between the world of texts, the vast library, and the figures who are forever outside that world, even when they are written into it.

Conclusion

When Charles Wychwood sits down to write what he believes will be a ground-breaking study of Thomas Chatterton, he does so with a pen that has just run out of ink, "so eager to continue with his thoughts that he merely pressed deeper into the paper in order to print the outlines of his words" (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 127). Interrupted by a telephone call, Charles returns to find that his words and thoughts are gone:

> The words which he had inscribed deeply into the page had already faded, leaving only a few hollows and striations behind; all of his thoughts about Chatterton had disappeared.   (Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 128)

An extended pun on writing "under erasure," this scene is a reminder that writing is always a tentative gesture. Charles's thoughts are not here presented as the source of his words, but as constructed by them. Without those words the thoughts cease to exist. This is true of the fictional Wilde's journal as well (a journal never written), a text that constructs what it sets out to reflect. That is, not only do texts and documents disappear physically with alarming ease, but words themselves are always only outlines, and faded ones at that, of the (absent) realities they mean to represent. All texts are made up of "hollows and striations."

Indeed, the frequent disappearances of texts and documents in both *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton* are related to

the postmodernist text's deliberate problematizations of what is perhaps the most conventional opposition of all, that between what is text and what is outside the text. Whether the postmodernist novel is confronting the binary opposition between history and fiction or that between author and reader, it is ultimately this opposition between artifice and reality, between word and world, that concerns such fiction. When historiographic metafiction performs the boundary between history and fiction, it not only questions the truth/lies dichotomy and the differences between two ways of representing reality, but also the possibility of any human construct capturing and conveying extra-textual reality, past or present. Indeed, the possibility that the reality we know is actually itself a complicated tissue of textual constructs is used to subvert the model in which reality is reflected in or by texts, in which the world precedes the word. And the postmodernist interrogation of the boundary between author and reader functions to problematize the extra-textual status of both entities, since, in the postmodernist novel, the extra-textual struggle for interpretive authority becomes an interdependent production and reception of meaning constructed in/by the text itself. Historiographic metafictive novels like *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton* perform their own intertextual relations as part of a continual pointing outside the text that is simultaneously, and paradoxically, a pointing toward textuality. Yet historiographic metafiction maintains a contradictory attitude toward "reality," for if its metafictional aspects make it

narcissistic or solipsistic, its historiographical aspects indicate a desire to somehow (re)engage with the world. In Ackroyd's texts, that desire is reflected in a (textual) inscription of both those real-world figures who exist(ed) in the historical past and those figures (extra-textual in two senses) who exist along the shadowy margins of cultural production and reception of texts. Historiographic metafiction challenges the notion that knowledge of reality can take place outside human constructs, but it does not deny that reality exists, nor, however we know it, that it matters.

In Britain, questions about the status of extra-textual reality (and, it follows, realism) are often the focus of discussions of postmodernism. In the words of David Lodge, "History may be, in a philosophical sense, a fiction, but it does not feel like that when we miss a train or somebody starts a war" ("The Novelist at the Crossroads" 33). It is statements like this one, perhaps, that cause many critics to situate postmodernism entirely outside the borders of Britain, constructing British literature as a staid and stagnant pool of endless attempts to return to the realist novel in a world that no longer finds the tenets of realism acceptable. And it is not only Britain's supposed refusal to accept postmodernist challenges to the realist novel, but its supposed refusal (or failure) to recognize modernist challenges and strategies that seems to court accusations of parochialism. Lodge, writing two decades ago, expresses fear for the survival of the English novel in a literary climate so committed to realism:

> There is a good deal of evidence that the English literary
> mind is peculiarly committed to realism, and resistant to
> non-realistic literary modes to an extent that might be
> described as prejudice. It is something of a commonplace of
> recent literary history, for instance, that the 'modern'
> experimental novel . . . which threatened to break up the
> stable synthesis of the realistic novel, was repudiated by
> two subsequent generations of English novelists. And,
> reviewing the history of the English novel in the twentieth
> century it is difficult to avoid associating the restoration of
> traditional literary realism with a perceptible decline in
> artistic achievement.   ("Novelist" 7-8)

The argument goes something like this: classic realism reached its
pinnacle in nineteenth-century Britain; modernism came along, was
tried and found wanting, and faded into insignificance sometime
around the second world war; subsequent British writers and critics
proceeded to either denounce modernism altogether and call for a
return to realism, or, more rarely, to re-enact modernism as if it had
never happened in the first place. In both cases, British writers and
critics are accused of operating with blinders raised to developments
in more "enlightened" parts of the world. Alan Wilde, in his study of
the relationship between modernism and postmodernism,
exemplifies this view, stating that, in the English-speaking world,

> to put the matter baldly, postmodernism is essentially an
> American affair; and one would be hard put . . . to discover

> relevant examples in England today, where writers, when
> they are not . . . calling for a return to a native tradition or
> working in traditional forms of realism, seem intent on
> continuing to work out the lessons of modernism. (12)

My intention here is not to mock Wilde's argument. Though I think it is an oversimplification of the state of affairs in both Britain and America (especially in its opposition of those two nations, an opposition which has itself gone unquestioned too long), it is not without evidence. Certainly the realist tradition looms larger in Britain than do the challenges and achievements of modernism. (This does not mean, however, that modernism is not a part of the British sense of the past--certainly in Ackroyd's texts the modernist concepts of the autonomous text and the separation of art from history are both used and abused.) Yet it seems to me that to deny the existence of British postmodernism because British texts place more emphasis on the realist tradition than the modernist one is overly limiting to definitions of postmodernism itself.

Wilde's assertion of the lack of postmodernist texts in Britain and Lodge's fear for the very survival of the novel are based on the view that the British literary scene neither desires nor accepts divergence from the norm. The British reviewing community, for example, is often suspicious of so-called "innovative" fiction: "a truculent incomprehension of anything that might be described as artistically new or different . . . is a persistent feature of the English literary scene" (Taylor 89). If rejection of norms was a integral

component of postmodernism, Wilde's argument might have more impact. But, in fact, the positioning of postmodernism as the new, as a radical break with the past that signals a rejection of inferior precursors is extremely problematic. Postmodernist texts do not separate themselves from their precursors, much less surpass them in some imagined race for the literary form that best examines the "human condition." Postmodernism is by definition simultaneously complicitous with and subversive of the literary tradition, if only because the awareness of the longevity and power of the tradition is necessary to any questioning of it. That awareness is, if anything, more acute, and thus more problematic, in Britain than elsewhere, perhaps because of the fact that for Britain, unlike, say, America or Canada, the literary canon continues to be primarily a native one that must be examined from within. And, while I would argue that modernism *is* included in the British construction of a literary tradition, it is also true that it is realism that dominates the sense of the past in the English literary scene. Of course, realist texts continue to be produced and received, not just in Britain, but everywhere, and not just in literature, but in other media as well. But twenty years after the publication of Lodge's essay, the "restoration of traditional literary realism" becomes a more complex issue. For the reproduction of literary realism is no more part of the British literary scene than is the *reassessment* of literary realism. And that reassessment is undertaken by means of postmodernist strategies, by an inscription *and* subversion, complicity*and* interrogation.

There is, then, a postmodernism in Britain, a body of fiction that is "unprecedentedly self-aware, self-conscious, and knowing" (Todd 118). A list of British writers whose texts could usefully be considered within the context of postmodernism includes Muriel Spark, Doris Lessing, Iris Murdoch, B.S. Johnson, John Fowles, John Berger, Christine Brooke-Rose, Malcolm Bradbury, Flann O'Brien, Fay Weldon, Maggie Gee, Bruce Chatwin, Eva Figes, Ian McEwan, Angela Carter, Alisdair Gray, Martin Amis, Jeanette Winterson, Julian Barnes, Iain Sinclar, Peter Ackroyd and such "imported voices" as Salman Rushdie, Peter Carey, and Timothy Mo.8 Even David Lodge himself, who asserts his belief in literary realism--"I like realistic novels, and I tend to write realistic fiction myself" ("Novelist" 32)-- is associated with the postmodernist strategy of placing subversive debates about the assumptions of realism within paradoxically "realistic" (con)texts. The texts produced by the above novelists are by no means a cohesive group, interchangeably alike. The balance between insciption and subversion of conventions shifts and strategies differ, as do the particular aspects of past conventions that are placed under interrogation. But I do not hesitate to speak of a postmodernist literature in Britain, although, unlike Todd, I refrain from grouping its manifestations together as "a canon of Britsh postmodernist fiction" ("Confrontation" 115), since the concept of canon seems one that proves most problematic for the British postmodernist text.

It is for this reason that I have chosen Ackroyd's texts as examples of British postmodernism. Their obsession with the power and absence of the past, with the oppositions between history and fiction and between author and reader, and with the problematic relationship between reality and artifice is carried out within an overtly intertextual arena, within an inscription and subversion of the British literary canon. Texts like *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton* undermine the possibility of truth by first inscribing it, subvert conventions by instating them, challenge oppositions by performing them, question the power of the literary past by acknowledging the impossibility of breaking with it. They are contradictory, paradoxical, self-conscious, uncertain, relentlessly interrogative (and aggressively British) postmodernist novels.

Notes

1 Belsey distinguishes between the text that is "*declarative,* imparting knowledge to a reader whose position is thereby stabilized, through a privileged discourse which is to varying degrees invisible," and the text that is "*interrogative* " and "literally invites the reader to produce answers to the questions it implicitly or explicitly raises" (91). Belsey argues that the "classic realist" novel is an example of the declarative text and I believe that the historiographic metafictive novel is clearly an example of the interrogative text, which "refuses a single point of view, however complex and comprehensive, but brings points of view into unresolved collision or contradiction" (Belsey 92).

2 Although Wilde is here a fictional character, his use of "he" when speaking of the artist must be addressed. I have encountered the employment of male pronouns in reference to artists, readers, critics, or human beings in general throughout my research. Although I have attempted to excise such limiting pronouns from my own quotations of critical material, they have sometimes been difficult, if not impossible, to avoid without losing grammatical sense. Since the repeated use of "[sic]" is clumsy, such pronouns do appear, without explicit comment, within cited material in the thesis, but they appear under authorial (and, I hope, readerly) protest.

3 I have followed here the lead of T. S. Dorsch, whose translation I employ, in referring to the anonymous author of *On the*

Sublime as "Longinus" in the interests of ease of identification and avoidance of awkward substitutions.

4 I refer the reader interested in the development and divergences of reader-response criticism to the two introductions to two anthologies of such criticism: Jane P. Tompkins' "An Introduction to Reader-Response Criticism" in *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism.* Ed. Jane P. Tompkins. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980. ix-xxvi. and Susan R. Suleiman's "Introduction: Varieties of Audience-Oriented Criticism" in *The Reader in the Text* : *Essays on Audience and Interpretation.* Ed. Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980. 3-45. Both anthologies also include annotated bibliographies.

5 Without being ignorant of the differences between the literary and the visual arts, I will, for the purposes of this thesis, refer to Henry Wallis as an "author" and to his productions as "texts."

6 For a sampling of critical reviews of Ackroyd's biographies see Brogan, Carey, Gill, Litz, Neill and Ricks.

7 It is interesting to note that Ackroyd's *Chatterton* is listed in Mallon's bibliography of books about or related to the issue of plagiarism, although Mallon does not quote from the novel within his text.

8 I do not mean to suggest here that writers such as Rushdie, Carey and Mo can be unproblematically engulfed by a British tradition which they explicitly challenge, nor that the British commonwealth is seamlessly part of the British experience. But the

works of these authors has had a powerful effect on Britain's postmodernist literature and on its interrogations of the master-narratives of its colonial and literary past.

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