

# Peter Ackroyd's Chatterton: History as Taxidermy

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## Abstract

The new historicist understanding of approaching the factual as fictional may stem from the awareness that every historian tends to give to real events the form of a story while emplotting their narratives. In this respect history has affinity with taxidermy which, as an image, serves well for understanding how a historian works. For the historian stuffs the events that happened in the past by the archival research, second hand information, other texts and other points of view, and represents them in a way much similar to a taxidermist. He exhibits the past with new stuff, and it works, because the dead cannot speak. Peter Ackroyd examines history in *Chatterton* as taxidermy, as an art of stuffing, and mounting the skins of dead animals for exhibition in a lifelike state, and skillfully applies his historical knowledge in creating a fictional version of Thomas Chatterton's life. This paper is an attempt to analyse how history can be perceived as taxidermy, and discuss how Ackroyd's *Chatterton* attaches an artistic and aesthetic dimension to it.

**Key Words:** Historification, Biography, Postmodern, *Chatterton*.

## Özet

Gerçekliğe kurmaca olarak yaklaşan yeni tarihselci anlayış tüm tarihçilerin kitap yazarken geçmiş hikâye anlatısı formuna sokup ona bir olay örgüsü verme gayreti içine girdikleri saptamasından doğar. Bu bağlamda tarihçiliğin taksidermi (hayvan postunu doldurarak onu canlı gibi teşhir etme sanatı) ile bir benzerliği vardır. Taksidermi tarihçinin geçmişe nasıl şekil verdiğini anlamak için güçlü bir imgedir. Zira tarihçi geçmişte olan olayların içini arşiv çalışmalarıyla, ikinci el bilgilerle, diğer metin ve bakış açılarından öğrendikleriyle doldurur ve onları bir taksidermist gibi bize sunar. Bunu yapmak da kolaydır, çünkü ölümler konuşamaz. Peter Ackroyd *Chatterton* adlı romanında tarihe taksidermi olarak yaklaşır ve romantik dönem şairlerinden Thomas Chatterton'un hayatının bize kurgusal bir alternatifini sunar. Bu çalışma Ackroyd'un *Chatterton* adlı eserini tarih, kurgu ve taksidermi kavramları bakımından analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Tarihselcilik, Biyografi, Post modern, *Chatterton*.

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*Chatterton* (1987) is the fourth novel of Peter Ackroyd -well known British novelist and biographer. Most of Ackroyd's novels can be loosely termed as postmodern parodies which mark his appeal to rewriting histories in a playful manner. Ackroyd owes a worldwide reputation not only to his novels but also to his biographies some of which are on Milton, Dickens, T.S. Eliot, Chaucer, Blake, and Shakespeare. He spends considerable time on historical research both while writing the non-fictional biographies and while creating the fictional worlds for his postmodern texts. By virtue of combining his author and historian identities, and by being a master of plots, Ackroyd writes novels which belong to the category of what Linda Hutcheon called "historiographic metafiction". By "historiographic metafiction" Hutcheon means: "those well known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages, [...and to] the theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs" (5). Ackroyd's novels are intertextual and parodic reproductions of histories illuminating his ideas on the indeterminacy of historical discourses. This intertextual parody of historiographic metafiction, as Hutcheon puts it, "offers a sense of the presence of the past, but a past that can be known only from its texts, its traces -be they literary or historical" (125). Whatever Ackroyd writes, he writes it with an awareness that no truth is outside language, and there is no such thing as objective past. Therefore, he abolishes the distinctions between the real and imaginary, past and present, truth and untruth. Ackroyd would certainly agree with Keith Jenkins' statement that: "there is a radical break between the 'actuality' of the world which is out there and so-called 'reality' which is being created by our human discourses which are 'about' but which do not knowingly correspond to that to which they 'refer'. Indeed, it is these discourses-broadly construed-which alone *make* the world variously meaning-full, and we know of no other reality than that thus constituted" (Jenkins, 42). Jenkins reminds us the famous Kantian distinction between **the thing in itself** (noumenon) and **the thing as perceived by us** (phenomenon) when he implies that reality is a human construct. "All attempts", Jenkins adds, "of producing human discourses to create realities are, in fact, attempts to **violate** the actuality of the world out there. Let alone the discourses in general, historical discourse cannot ever escape indeterminacy and its putative aim -the truth-full reconstruction of the past-is thus an impossible myth" (Jenkins, 43).

The relation between fact and fiction has been a great concern for the theoreticians of history, hermeneutics, narratology and poststructuralism. Hayden White, in two of his seminal works entitled *Figural Realism* and *The Content of the Form*, analyses the problematic relation between tropological narratives and their factual counterpart, namely history. In *Figural Realism* he says:

In the passage from a study of an archive to the composition of a discourse to its translation into a written form, historians must employ the same strategies of

linguistic figuration used by imaginative writers, to endow their discourses with the kind of secondary meanings containing interpretations of the events making up their contents. The kind of interpretation produced by the historical discourse is that which endows what would otherwise remain only a chronologically ordered series of events with the formal coherency of the kind of plot structures met within narrative fiction.”(8)

This theory of tropology does not, however, collapse the difference between fact and fiction but redefines the relations between them within any given discourse. Hayden White derives this discussion from Paul Ricoeur’s monumental work *Time and Narrative*. As Ricoeur states, “time becomes human time to the extent it is organized after the manner of a narrative” (3).

For Hayden White, “Real events should not speak, should not tell themselves. Real events should simply be and narrative is the solution for the studies of translating knowing into telling”. (*The Content of the Form 2*) Events simply happen and historian takes upon himself the authority of giving the true account of what really happened. The problem arises at the moment the historian wishes to give the real events the form of a story. The events, for White, are not real because they occurred, but because, first, they were remembered, and second, they are capable of finding a place in a chronologically ordered sequence. In *The Content of the Form*, White explores the distinctions between “the discourse of the real” and “the discourse of the imaginary”. History is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and if we consider the poststructuralist understanding of textuality, the line of demarcation between fact and fiction starts to disappear. Both the historian and the artist aim to re/present the absent by virtue of applying their imaginary faculties to fill in the gaps of information and unify their plots. This is because, as Ricoeur amply states:

The meaning of real human lives, whether of individuals or collectivities, is the meaning of the plots, quasiplots, parplots, or failed plots by which the events that those lives comprise are endowed with the aspect of stories having a discernible beginning, middle and end. A meaningful life is one that aspires to the coherency of story with a plot. Historical emplotment is a poetic activity, but it belongs to the (Kantian) productive imagination, rather than to the reproductive or merely associative imagination of the writer of fictions. (63-64)

Indeed, events happen; they don’t talk, and, for White and Ricoeur, the moment they are narrated they become facts. In other words, a “fact” is discourse-defined; an “event” is not (Hutcheon, 119). Once the events are narrated, appropriated and emplotted they lose touch with their origin and become a part of figurative speech. The past is absent, so the historian actually has no referent. Since he has nothing to refer, all he can do is to infer. “A historian”, Jenkins states, “infers a past which fits into his data, position

and inferences. For historians cannot know the past and then search for the sources to correspond to it. Rather the process is that of using this and that from which a past to conform to this and that is inferred" (49). The record of events can be in at least three distinctive kinds: annals, chronicles and history proper. Annals and chronicles fail to narrate events. However, the narrative discourses on history serve to transform into a story a list of historical events that would otherwise be only a chronicle. The selection and appropriation of events and the ways they are narrated can reveal a certain viewpoint or stance. Historian generally writes about the things that he does not witness, he depends on second hand information and archival research. He obviously uses his imagination in forming causal relations when he is faced with information gaps that would spoil his narrative. When we remember Paul Ricoeur's famous statement that "all history is an extended metaphor, the traditional definition of allegory and therefore must belong to the order of the figurative speech" (in *Figural Realism* 6) the relation between fact and fiction becomes even more blurred. "Plots are", for Ricoeur, "metaphorical, so narrative and metaphor are not disparate notions. Plot is the temporal unity of a whole and complete action. It is this synthesis of the heterogeneous [in other words, the Aristotelian concordant discordance] that brings narrative close to metaphor" (Ricoeur, ix).

*Chatterton* is a most suitable example to be studied for its ambiguous relation to fact and non-fact, and for its representation of historical persons as characters in the frame of a fictional biography or its postmodern equivalent. It situates itself at the very center of new historicist theories, and offers itself like the new form of novel Raymond Federman defines as "a collection of fragments, as a puzzling catalogue of events or details, as a montage or collage of disparate elements" (22). However, this study will only focus on the parts related to Chatterton's life and the process of Charles Wychwood's writing Chatterton's biography. Ackroyd masterfully blends the discourses of the real and imaginary while focusing on the life-story of Thomas Chatterton, who as a cult figure, was considered to be a neglected prodigy by the romantic poets. William Wordsworth in "Resolution and Independence" thinks of Chatterton as "the marvelous boy/The sleepless soul that perished in his pride"; as one of those poets who in their youth begin in gladness but end up in despondency and madness. Keats, Shelley, and Coleridge commemorated Chatterton in their poetry as well. History remembers Chatterton as a poet who killed himself at the age of seventeen. The romantic poets took him as a figure of romantic idealism. But, Ackroyd's *Chatterton* is not in pursuit of knowledge or facts; rather it invents its own reality at the cost of labeling the historical facts about Chatterton's life as imposture. Thomas Chatterton provides Ackroyd rich source to play freely with the postmodern issues such as plagiarism, authenticity, objective reality, representation and so forth, because Chatterton was a forger of pseudo-medieval poetry. He started to write at the age of twelve. Since this reality was too real to be believed, he created a fictive

personality-a medieval monk- named Thomas Rowley and wrote his poetry under this name. Chatterton's genuine poetry but fake name provided Ackroyd a perfect image for creating his fictional game in the novel. Before presenting his story to readers, Ackroyd adds to the book- as a preliminary, a one-page-biography of Thomas Chatterton—in italics- which can be found in any literary encyclopedia or anthology. This record only tells the facts that are known about Chatterton and, contains the highlights of the poet's short life. The biography has two paragraphs and from the first paragraph reader learns that Thomas Chatterton was born in Bristol in 1752; educated in Colston's School; that his father died three months before his son's birth; he was only seven when his mother gave him certain scraps of manuscript which had been found in the muniment room of the church; he began writing poems at twelve and at the age of sixteen he composed the Rowley sequence. The second paragraph is as follows:

*At last, tired of Bristol, and lured by the prospect of literary success, Thomas Chatterton traveled to London at the age of seventeen. But his hopes of fame were to remain unfulfilled, at least within his own life-time; the book sellers were unenthusiastic or indolent, and the London journals declined to publish most of the elegies and verses he offered them. At first he stayed in Shoreditch with relations, but in May 1770 he moved to a small attic room in Brooke Street, Holborn. It was here on the morning of 24 August 1770, **apparently worn down by his struggle against poverty and failure, that he swallowed arsenic.** When the door of his room was broken open, small scraps of paper-covered with his writing-were found scattered across the floor. An inquest was held and a verdict of *felo de se* or suicide was announced; the next morning, he was interred in the burying ground of the Shoe Lane Workhouse. Only one contemporary portrait of him is known to exist, but the image of the marvelous boy has been fixed for the posterity in the painting, *Chatterton*, by Henry Wallis. This was completed in 1856, and has the young George Meredith as its model for the dead poet lying in his attic room in Brooke Street. (1)*

Ackroyd here provides the reader with a—presumably- objective record of Chatterton's life. He presents a “real image” of the past and a “true account” of the poet's life and death. He does it in order to create a resource, or an original account for the reader to make rational comparisons with the alternative versions that will be offered by the book. Here, we are informed that Chatterton died by committing suicide. For the narrator of this account the reason of his suicide was apparently despondency. Yet, we may scrutinize the truth value of it because a suicide can only be “apparent, readily seen, visible” to a person when that person witnesses it, or when that person has clear and distinct data that would enable him to infer it thus. At this moment we stop and think of the validity and reliability of the historian's comment. Here Ackroyd as an experienced biographer wants to remind the reader the uncertainty principle which signifies that there are always things that cannot be known. It would not be wrong to assert that Ackroyd dedicates

*Chatterton* to the indeterminate nature of historication. After this brief biography we are given four extracts from the book. These four extracts prepare us for the four parallelly constructed stories taking place in three periods of time: the 18<sup>th</sup> century scenes from Thomas Chatterton's life; the 19<sup>th</sup> century scenes about George Meredith posing for Henry Wallis' painting as Chatterton; the present day scenes showing Harriet Scrope's failed attempts to write her autobiography and Charles Wychwood's failed attempts to write Chatterton's biography. The first part displays Ackroyd's speculations on how we all appropriate the past for our own purposes and in our own ways. It opens with Charles Wychwood going to an antique store to sell some classic books on flutes to support his financially struggling family. In the shop Charles spots a portrait of a middle-aged man, and is suddenly fascinated by the mysterious man it portrays. Forgetting about his family's precarious financial state, Charles trades the books for the portrait. He is quickly obsessed with the portrait when, with the help of his friend Philip, he discovers that it resembles Thomas Chatterton, who reportedly died at the age of seventeen in the year 1770. Since the painting dates back to 1805, the portrait must have been painted when Chatterton was about fifty. Charles travels to meet the original owner of the painting and receives a set of documents from the owner's lover. While sorting these documents, Charles discovers some manuscripts with the initials "T.C." signed across the bottom. This clue fills Charles with utmost excitement when he finds that some of the poems in the manuscripts which are signed by the initials "T.C." were known to have belonged to William Blake. The lines repeated by Charles ("Craving & Devouring; but my Eyes are always upon thee, O lovely Delusion") are from Blake's *The Four Zoas*. Chatterton's being a real forger during his life encourages Charles in making such delusive inferences that Chatterton might have forged his own death and continued to write under the name of William Blake. **Charles has an urge of saying what has not been said before, and this urge guides him to such lovely delusions.**

For Ackroyd, historical narratives are just versions of what really happened. Every event or life story may have alternative versions and at this moment comes the question about the most reliable version, the real version. He shows us how other versions of a life story can be made up, with what hidden catches this story can be re-written, and in so doing Ackroyd presents radically different but equally sound versions of Chatterton's life and death. The novel tackles with this aspect of history by exposing its own lies, telling stories that openly claim to be invented, to be false, inauthentic and by virtue of dismissing absolute knowledge it defies the idea of reality (Federman, 9-10). Thus, Ackroyd deliberately presents a parodic version of not only Chatterton's life, but also the process of Charles' attempts of historicifying Chatterton's life.

After believing that Chatterton not only forged his poetry but also his own death Charles follows the traces of the past with a radically different perspective. On one

hand, he is so sure of giving the hidden realities of Chatterton's life, on the other, he is afraid of fictionalizing it with his far-fetched, rather, schizophrenic assumptions guiding him to such decisions that Chatterton, in fact, hadn't died when he was 17 and, kept on writing under the name of William Blake. Thus, the second part of the book starts with Charles reading to his friend Philip, the incomplete autobiography he wrote on Thomas Chatterton. This first version, which mainly depends on the so-called ancient manuscripts Charles found in Bristol, is a fictional autobiography, a kind of Dickensian bildungsroman. This first attempt of Charles writing Chatterton's life not as a biography but as an autobiography shows his anxiety in asserting something that would later be discredited. It somewhat sounds also like a Shandyan autobiography:

These are the circumstances that concern my conscience only but I, Thomas Chatterton, known as Tom Goose-Quill, Tom-All-Alone, or Poor-Tom, do give them here in place of Wills, Depositions, Deeds of Gift and sundry other legal devices. Take then the following account for what it is, tho' a better, I believe, could not be given by any other man: for who was present at my birth but my own self." (81)

This fictive and parodic account gives Charles the freedom of writing his new version of Chatterton's life with clear-conscience. In other words, the discourse of the imaginary is always at work whether the writer is sure or not about the truth value of his assertion. Charles reads this incomplete ten-page-story to Philip by saying "It ends here. That's the lot" (93). The immediate response of Philip was that he could not say **real** to them. This comment of Philip shows his concern that only if Charles had narrated and offered them as the truest account of Chatterton's life denouncing the already known ones by putting an emphasis on Charles' being the one who removed the dust on the past that they could receive a public appreciation. Not being satisfied with the autobiographical version Charles tries different ways of writing the biography, he reads most of the biographies written on Chatterton, but the more he reads the more he procrastinates. He is suspended in the limbo of real and imaginary discourses. Due to his health problems and approaching death he cannot focus on his studies, he is not even able to write an original and complete preface to the book he is planning to write. A week before his death, he sits at his desk and starts to write a preface:

Thomas Chatterton believed that he could explain the entire material and spiritual world in terms of imitation and forgery and so sure was he of his own genius that he allowed it to flourish under other names. The documents which have recently been discovered show that he wrote in the guise of Thomas Gray, William Blake, William Cowper and many others; as a result, our whole understanding of the eighteenth century poetry will have to be revised. Chatterton kept his own account of his labours in a box from which he would not be parted, and which remained concealed until his death. (127)



Charles stops in the middle of the preface and cannot proceed because, this time, he is anxious about the possibility of unconsciously plagiarizing a text he has already read on Chatterton. Ackroyd winks at the reader at this point because he makes a self-plagiarism by alluding to what he made Oscar Wilde say on Chatterton in his 1983 novel *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*: “a strange, slight boy who was so prodigal of his genius that he attached the names of others to it” (67).

The book has yet a final version of Chatterton's death directly refuting both the one given in the first page of the book, and the ones already offered by Charles in the course of the narrative. This alternative version is narrated from a God's eye viewpoint focusing on the last day of Chatterton. It is narrated in parallel to the events following the death of Charles Wychwood. Harriet discovers that the painting of the older Chatterton is a fake, Phillip learns that the autobiographical manuscripts that Charles found in Bristol were in fact the ones that were written by Chatterton's Bristol publisher and put among Chatterton's papers after his death, and it is made clear that Charles was tiring himself out for nothing. All the assumptions of Charles are thus refuted. On the other hand, the scenes from Thomas Chatterton's last day are narrated in such a way as to parody the historical assertions of the first resource provided in the beginning of the story. In this last version Thomas Chatterton is represented in a completely joyful state, as a happy and successful young poet who is full of life and optimistic about his future. He has his first sexual intercourse from which he is genitally infected. He just wants to cure the newly alarming disease and learns from a friend that a mixture of arsenic and laudanum –probably Arsphenamine- will quickly heal him. For during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, a number of arsenic compounds were used as medicines especially to cure syphilis. In his last night he comes to his room drunk and after writing an elegy ordered for the funeral of a man, he drinks the arsenic-laudanum mixture. But, he was not sure about the measure inscribed on the side of the bottle: “Was it one grain of arsenic for each ounce of laudanum? Or four grains? Or two ounces?” he doubts and then thinking that “a little more brandy will aid the memory”, “he pours some into his glass. Then he empties the linen bag onto the table and piles up the grains, rolling one of them beneath his finger. One for fame. He drops it into his glass. One for genius. He puts in another. And one for youth. He picks up a third grain, and adds it to the brandy. Then on a sudden instinct, he pours most of the laudanum into the same glass and swallows the whole draught.” (224) and dies, most unluckily, of overdose. He obviously never believed that the cure would ever be his kill, so when he died he still had a naïf smile on his face. This version obviously questions the validity of the first version by which we are informed that Chatterton killed himself by being “*apparently worn down by his struggle against poverty and failure*”. It, rather, adds a new dimension claiming that this act of killing the self could just be accidental and the verdict of *felo de se* cannot explain whether this suicide was intentional or not.



Each version of Chatterton's life, therefore, equally abolishes the distinction between real and imaginary and falls prey to the uncertainty principle. As long as we are licensed to use our imagination, we can stuff and exhibit the life stories or the past in anyway we wish. The validity of interpreting history as taxidermy comes into light at this moment. Taxidermy is the practice of creating lifelike representations of animals by using their prepared skins and various supporting structures. And, Peter Ackroyd examines history in *Chatterton* as taxidermy, as an art of stuffing, and mounting the skins of the dead for exhibition in a lifelike state.

Imagination itself is a form of imitating, copying the outside, a form of reproducing and violating the external reality rather than creating or inventing new ones. In a way it is a form of forging the original. By approaching the idea of imagination thus, the book abolishes the myths of originality by adding itself to the world of realities with the consciousness of its own fictionality. It problematizes the possibility of historical knowledge with the awareness that we can never know about the past with certainty. The only way of knowing the past is reading the texts on the past. Each attempt of writing about the past is also an attempt of violating its context by replacing the past in the present.

*Chatterton* is not a novel on the life of Thomas Chatterton; rather, it is a novel on how to (re)write it. It problematizes the function of imagination while writing either literary or non-literary texts about the past. Imagination, the ability to form images, is an act of representation *per se*. By virtue of equalizing imagination with an often misleading copy of the real, treating it, in the most Platonic sense as the copy of the copy, the book uncrowns imagination by reducing it to a mode of plagiarism. Its difference from Platonic simulacra is that the book denies the existence of the world of origins and situates itself explicitly on the side of the poststructuralist concept that there is only text and nothing is outside it. This mode of plagiarism is never taken as something negative; rather, it is treated as inevitable since there is only a world of appearances and nothing else. As Chatterton says: "Thus do we see in every Line an Echoe, for the truest Plagiarism is the truest Poetry" (87). This statement echoes T.S. Eliot's sentence "immature poets imitate, mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different" (155). The novel by stating that "original genius consists in forming new and happy combinations, rather than in searching after thoughts and ideas which had never occurred before" and "that we just need to switch around the words" (58) discredits the possibility of attaining originality through imagination and favors plagiarism as it is described by Eliot. The book seems to confirm Baudrillard's approach to simulacrum as the only truth. It denounces the idea of originality thus, and tries to show that all meaning-making processes and forms of representation are, in fact, acts of violation. "The act of writing", as Jenkins cites from

Derrida, "is a violent production of meaning, an abuse which refers to no exterior or proper norm. It is a form of catachresis" (44).

Imagination comes to the help of the writer while he is imitating, representing the Kantian noumenon by translating it into phenomenon. But the targeted real of Chatterton is not out there, rather, it is a form of an already reproduced reality, a hyperreality. It is the imitation of imitation and hence it becomes a simulacrum. "Simulacra", as Baudrillard defined it, "is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality, a hyperreality. It becomes a substitute of signs of the real for the real itself". (1734) It is this aspect of simulation that threatens the difference between true and false, between real and imaginary in the book. As Brian Finney states:

The Victorian episodes in which Wallis uses Meredith to pose as the dead Chatterton offer a perfect simulacrum of the world as Ackroyd conceives it in his fiction, fiction which is itself - as Chatterton's publisher says of his forgeries - "an imitation in a world of Imitations". (Finney, 255)

The portrait, then, if we describe it in Baudrillard's terms, is not the reflection of a basic reality, it masks and perverts the basic reality, it is the absence of reality and bears no relation to any reality, it is its own simulacrum. Ackroyd deliberately inserts into his novel the 19<sup>th</sup> century scenes about the process of Wallis portraying Meredith as dead Chatterton to illustrate what other parts of the book mean to tell. "Yes", says Meredith in the novel, "I am a model poet pretending to be someone else". Wallis wants Meredith to allow himself to the luxury of death but Meredith complains: "I can endure death. It is the representation of death that I cannot bear". Wallis tries to console him by saying "You will be immortalized" but Meredith doubtfully asks "Will it be Meredith or will it be Chatterton?" (2-3) "The model poet pretending to be someone else" (141) is not only Meredith but also Thomas Chatterton who wrote as Thomas Rowley. "*The image of the marvelous boy has been fixed for the posterity in the painting, Chatterton*" (1) by Wallis and when we visit Tate Gallery all that we see as the "fixed image" of Chatterton will be the feigning image of Meredith. If we ask it like Baudrillard, is it the portrait of Chatterton or Meredith? Is it the portrait of someone dead or alive? Our answer will be yes it is and, no it isn't. "So", as Meredith says, "the greatest realism is also the greatest fakery" (139). For simulation produces the true symptoms of the feigned absence. The book takes the concept of hyperreality as its metalanguage and from this perspective attempts to reproduce many other images of Chatterton. Since simulation challenges the idea of authenticity and purports the impossibility of separating the real from its artificial resurrection, simulacrum remains as a precession of itself. Taxidermy serves well to represent the idea of hyperreality. Although Ackroyd does not pinpoint the idea of history as taxidermy explicitly, it functions as an extended metaphor throughout the book. It is referred in the beginning when Charles goes to Leno's antique shop in order to

sell his books. The first thing he sees in the shop is a stuffed-eagle. This makes Charles contemplate on the delusive appearance of the dead as alive. He thinks that “there are no souls, only faces” (7). He means that there is no essence but only appearance, no reality but only image. The shop is full of “ornaments, prints, stuffed animals and miscellaneous bric-a-brac, or relics from the past which are now mostly useless in symbolizing anything: plaster busts, playing cards, books, clay bowls, dishes filled with buttons and toothpicks” (8). The shop is like a trash can or recycle bin, in a way as the past itself is. Only when we wish to make use of them, the things belonging to past can have an avid place in the present. For Charles “there are no rules” and “everything is possible” (9), so he finds himself exchanging the two antique books with the mysterious painting which he would later believe to be of Chatterton. For Charles, there was something familiar about the face in the painting (11). He thinks that “there was death on that face like there was death on every face” (12). At home, while trying to erase the dust on the painting by his licked finger he tells his son that “he is eating the past” (15). Eating the past is like eating a stuffed animal. However much the animal looks like real, it is a still life. Another case where we meet the reference to taxidermy is when Harriet goes out to visit her friend Sarah Tilt. Sarah is working on a book about the art of death. Before going out, Harriet puts on her fur coat and fur hat on the top of which was pinned a stuffed bird. The bird was so life-like that even her cat Mr. Gaskell tries to eat it. On her way to Sarah, Harriet meets a blind man and helps the man walk across the street. While walking with the man she pretends to be a Cockney upstart whose husband was a taxidermist. She says to the blind man: “When my old men passed on he left me a bit, you see. He was a taxidermist. Do you know what I mean when I say taxidermy? I mean stuffing with odds and bobs” (30). What she does by this quick improvisation is no other than stuffing herself with odds and bobs.

With this novel, Ackroyd questions the authority which is going to test the legitimacy of any original writing when there is no such thing as originality. The authority which can punish for plagiarism is in a tragicomic situation in the hyperreal world of postmodern fiction. History is as you like it. It is, for Ackroyd, a kind of representation in which anything goes. The past can be read and made to mean any way we like. History is about something that never did happen in the way in which it comes to be represented. Its inside is invisible to the outsiders, and there is no limit on what could legitimately be said about it. The events that happened in the past are stuffed by the archival research, second hand information, other texts and other points of view, and represented by the historian in a way much similar to what a taxidermist does. He exhibits the past with new stuff, and it works, because the dead cannot speak. As Gertrude Stein puts it “an event is only an outside without an inside, whereas a thing that has existed has its outside inside itself” (in *FR*, White 83). The attempts of narrating an event which has no “inside”, then,

is equal to stuffing it with any “inside” we wish to make use of. That is exactly what both the historian and the writer of fiction attempt, they stuff the absent with their alternative presents.

Taxidermy also connotes Baudrillard’s idea of extermination by museumification. He uses this term in order to criticize the exhibition of mummies in the museums after long examinations and remummifications. For mummies, he says; do not decay because of worms: they die from being transplanted from a prolonged symbolic order, which is master over death and putrescence, on to an order of history, science and museums-our own, which is no longer master over anything, since it only knows how to condemn its predecessors to death by science. An irreparable violence towards all secrets, the violence of a civilization without secrets (1739). He in a way echoes Wittgenstein’s invitation to silence. Historians similarly attack and violate the secrets of the dead, the silence of the past by way of disturbing them with their noisy rhetoric. Ackroyd’s *Chatterton*, to conclude, is a parodic representation of this view with its apparently noisy rhetoric or with its much ado about nothing which invites us to silence.

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