

# On First Looking Into Ackroyd's *Chatterton*: Framing Pictures

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Looking is always framed by past experiences and learned ideas about how and what to see. 'Just looking' is never innocent, nor is it ever final.

(Marguerite Helmers)

Many critics agree that Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton* evokes scenes of recognizable reality in a postmodern novel. They primarily explore the intertextuality and self-referentiality of Ackroyd's "most metafictional historiographic metafiction" (Onega 1998, 34), for example the construction of characters as doubles and their lives as imitations of art, explicit discussions of art and life, the relationship between truth and fiction, or originality and forgery.<sup>1</sup> They argue convincingly that Ackroyd undermines notions of humanism, of a Wordsworthian kind of expressive Romanticism, of the author, originality, authenticity, truth, representation, and history (e.g. Nünning 1999, 29-38; Crespo, 318). Onega (1999) writes that the novel presents "a huge transhistorical palimpsest" (70), in which stories reflect and undercut each other, and "the reader is forced to impose his or her own arbitrary pattern of meanings on a text that constantly aspires to the category of 'pure writing', the pure *écriture* of Roland Barthes" (62).

Linda Hutcheon emphasises that the form and content of the "postmodern novel [...] de-naturalize[s] representation in both visual and verbal media in such a way as to illustrate well the deconstructive potential of parody" (91). The pictures represented in the text are usually considered as catalysts or illustrations of metafictional debates, not as aesthetic objects of their own that merit closer attention: "The wanton changing of artistic reality here obviously results in the change or manipulation of received aesthetic notions" (Albers, 78). Finney argues that the second part of the novel "is an extended meditation on the authenticity of artistic forgery, using Wallis's faked death scene of Chatterton as its principal extended (possibly over-extended) metaphor [...] The only subject allowed to surface in the novel is a textual construct" (256, 259). The fake portrait of Chatterton, a palimpsest, serves as an analogy of the novel as a whole (Onega 1999, 72; Crespo, 316; García-Caro, 164; Albers, 139-40).

Reading for (inter-)textuality and metafiction in a narrative approach induces many critics to subordinate the visual in the novel, and not to look closely at the imaginary pictures in the text, the visibility of writing, the historical works of art as intermedial frames of the novel, and the *book* as an intermedial product. Not looking at the original

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1 See, for instance, Finney, 259; Maack, 319; Nünning 1994, 29, Nünning 1999, 29-31; Delgado, 347-50; Zwierlein, 502 or Gibson/Wolfreys, 67-9 and 123-34).

pictures through the lens of the ‘metapictorial’ novel, many critics miss Ackroyd’s discursive *re-framing* of the two pictures of Chatterton.

There is only one publication on the novel that extensively reflects on the theory of visual and verbal representation with reference to Ackroyd’s *Chatterton*, which will be the starting point of my discussion of (1) analytic concepts, (2) the paratext, including the book cover, (3) the fake portrait of Chatterton in relationship to handwriting and (4) Wallis’s painting of Chatterton and its fictionalized creation.

### Concepts of Intermediality, the Gaze and Framing

Stefanie Albers’s recent, well-researched monograph on *Verbal Visuality* (2011) surveys important positions in scholarship on the relationship between word and image and delivers the only sustained analysis to date of the novel from a distinctly intermedial rather than a narrative point of view. She singles out ekphrasis and aesthetic discourse as major forms of intermediality in Ackroyd’s novel and goes beyond previous criticism in discussing relevant economic, social and individual functions of art in the novel. Following Wagner and Müller-Muth, Albers correctly stresses that “it is not simply the beholding of an aesthetic object but the entailed discursive action that reinforces this understanding” in specific cultural discourses and contexts (8). Albers does not ignore the supplementation of the lack of the verbal through the visual and vice versa that Müller-Muth points out (Albers, 24; Müller-Muth, 113; cp. Wagner, 13). However, Albers’s concept of intermedial *fusion in the text* subordinates visual to verbal representation. In spite of numerous valid arguments *about* aesthetics in the novel, she literally ‘loses sight’ of the imaginary and historical pictures as aesthetic phenomena.

With respect to the interrelationship of looking at pictures *and* manuscripts in the novel, it is helpful to employ a dialectical concept of intermediality as well as concepts of the gaze and of framing. Norman Bryson, W.J.T. Mitchell and Peter Wagner (13) question both the opposition and the compatibility of visual and verbal representation. Mitchell maintains that the visual contains textuality, and texts need to be visible (1994, 95). The combination of word and image, he suggests, is a “dialectical trope”, captured in the phrase “vs./as”: “word vs. image” denotes the tension, difference and opposition between these terms; “word as image” designates their tendency to unite, dissolve, or change places” (Mitchell 1996, 53). Far from reducing this tension to a formalist game, Mitchell calls for placing the issue in social and cultural contexts (Mitchell 1996, 55; cf. Dallow, 98). Ackroyd’s self-reflexive new-eighteenth-century novel highlights the opacity of representation, stressing that the legibility of painting and the visibility of writing need to be scrutinized in order to avoid the trap of referential fallacy when dealing with historical sources and the problem of authenticity.

Ackroyd’s juxtaposition of realist and self-referential paintings parallels Bryson’s distinction between the *gaze* as a certain “prolonged, contemplative” but disengaged view that promises access to presence, and “the *glance* [...], which] does not seek to

bracket out the process of viewing" (94). Ackroyd exposes naïve referential viewing as delusion. He draws attention to the materiality of the signifier and to framing.

Framing is of literal and metaphorical significance in the production and reception of pictures. Ackroyd explores a large range of framing devices, the construction of a motif and perspective, the literal framing of a canvas, the composition and the interpretation of a picture in relationship to cultural frames, generic conventions and social functions. In social discourse, "culturally determined codes of recognition" provide frames that make the denotations of (mimetic) pictures legible (Bryson, 61). Bryson juxtaposes the rather exact denotative meaning based on iconology and the fuzzy connotative codes "distributed through the social formation in a diffuse, amorphous manner", for example codes of faces and bodies (68). Connotative codes, which are "both *non-explicit* and *polysemic*", vary with the context and can break the interpretive frames (Bryson, 71).

Ackroyd plays with all of the framing devices mentioned above in a typically postmodern way: "Contemporary metafiction, in particular, foregrounds 'framing' as a problem, examining frame procedures in the construction of the real world and of novels", writes Patricia Waugh (28). The inclusion of visions and pictures, she continues, can confuse ontological levels of reality and fiction, and "the alternation of frame and frame-break (or the construction of an illusion through the imperceptibility of the frame and the shattering of illusion through the constant exposure of the frame) provides the essential deconstructive method of metafiction" (31). Ackroyd's play with frames on the level of the discourse and the story undermines both the referential paradigm of realist art, fiction and historiography as well as the Romantic idea of originality beyond cultural conventions. He problematizes framing not only in its pervasive intertextual structure based on artistic, literary and theoretical traditions but in several beginnings and endings.<sup>2</sup> I shall discuss how the book creates and questions the sense of an origin by multiplying beginnings in the sense of (1) the iconotext of the cover, (2) Chatterton's biography, especially his early death as the inception of a myth, (3) the juxtaposition of four narrative fragments that start and end *in medias res*, and (4) the exchange of a text for a mysterious picture, which motivates the search for its reference and significance.

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2 Maack argues that the novel has no beginning and no ending (335), which is not specific enough since Ackroyd's strategy is to mark beginnings and endings only to undermine them, granting the necessity of these framing devices but exposing them as rather arbitrary constructions.

## The Paratext: Judging a Book by its Cover

*Paratextuality* indicates the presence of material around the primary text, but in which the text is embedded: the framing acts of title, subtitle, preface, illustration, book covers, dust jackets, and the setting of the book that is dependent on external conditions, which the readers cannot ignore. (Helmers and Hill, 14)

The self-referential cover of Ackroyd's book in the Penguin fiction series of the 1990s invites and questions framing (Fig. 1). The cover by Paula Silcox seems to have been designed in response to the novel, and it frames the novel in turn. The cover visualizes Ackroyd's concept of "language as gestural phrase" rather than reference, content as variety of style, and literature as a "display of fiction within arbitrariness" (Ackroyd 1976, 133-35). The most conventional codes are

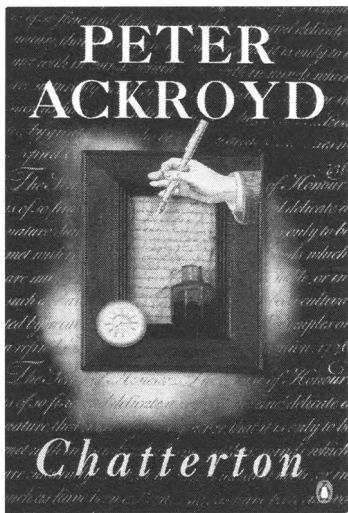


Fig. 1: Paula Silcox, Cover of the 1993 Penguin Edition of Ackroyd's *Chatterton*.

the author's name at the top of the front cover in white capital letters and the title of the book at the bottom in cream-coloured italics and smaller font-size, marking the difference between the authors as writer and topic of the book. The cover does not show a portrait of the historical Chatterton but the reproduction of a mixed-media object. Different forms of writing within and around a photographed frame confuse the pictorial convention of figure and ground, hierarchy and perspective. The 'ground' inverts the regular black on white of writing and seems to reveal cream-coloured, meticulous hand-writing on a black surface, which, at close inspection, looks too regular and rather like print simulating hand-writing. The writing is not contained by the material frame of the cover format, which simply cuts off the words in an arbitrary fashion rather than framing meaningful units. The fragmented lines are not even parts of one coherent text but repetitions of smaller fragments, which are partly illegible: "is of so fine and delicate a", "nature, that it is only to be", "met with in minds which", "are naturally...noble, or", "by great", "The Sense of Honour", "such as have been cultivated." These words suggest eighteenth-century topics and style but are incoherent. What is more, the beauty of the slanted letters and the fact that the words are only partly legible draw our attention to the necessary condition of visibility and different historical writing styles. Thus, the names of the author as writer and the author as subject of the book are visually and historically opposed to each other (on the top and at the bottom of the page) but share the background of simulated and fragmentary hand-writing. The illustration defies the clear-cut separation of the visual and the verbal, the spatial and the temporal. The design denies referential illusion via a portrait and

instead directs the reader's attention to the textuality of history *and* the visible form of writing rather than the content, conjuring up an eighteenth-century atmosphere and a sense of mystery or rather mystification.

In the centre of the cover, connecting – and separating – the names of the author and the subject of the book, we see the photograph of a fairly broad, simple, dark brown, old-fashioned wooden picture frame holding not a picture but something that looks like the creased sheet of an old manuscript. The text looks coherent, but the words are so small they are hardly legible. This picture frame – similar to the cover itself – seems to render an arbitrary part of a manuscript, but here, neither the writer nor the subject nor the addressee, the place or date of the manuscript are visible, which defies the conventions of framing documents. The fragments “fine Gentleman”, “Elevation of Spirits” and “joined a clear Understanding” suggest eighteenth-century phrases but hardly allow for tracing the words back to a particular author. The framing of a few incomplete lines from a manuscript raises the question as to what type of text it is, who framed it and for what purpose. Like the writing outside the picture frame on the cover, the fragment cannot be traced back to its original, authentic author.

In the lower right angle of the frame, an older glass vessel with a broken neck has been placed, half filled with a black substance, possibly ink, alluding to the historicity of the manuscript. Opposed to a photographed manuscript and bottle within the frame, two drawings are placed on opposite corners of the frame, suggesting cutouts from black-and-white ink etchings. One drawing shows a hand with a fountain pen hovering above the letter at the top right, as if pointing at the second drawing of a watch on the lower left angle of the frame, pointing out the difference between the time of writing and the time written about. It is also strange that the hand is not holding the pen as one does when writing, but that some fingers are taken off the pen as if in a moment of reflection on what or how to write. In addition, the hand is not photographed as the manuscript is, but it is foregrounded as a drawing. In other words, the visual gap between the hand and the manuscript raises the question of which hand wrote which script, which is a central motif in the novel.

Around the figure of the wooden frame on the ground of the cover, we can see an irregular, cream-coloured stain, a ghostly emanation or halo, fading out towards the edges as if the frame was leaking or radiating or hiding something beneath it that seeps out. Perhaps, the stain parodies the ‘aura’ of the ‘original autograph’, hinted at and diminished in its reproduction on the cover. The stain questions the clear boundary of the frame as a container, and, complementing the incomprehensible selection of what is framed, highlights the arbitrary nature of framing (and writing?).

This highly intermedial and fragmentary iconotext in Wagner's sense ironically establishes clear material frames on the cover and with the cover, but these frames do not ‘contain’ coherent content. The iconotext combines different forms of representation and media, setting off the significant absence of a portrait or a pictorial scene in the frame. The desire for a window on the past or transparent mimesis is frustrated. The referential default mode is both addressed (name, frame) and suspended. As a re-

sult, the process of representation is foregrounded, the intermedial network more important than the individual text, unframing more important than framing, possibilities of seeing more important than recognition.

## Beginnings

The novel is introduced by a biographical sketch in italics, which conventionally begins with Chatterton's birth in Bristol and ends with his death in London, considered a suicide from despair about his poverty and failed expectations. Ackroyd's choice of words and phrases conjure up the myth of the Romantic icon, a "genius", whose "*imagination was formed at once*" upon reading medieval manuscripts, and who "*create[d] an authentic medieval style from a unique conflation of his reading and his own invention*" (Chatterton, 1).<sup>3</sup> The sketch quotes "*the image of the 'marvellous boy'*" from Wordsworth, as "*fixed for posterity in the painting, Chatterton, by Henry Wallis*" (C, 1), for which Meredith served as a model. Thus, the fictions of poetry and painting shape the image of this individual more so than historical research, and Ackroyd's novel picks up the title of Wallis's painting, weaving a narrative around the *image* rather than the historical writer. The embellishing biography ignores the accusations of forgery mentioned on the back of the cover, opening up the problem of different versions of the truth, which the novel will unfold and multiply. Thus, the sketch does not merely serve as the "official historical record" and norm, as Hutcheon claims (92), but as an introduction to the problem of reconstructing the past. Ackroyd mentions in passing the only contemporary portrait of Chatterton, making its absence in the frame on the cover even more conspicuous. Ackroyd stresses the textuality of history, avoiding any claim to mimetic representation. However, in explicitly mentioning these two paintings he establishes a divided tradition of pictorial representation as a visual framework of the novel: the forgotten 'mimetic' portrait of the 'living' poet, and the famous highly artificial (re)construction of his death. If you look at reproductions of these pictures, they have next to nothing in common except for the name. Ironically, a reproduction of the 'original' portrait is instrumental in wrongly identifying a faked second contemporary portrait of Chatterton in mid-age in the novel. Before the first part of the novel, Ackroyd inserts four passages, introducing scenes from three different historical eras (see Onega 1999, 60) and stressing repetition with a difference rather than exact reproduction as a strategy. These passages are linked by motifs and echoes to the cover, the previous biographical sketch, Wallis's painting, to each other, and to the subsequent stories, defamiliarizing linear reading and challenging the reader to form intermedial connections. Rather than briefly addressing these fragments as prefigurations of the novel, as many critics do, I would analyze their functions of re-framing the biography and Wallis's painting of Chatterton.

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3 Future references to Ackroyd's novel will be marked by C and the page number in parentheses.

The first text shows the poor Chatterton searching for an audience, muttering words about his "departure" and a "wanderer", who will look for him but will not find him (C, 2). Chatterton seems to quote from James Macpherson's *Ossian*. In the biographical sketch, Ackroyd stresses the influence of authentic medieval manuscripts, here, that of Macpherson's forged medievalism, reading Chatterton through the lens of forgery. The word "departure", framed by the biography and Wallis's painting, may point towards Chatterton's death, or it may simply suggest disappearance. The novel plays with the option of Chatterton's departure as his disappearance from public view after having faked his own death. According to Finney, Ackroyd deconstructs the Romantic legend of Chatterton: "All that survive from the Romantics' elevation of the alienated gifted artist reliant on his innate imagination are the texts, and these are themselves forgeries" (250). However, Finney neglects the visual dimension of the myth. The wanderer in the novel, the contemporary Poet Charles Wychwood, whose "eyes will search" (C, 2) for Chatterton, will not find him. Chatterton neither appears in his own pseudo-medieval text nor in the painterly imagination of his death. The re-framing of utterances and paintings creates ambiguity and new possibilities of meaning, the very opposite of the univocal reference, mimetic representation or historical truth insinuated by the previous biographical sketch.

The second, ekphrastic fragment questions the effect of realist representation of Wallis's painting *Chatterton*. The narrative about how the painting is made in time undermines its effect of transparency and its spatial stasis. Ackroyd's text recalls the painting, but destroys the reader's or spectator's contemplative gaze on the "eternal moment of disclosed presence" (Bryson, 94). The painting entitled *Chatterton* is, in fact, about Chatterton's early death as the young poet's claim to fame. The discussion between the painter and his model about how to simulate death makes us aware of the fact that in the painting itself, the poet seems to be rather asleep than dead. Thus, Ackroyd destroys any notion of *vraisemblance* before the reader even gets to read the main text of the novel and suggests that Wallis, who even shows Meredith how to hold his head, fails to render a credible version of death against his explicit intention. Meredith's statement that he cannot bear "the representation of death" (C, 2) is highly ironic since that is, apart from his poems, what he is remembered for in the novel. Ackroyd criticizes naïve viewers who prefer the beautiful illusion of the artifice to reality in spite of expecting that paintings are like windows on reality. Last but not least, Meredith plays with the terms "model poet" (C, 2), the exemplary poet or the one who serves as a model in a painting and pretends to be someone else, and asks whether he will be immortalized in the painting as Meredith or Chatterton (C, 3). This alternative view of the subject of the painting dismantles transparency and frames the painting as a dialectical and ambiguous metapicture, where you see the duck and the rabbit alternatingly (cf. Mitchell 1994, 45-56). Here, Chatterton is the rabbit Wallis simply conjured up half a century after the death of the poet.

The third passage prefigures the subplot about a modern plagiarist, the novelist Harriet Scrope, suggesting a clandestine literary tradition of forgery from the eighteenth to the twentieth century.

The fourth passage shows Charles Wychwood in pain and despair, experiencing a brief vision of Thomas Chatterton, who simply says “And so you are sick” (C, 3) before he disappears. This scene complements the postmodern decline of the author mentioned above as Ackroyd debunks the Romantic concept of an epiphanic vision. Here, Charles does not see something new but someone from a picture, who simply tells him what he knows anyway, which reveals the vision as a self-referential delusion. In a parallel to Bryson’s distinction between the gaze as an illusion of presence and the temporary glance in painting (94), the delusive vision of Chatterton “is gazing” at Charles and as soon as Charles glances up, becoming aware of himself in the here and now, Chatterton has disappeared (C, 4). From an intratextual perspective, Chatterton’s “leaves” (C, 2) are scattered as the leaves from the trees in the fall in this passage. When they are “swept away” (C, 3), the textuality of history is erased and seems to become transparent in the vision, which is a delusion. From an ekphrastic and intermedial point of view, the text makes us “see” two characters (however vaguely), but the “real” character is just as much a product of the reader’s imagination as the vision or illusion in the story and comments on Wallis’s painting as a delusion parallel to Wychwood’s. Passages such as these provide a comprehensive intratextual and intermedial framework for reading the novel and a profound and sceptical reflection on visual and verbal representation in Romanticism and realism from a postmodern point of view.

### **The Power of Painting and Delusion, or: Chatterton’s Life**

The three parts of the novel are introduced by quotes from Chatterton’s texts, setting a mood of misery, despair, and death. These quotes are attributed to Chatterton’s fictional medieval characters, which in turn guide our understanding of Ackroyd’s fictional biography. Ackroyd’s metafictional biography inverts the Romantic aesthetics of expression and the tragic version of Chatterton’s death from despair, opposing an autobiographical, Romantic reading of Chatterton’s works. The five chapters of the first part are interrupted by fragments in italics, which cannot be clearly attributed to anyone but seem to be freely floating snippets until they are drawn together at the end of these chapters. According to Onega, the “apparently meaningless fragments may be said to reproduce the whole novel *in abyme*” and reveal “connectedness-within-fragmentation” (1999, 61). However, I would beg to differ from Onega’s interpretation of the sequence because for her, the fragments summarize “Charles’s process of maturation as a visionary poet” (ibid.). Against Onega’s interpretation, which endorses the Romantic myth of the genius, the self-reflexive and intermedial framing of the novel requires an ironic reading. Charles can hardly separate perception and vision (an important Wordsworthian distinction, and he neglects writing poetry in search of bio-



graphical truth, cf. Albers, 99). As it turns out, Charles experiences this vision of Chatterton in his eager search for the referential truth of a fake portrait. His migraine initially leads to a "loss of peripheral vision in his left eye" (C, 16), which symbolizes his limited grasp of phenomena. Later, his left eye is no longer controllable, and strong pain seriously interferes with his perception of reality and leads to a nightmarish, almost psychotic hallucination (C, 45-6) shortly before Chatterton appears to him. Omega realizes that Charles's brain tumour is responsible for his hallucination and split self (1999, 65), but I would argue that a referential orientation and a medical condition are not conducive to epiphany in the Romantic sense. Charles is a dreamer whose perceptions and visions are framed by works of art. He seems to have a Wordsworthian vision when he suddenly "found himself gazing through a ground-floor window into a bare room" (C, 13) and sees a child with a bird perched on its shoulder, who stares back at him. This visionary quality is deflated because it seems as if he merely recollects one of Joseph Seymour's paintings of a child who "stared out from the canvas" (C, 35). When he looks out of the window of his flat, "he had a vision of the street as some unreal thing without depth or volume: If it was Victorian, it was only as a diorama, a roll of canvas which unwound and gave the sensation of a moving world" (C, 17). Thus, Ackroyd's strategy is to evoke an illusion of a perceived or visionary reality through writing, only to undermine it subsequently by re-framing the information, exposing its reality-effect in an intermedial game.

A closer look at the fake portrait and its resistance to interpretation discloses the power of painting and of delusion. In a rather quaint antique shop, Charles "saw the picture. He had the faintest and briefest sensation of being looked at, so he turned his head to one side – and caught the eyes of a middle-aged man who was watching him. For a moment he stood gazing back in astonishment" (C, 11). In a way, Charles becomes the prey of the picture's presence. He only looks at the content of the picture, not its form. The other's eyes are addressing the spectator, requiring his recognition. However, recognition becomes the crucial problem since the picture has no title and the visual phenomena resist disambiguation. Ackroyd does not give us an ekphrastic description of the aesthetic object as such but details the "durational temporality of the viewing subject" (Bryson, 94). The man seems to be at ease,

but then Charles noticed how tightly his left hand gripped some pages of manuscript placed upon his lap, and how indecisively his right hand seemed to hover above a small table where four quarto volumes were piled on top of each other. Perhaps he was about to put out the candle, flickering beside the books and throwing an uncertain light across the right side of his face. (C, 11)

Zwierlein points out that the hands are a leitmotif that symbolizes the loss of control over the text (510), but she does not analyze the motif in detail or beyond the portrait. The image of the hand gripping pages of the manuscript endorses authorship and makes us think that these hands wrote these pages, whereas the hand hovering above the books rather than on the books raises the question of their author. In this picture, interpreting the meaning of authorship is as difficult as decoding the social code of

historical fashion or even the colour of the eyes, which ironically reflects on the deceptive maxim of “seeing is believing”: the costume

might have seemed too Byronic, too young, for a man who had clearly entered middle age. [...] the eyes [...] seemed to be of different colours, and they gave this unknown man (for there was no legend on the canvas) an expression of sardonic and even unsettling power. And there was something familiar about his face. (C, 11)

The paradoxical portrait of the unknown but somehow familiar man interpellates and resists the viewer at the same time. The canvas is “clumsily tacked upon a light wooden frame” (C, 11), but not framed for an exhibition, and thus Charles is dependent upon the rather sparse information provided by the dealers, who date the picture to the early nineteenth century (C, 12). Charles swaps his volumes of the forger James McPherson for the painting, which later turns out to be forged. He tries to discover the secret of the picture to frame it by discourse in order to authenticate it. Charles’s refusal to have the picture framed by an art dealer may derive from his fear that this would confirm his son’s intuition that it is a fake and would interfere with his own desire to frame the picture as a truth, sensation, and motif of rewriting literary history.

Discourse negotiates the opposite meanings and functions of the picture as fraud or original. Charles’s son Edward spontaneously and repeatedly calls the picture a fake without having any clue of its provenance – maybe meant to provoke his enthusiastic father. However, the fact that Edward assumes the picture to be a fake does not impair its realistic effect upon him. He thinks that the figure in the portrait “is alive in the picture” (C, 129), and his father ambiguously comments: “Seeing is believing” (C, 129). The son’s uninformed guess is just as unreliable as the dealer’s designation of the picture as a lord’s portrait. Charles’s friend, the librarian Philip Slack, whom Charles humorously addresses as “Holmes” (C, 18), actually comes up with a ‘certainty’ that will turn out to be a red herring. His misidentification of the picture as a portrait of Chatterton is based on its resemblance to the reproduction of Chatterton’s portrait as a young man. However, the reader who takes part in the quest and looks at the portrait will find out that the only definite facial features Charles notices, “a peculiar snub nose and a large mouth” (C, 11), bear hardly any resemblance to the portrait of the young poet. Thus, the friends make two mistakes: firstly, of not being able or willing to look closely for a correspondence between media; and secondly, of mistaking a copy of a ‘mimetic copy’ as a basis for historical evidence. Ackroyd plays with the conventions that portraits usually represent one version of a living individual, whereas biographies offer multiple versions of the dead (Benton, 94). Here, the reader’s comparison of the fictional portrait in colour with the black-and-white original questions the similarity between the two pictures and the mimetic quality of the real portrait since it draws attention to its conventional abstraction.

The slight visual ‘evidence’ is complemented by reading and conjecture. The librarian takes verbal evidence, the titles of the books in the picture, as proof of his conjecture since portraits conventionally associate figures and metonymic objects, but he ignores the visual ambiguity of the hands in the picture. Philip reasserts Charles’s

hunch, and their desire to solve the mystery and to achieve clarity and 'truth' makes Charles and Philip re-frame 'inconsistent' information. For instance, they solve the problem of Chatterton's death in 1770, that is over three decades before the painting of 1802, by inferring that Chatterton must have faked his own death (C, 21-3). Charles concludes with a tautological remark: "if this is real, this is him" (C, 23).

A further traditional strategy to authenticate a picture is to ascertain its provenance. Charles traces down a descendant of Chatterton's publisher of the same name and residence in Bristol, who was in possession of the portrait and still has some manuscripts which Charles obtains from his friend. The manuscripts that recall famous poems by Romantics and are signed "T.C." lead Charles to the assumption that Chatterton actually wrote William Blake's poems – a fact that would call for a revision of literary history (C, 58-60). Ackroyd parallels the referential attitude towards pictures and the search for the author of literary texts as misguided strategies that lead to airy constructions. In turn, the manuscripts would have to be authenticated by scrutiny of their particular visual form. The watermark is from the late eighteenth century and seems genuine, but the handwriting is very ambiguous. The expert discovers "an English round hand [...] definite traces of an ornate schoolroom script [...] and a secretary hand" (C, 74). What makes matters even more confusing is the fact that it "was perfectly common [...] for the same person to compose in more than one style" (C, 74). The expert concludes that this "must be the work of an antiquarian" (C, 74). The fact that these letters could have been written by one or by different hands disrupts the search for *the* author. In his own confessions (faked by his publisher Joynson), Chatterton comments on his writing as a re-combination of passages from his medieval readings "that in Unison [...] became quite a new Account, and, as it were, Chatterton's Account." He adds his own "speculations [...], all of them cunningly changed by the ancient Hand and Spelling" (C, 85). The confession of his creation of a medieval 'hand' figuring as an original is a self-reflexive device characterizing Ackroyd's own invention of Chatterton in a late-eighteenth-century 'hand', that is in the style of eighteenth-century writing. The motif of feigning handwriting frames the writing reproduced on the cover illustration and raises more suspicion concerning its historicity and authenticity.

The information about one writer's different styles of handwriting parallels the different poetic styles that Chatterton claims to have used in his imitations of the more famous Romantic authors. What is more important is that Ackroyd plays with the notion of the copy, as these poems were written in a number of styles, "but all transcribed in the same handwriting" (C, 93). Here, it is no longer clear whether the copies in the hands of the friends are Chatterton's copies of the Romantic poets or of Chatterton's 'original' manuscripts, or transcriptions of these (C, 93). The latter option would grant Chatterton's 'hand' the status of both copy *and* original. Chatterton's construction of a difference between simply copying a style in a foolish and burlesque way and that of a genius breaks off in mid-sentence (C, 92-3), pointing towards the impossibility of being able to clearly define the nature of his writing.

The fact that these poems attributed to Chatterton are in turn faked by Joynson's 'hand' copying Romantic styles leads to a circular argument in which one text leads to another, and the 'author' as the 'origin' of the text turns out to be a figment of the imagination and therefore of the same status as the fictional texts. As the hand superimposed on the frame of the book cover suggests, the pen and hand are no reliable index of a particular author, but it is the reader who imposes a metonymic 'hand' on the writing. Ackroyd gives the idea of handwriting a further ironic twist as Charles continues to write down Chatterton's biography in a rush in spite of the fact that his biro ran out of ink: he literally prints the words onto the paper, but after a short time, only a few illegible traces are left (C, 127-8). Charles's attempt at re-framing Chatterton's biographies in order to write the final version is doomed to fail because of the instability of writing and life. Charles dies and disappears, but might come to life in Philip Slack's project of a novel about Charles's error. Ackroyd makes us aware that ink is another medium that connects *and* separates the writer and the paper, and that visibility is the basis for legibility.

Ackroyd turns the concept of 'authentication' on its head when the forger Merk promises to recreate a perfect version of the portrait, removing 'mistakes' of historical style, which means that authenticity as well as forgery are a question of consistency and of correspondence to stylistic and cultural codes. The owners of the art gallery that collaborates with the forger Merk discover that the style of the furniture and the hair do not fit the date of the painting, and that behind the face on the surface, other faces are lurking. Representing the consensus among critics, Nünning remarks that the picture as a palimpsest metonymically represents the novel, and that searching for its origin is endless (Nünning 1994, 42). The corrupt art dealer calls for an expert "to *authenticate* it properly" (C, 201), insinuating to rework originality in order to please the client. By removing the entire colour and repainting it on the basis of the outline on the canvas, the twentieth-century forger will produce "the best fake you ever saw" (C, 205). Ironically, the dissolvent causes a chemical reaction that reveals and erases one face after another except for "certain letters from the titles of the books which now hovered in an indeterminate space" (C, 228). The improbable remainder of letters as opposed to the face endorses the logocentric iconoclasm and postmodern textuality that undermine the reality effect of visual representation and the naïve attitude of 'seeing is believing.'

### **The Power of Composition: Chatterton's Death**

In order to authenticate his portrait, Charles and his son Edward want to compare it to Wallis's painting of Chatterton's death in the Tate Gallery. However, Charles hesitates to proceed directly to the picture. It is as if seeing Chatterton's death destroyed his notion that his own portrait represents the live poet. Thus, Charles gazes at the room in Wallis's picture but does not "look at the actual body" first (C, 132): he looks out the window (of the picture), at the plant on the sill, the snuffed candle, the wooden chest,

and starts counting the pieces of paper as if they were empirical evidence needed to decide upon a case of mystery. As soon as Charles gazes at the body in the picture, he completely identifies with its pose: "Charles was lying there, with his left hand clenched tightly on his chest and his right arm trailing upon the floor. He could feel the breeze from the open window upon his face, and he opened his eyes" (C, 132). His son seems to take a detached view, remarking on the difference between the face on their portrait and Wallis's painting, pulling Charles out of his reverie. However, his son indulges in the even more naïve illusion that the Chatterton in the portrait cannot be dead if it was not him dying in Wallis's painting (C, 132). Finally, Charles imagines himself dying in this pose and ultimately does so in reality: life imitates art (C, 169-70; see also Finney, 255-6; Hutcheon, 93; Maack, 322 and Albers, 140).

Charles's and Edward's mimetic identification of the picture is opposed to its poetic composition. Most critics slight the details of the creation of the picture in favour of the discursive negotiation of art, but some details are significant concerning Ackroyd's complication of verbal and visual representation. Critics frequently comment on the relocation of the phial of poison from Chatterton's hand to the floor for effect and refer especially to the discussion between Wallis and Meredith about realism in art against aesthetic composition (Clingham, 48; Albers, 79). However, the wide range of contradictory framings of the narrative and the painting are largely neglected. The realist narrative of how the painting is constructed undermines any semblance of pictorial realism, which is far removed from the historical event. The painting from 1856 is based on Catcott's report of how people found Chatterton in 1770. Wallis, for whom only visible things are real (C, 139), aims at the depiction of reality in "verisimilitude" (C, 137, 157): he draws sketches in the original location of Chatterton's death, and Meredith even assumes that the furniture might have been Chatterton's (C, 137). However, Meredith does not even see that the furniture Wallis acquired later for the studio is different from that of the garret room (C, 155) and mistakes the costume on the bed for a body (C, 153) – the man of the word considers visible things "stage props, mere machinery," and believes that only words themselves are real (C, 140, 157). Thus, his musings about the furniture are relegated to the realm of speculation. While Ackroyd himself tends to the latter position, he does not endorse Meredith's negligence of visual reality. In a truly postmodern vein, Ackroyd pays very close attention to visual details only to deconstruct the reality effect of the paintings. Wallis scatters pieces of paper on the floor to simulate the scene of death in the historical report, but later remembers or imagines that the draft caused by the people opening the door to the garret snuffed the candle and scattered the papers, questioning the notion of a specific moment in time eternalized in the picture (C, 156). Thus, Wallis constructs 'truth' – despair on the part of Chatterton concerning his manuscripts, and the candle as symbolic extinction of life parallel to the poet's actual point of death. The scattering of paper scraps as a simulation of reality is just as ridiculous as Charles's counting of them. The writing on the scraps is illegible, simulating writing as a visible gesture rather than content (cp. Ackroyd 1976, 134). Wallis rearranges not only the phial of

poison but also the furniture for composition and effect and again simulates his scene with different furniture in his studio. He does not even refrain from lying when he pretends to Meredith's wife that everything is the same as it was on Chatterton's death (C, 142). The very obvious difference to historical truth is the rather slight flower with a single blossom leaning towards the open window, which belongs to the servant who lives in the garret but can easily be read as a symbol of the poet's dire existence and yearning for freedom. In sum, next to nothing in the picture is as it probably was at the poet's death.

The composition of the painting with its dark ceiling and floor, the white walls, the window and the furniture establishes a highly theatrical frame for the prostrate and bright body. The painting of the pose is not even an imitation of the model in spite of the fact that Wallis says he can only paint what he sees, but what he believes he sees is not reality per se. He views Meredith's wife through the frame of art, "not [as] a Giotto [...] but an Otto Runge" (C, 133), but then questions Meredith's statement that "we see nature through the eyes of the painter" (C, 134). The painter rehearses the part of the model, lying down in order to feel what the body on the bed looks like (C, 136). His own performance of the pose serves to direct his model what to do in meticulous detail – so the body is arranged according to a construct of death. Ironically, Wallis insists on seeing the muscles moving in the clenching hands (C, 138) in order to get a "lifelike impression of death" (C, 156). Wallis considers his friend to resemble Chatterton closely (C, 155) only because they both had red hair. However, he later no longer sees "the individual face but the general human image on his canvas" (C, 156). Thus, mimesis takes on a very wide meaning, including the 'improvement' of reality for artistic purposes.

The final painting is many steps removed from the first sketches at the original location. Ackroyd describes in detail the choice and use of the underpainting, colour, texture, light and shadow for the final effect of a brightness of clothes and hair that "would be the emblem of a soul that had not yet left the body" (C, 164). Ackroyd exposes the basis of the artifice in a Christian world view and in the paradoxical attempt of bringing the dead to life in painting, a form of resurrection that replaces religion by art.

Once Wallis has finished the painting, he sees its meaning change in the eyes of the others. Wallis sees Chatterton's soul escape through the window of the garret, and anticipates interpretations by art historians of its emblematic meaning of the status of literature in a world of darkness (C, 170). On scrutinizing Wallis's painting after having read Ackroyd, we would even have to qualify Meredith's question: "So the greatest realism is also the greatest fakery?" (C, 139). The effect of realism is only achieved in attention to detail, but Wallis's composition foregrounds framing in a highly self-reflexive way. In other words, realistic detail is framed by artifice in the painting, and Ackroyd mirrors and transforms this self-reflexive composition in his 'realistic' narrative of creation and reflection. The contradictory debate and versions of Chatterton, however, deconstruct Wallis's framing of realism.

Ackroyd's novel spells out the implications of Wallis's ambiguous painting of a man who seems to be more asleep than dead, telling two contradictory stories of Chatterton's faked death. The last chapter, which most vividly evokes the last hours in Chatterton's life in the present tense and therefore reveals its artifice, constructs an alternative ending to the official version of suicide. Ackroyd empties the linear story of free will and tragic import by attributing the poet's death to a fatal overdose of the kill-or-cure of the clap by arsenic and laudanum, and gives him something of a smile. This revision questions the result of the inquest of Chatterton's suicide and its proliferation in biographical writing, as it was given in the beginning. Chatterton's end is the beginning. Death remains the final closure of life, but it is accidental and gives rise to numerous versions of his death, each of which seems to be as fictional or 'true' as any other.

## Conclusion

An intermedial reading of *Chatterton* reveals how Ackroyd deconstructs the opposition of spatial picture and temporal narrative as he explores the production and reception of visual art as well as the framing and superimposition of narratives. Neither visual nor verbal representation helps us to come closer to 'the' truth, but they figure as signifying media, both framing and going beyond each other. The anonymous portrait and Wallis's ambiguous painting of Chatterton suggests contradictory versions of Chatterton's life and death. Looking at Wallis again through the lens of Ackroyd's novel raises awareness of its self-reflexive composition and in turn reveals that Ackroyd's narrative may parallel the painting in scenes of realism and self-reflexivity, but goes further in asserting the need of frames and undermining them to liberate the free play of intermedial productivity.

Ackroyd's novel re-frames two dominant paradigms of the late eighteenth century, complementing his essay *Notes for a New Culture*. In his essay, Ackroyd criticizes the limitations of the mimetic, realist tradition in English literature and the Romantic tradition for retaining a mimetic concept of language in the presence of the subject in writing (1976, 17). Instead, he favours the formal experiments and intertextuality of Modernism. Following Derrida, Ackroyd rejects the notions of truth, presence, and originality, and asserts the textual play of language (1976, 141, 143). Revealing the artifice of realism in the composition of pictures effectively questions the intuitive notion of 'seeing is believing' and establishes a parallel to misreading realist texts as transparent representations of reality. In the novel, the realist author Harriet Scrope sells well, but the secret of her success is not a mimetic representation of contemporary life but 'borrowing' plots from forgotten Victorian novels. Even the author herself is not a realistic individual but a grotesque Dickensian character (Onega 1998, 35), reflecting the concept of life imitating art. The poet Charles goes through the motions of the alienated, marginalized and despairing Romantic poet, who is waiting (in vain) for inspiration and hopes for recognition in the future. He seems to identify with Chat-

terton's myth for the wrong reasons, i.e. poverty, neglect and death. As a failed poet, Charles turns his ambition towards being an innovative critic and biographer but continues to think along Romantic lines. His Romantic readings of the forged portrait and the forged manuscripts as an authentic evidence of Chatterton's life and expression are mistaken. Ackroyd deconstructs the Romantic ideals of literary production and reception. Instead, he suggests that the forger Chatterton forms a more interesting model of literary production from the eighteenth century. Picking a literary forger as a representative undermines the Romantic ideal of the original genius (Lee, 521). Chatterton creates a voice and discourse on the basis of medieval manuscripts like a craftsman in an intertextual universe. In his pseudo-medieval texts, Chatterton works as a scriptor who performs an anterior gesture of writing, as Barthes would say (52-53). In this sense, Ackroyd's novel responds to Chatterton as an alternative model of literary production. Ackroyd imitates gestures of writing, mingles writings, and counters some forms of writing by others (Barthes, 53), but he does not claim authenticity or originality under the name of another, as Chatterton did. The postmodern author openly acknowledges his intermedial borrowings *and* claims the text as his own under the copyright.

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### List of Illustrations

- Fig. 1: Silcox, Paula. Cover illustration for Peter Ackroyd, *Chatterton* (London: Penguin, 1993). Scan.