FORUM

Title	"But who is to say what is fake and what is real?" – Spectral and Textual Haunting in Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton*
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Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue Number	07
Issue Date	Autumn 2008
Publication Date	12/12/2008
Editors	Jack Burton & Jana Funke

"But who is to say what is fake and what is real?" – Spectral and Textual Haunting in Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton*

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The concept of haunting has pervaded fictional narratives throughout the ages. Mostly coming up in the form of full-blown apparitions of ghosts or spectres, the supernatural or paranormal element has always been fascinating to the reader. However, haunting does not only appear in the form of spooks or anima but is oftentimes also embodied in the intertextual element.

This essay looks at how the phenomenon of haunting is discussed in Peter Ackroyd's novel *Chatterton* (1989). It analyses in which forms the idea of haunting appears and which function it fulfils in the text. Of particular interest here is the multi-layered narrative which presents haunting in several different modes, both on the story and the meta-level, not only giving it the shape of regular 'visitations', but also pointing it out through intertextuality and metafictional comments. The haunting by other texts is here closely connected with the more traditional image of the ghostly apparition through a linking of the two by means of historiography: "These textual fragments it would seem make up a metanarrative about the *simultaneity* of different historical experiences and events" (Clingham 45). The relationship between reality and fiction is thus probed through means of history as is the connection between notions of reality and the use of structuring principles. The novel ultimately defines itself as "historiographic metafiction" (Hutcheon 5).

Finally, this essay shows that the element of haunting in *Chatterton* works as a tool to disrupt the novel's different storylines. This disruption underlines the relation between imagination and reality by highlighting and foregrounding the novel's fictitiousness and at the same time "points to the constructedness of any representation of the 'real world'" (Delgado 349), may it be fiction or the visual arts.

The Red-Haired Man: Thomas Chatterton's Continuous Re-emergence

Coming back to the more traditional notion of haunting, namely of it being some kind of ghostly manifestation, numerous examples can be found throughout Ackroyd's novel. These apparitions are not only restricted to the main narrative strand revolving around Charles Wychwood.[i] If they were, one could argue that "Charles's … sightings

of the ghost of Chatterton are perhaps a temperamental quirk or a symptom of his constitutional headaches" (Clingham 43). However, the emergence of the man with the red hair is, in fact, present in all three storylines, irrespective of temporal matters. This break in time is a stylistic device the novel works with repeatedly:

> Ackroyd's vision is essentially atemporal; past and present interact in the moment. Or you can say that the present consumes the past. Charles jokingly tells his son that he is 'eating the past' when licking dust from the forged painting off his fingers. (Finney, "Postmodernist Play"[ii] 11)

Spectral sightings are nearly omnipresent and affect almost all main characters. One of the most prominent passages, mainly because it is the first, however, is probably the one when Charles regains consciousness after having passed out in the park:

> When he awoke he noticed that the leaves had been swept away, and a young man was standing beside him. He had red hair, brushed back. He was gazing intently at Charles, and he placed his hand upon his arm as if he were restraining him. One said, 'And so you are sick?' The other replied, 'I know that I am.' He was about to rise. 'Not now. Not now. I will come to see you again. Not now.' (*Chatterton* 47)

Here, we have what can be considered a full-blown ghostly apparition even though it is never quite clear whether or not the young man is visible to other people in the park as well. The fact remains, though, that the appearance of Thomas Chatterton signifies and determines the personal or psychological haunting of Charles Wychwood. Being all but obsessed with confirming the identity of the man in the painting he has acquired in an antique shop reminiscent of Dickens, for Charles reality and imagination are ultimately merged. The apparition of Chatterton that transcends space and time is therefore a manifestation of Charles's own obsession. In addition, his being haunted stresses one central argument in Ackroyd's novel: "But who is to say what is fake and what is real?" (*Chatterton* 113). Issues of forgery and reality weave themselves through the story as a red thread, constantly resurfacing in the question of what is simply a product of imagination and what is in fact reality, but also emerging in comments on art and mimesis.

The incidents of spectral haunting in *Chatterton* do not necessarily carry explicitly negative connotations. The apparition of the eighteenth century poet sometimes even seems to have a comforting aspect, at least for Charles himself who is

struggling for literary success. This seems rather logical when considering the fact that the term "haunting" etymologically stands for "getting home" or "providing a home" (cf. Ratmoko 1). From the narrator's point of view, however, one problematic element is stressed: in the passage quoted above, it is not only reality and imagination that are merged but also Charles and Thomas (or his ghost, for that matter) themselves. This becomes evident when taking a closer look at the short conversation between the two poets. Even though the reader will probably be able to construct his own interpretation of who is talking and when, the narrative use of 'one' and 'the other' here leaves a gap that needs to be filled. Whereas this scene is aimed at illustrating the extent to which Charles's identity has already been disrupted, the reader has to create his own meaning. However, this passage is only one of several. In the course of the novel, Charles Wychwood experiences a kind of unification process with Thomas Chatterton:

> For example, Charles sees a vision of Chatterton lying on his death bed when he looks into George Stead's 1802 portrait; then, when looking at Wallis's painting, he sees himself lying in Chatterton's place, being mourned by his wife and son; at the same time, Charles's son, Edward, is convinced that Chatterton is still alive, because Wallis's Chatterton (who has the face of George Meredith) is different from Stead's Chatterton. (Clingham 48)

This merging of the two men goes so far that Charles, albeit unconsciously, even takes on Chatterton's death-bed posture when he eventually dies in hospital:

> Charles died […] his right arm fell away and his hand trailed upon the ground, the fingers clenched tightly together; his head slumped to the right also, so that it was about to slide off the hospital bed. His body arched once in a final spasm, quivered, and then became still. (*Chatterton* 169ff.)

This uncanny scene is already foreshadowed in an earlier passage of the novel, namely when Charles and Edward go to see Wallis's painting at the Tate Gallery. Here, it is not so much an apparition in its original or gothic sense, i.e. the appearance of a spectre, but rather a sort of reversed phenomenon of haunting with a character suddenly being turned into a ghost-like figure. This reversal is presented in a vision that Charles has:

> But was there someone now standing at the foot of the bed, casting a shadow over the body of the poet? And 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. He was able to look up and, her face in shadow beside the garret window, he saw Vivien standing above him. She was crying. (*Chatterton* 132)

This haunting (or this haunted relationship?) between Charles and Thomas Chatterton shows to what extent the two men have become one. Their borderlines have been blurred so that it is not always completely clear where one ends and the other begins: the young Chatterton steps into Charles Wychwood's reality while perpetually mocking him through the portrait that supposedly shows Chatterton as an old man.

It is not only Charles who is confronted with the spectre of the poet, however. Other characters see him as well: "When Charles had murmured 'I know you very well' … Harriet Scrope looked up for a moment and saw the outline of a young man who smiled and bowed towards him" (*Chatterton* 166). This passage is but one example, and the apparitions have different effects on equally different people. Again, the apparition of Chatterton's spectre is often depicted as having a positive effect. George Meredith, for instance, ends up being prevented from committing suicide:

He [George Meredith] had purchased a phial of mercury-and-arsenic with which he intended to end his life but, as he was about to put the deadly flask to his pale lips, he felt a hand laid upon his wrist; looking up, he saw a young man standing over him and forbidding him to drink. When he put down the phial, the young man disappeared. Thus was the young George Meredith saved for literature by the intervention of the ghostly Thomas Chatterton. (*Chatterton* 70ff.)

In a palimpsestian manner Ackroyd constantly breaks up the time levels between the various strata and thereby connects the (sub) plots with each other: "The past resolves itself into a series of texts which themselves interact bringing past to bear on present and occasionally present to bear on past – or at least the past as it is textually constituted in and by the present" (Finney, "Postmodernist Play" 12). The haunting transcends these levels of time as well, so that Charles appears to glimpse the very same child that Chatterton intended to help but was no longer able to. The reader is therefore constantly confronted with the question of what is real and what is not, being forced to work his way through several layers of textual reality. For instance, the child that both Charles and Chatterton have come across, re-emerges in Seymour's – or Merk's ? –

painting and "[i]n a transparent but compelling passage of the novel, Charles is fully conscious of himself, but *feeling* as if he were acting a part, dying someone else's death" (Clingham 43).

Finally, the above mentioned passages, as well as Edward's sighting of his father as the integral part of the Chatterton painting, bring to mind the Renaissance notion that poets communicate with one another irrespective of time and space. This "communication" or influence between writers is, however, transported even more explicitly in the novel's use of intertextuality and metafiction, by the use of textual haunting, so to speak.

The "Trace": Textual Haunting in *Chatterton*

In his *Notes for a New Culture* (1976), Peter Ackroyd himself proclaimed that "[w]riting does not emerge from speech, or from the individual, but only from other writing" (61). In fact, it is clear that *Chatterton* not only works on three different narrative time levels, but also clearly draws on intertextuality and metafiction:

> [T]he work of art is itself a reordering of other works of art from the past. Texts, seen as Ackroyd sees them in a poststructuralist light, are not the invention of unique writers of genius, of the artistic imagination at odds with society. Texts are rearrangements of other texts. (Finney, "Postmodernist Play" 7)

In the light of the title of this essay, I will consider these literary references (and sometimes even self-references) or traces as textual hauntings. A trace, being a remnant of something that was once present but no longer is – or in other words, an imprint of an object that has disappeared – it stands as a marker of absence and simultaneous former presence. The same definition can easily be applied to the concept of textual haunting: every text constantly refers to what is not there and thereby defers meaning to something outside itself.[iii] Ultimately, the meaning of the text is dependent on the awareness of what is in fact absent as every text absorbs and transforms other texts (cf. Kristeva 146). *Chatterton* draws references to T.S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1917) and thus stresses the idea of the poet being part of a community of writers who preceded him: "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone … you must set him for contrast and comparison among the dead" (Eliot 761). This setting "among the dead" brings back notions of haunting. The poet or writer, or

any artist for that matter, is thus constantly haunted by ghostly traces of erstwhile originality. *Chatterton* here seems to ask this very same question: is originality possible at all or is any kind of expression nothing but a form of plagiarism?

Now, it is obvious that Ackroyd plays with intertextuality and literary allusions, but rather than appearing to be stifled by what Bloom called "the anxiety of influence" (62), the novel triumphantly flaunts its indebtedness to previous texts. In that vein, *Chatterton* abundantly draws connections to other texts and through this intertextuality foregrounds its own constructedness as a work of fiction, to a certain extent following Eliot's notion of a collective unconscious of art.[iv] Additionally, it relates itself to Barthes's concept of the text being a "tissue of quotations … from innumerable centres of culture" (146).

This "ghostly connection" between Ackroyd's novel and other literary works constitutes a metanarrative comment and destructs the text as a closed literary artefact, illustrating literature's dependence on other texts. Direct quotes from or allusions to works by Blake, Wordsworth, Eliot, Virgil, Tennyson or Wittgenstein are only a few examples: "Ackroyd appears set on overwhelming his readers in a plethora of unending literary borrowing or plagiarism in which he freely admits his own involvement" (Finney, "Postmodernist Play" 9). The most prominent textual trace, however, is probably that of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). The interconnection is not only restricted to Charles finding and becoming obsessed with the portrait of a (presumed) Thomas Chatterton. As already mentioned, the painting seems to mock the novel's protagonist, disrupts his entire life and eventually leads him to perdition. The haunting on the meta-level here automatically and simultaneously functions on the story level as well. As in *Dorian Gray*, Charles seems to be unable to regard the picture for its mere aesthetic value. Instead, looking at the portrait immediately triggers a ghostly connection between the one portrayed and the one perceiving, and from the very first moment that Charles sees the painting, the eyes of Chatterton follow him everywhere, if only in his mind and subconscious. However, the connection to Wilde also becomes evident in the question of what constitutes art in general: the haunting here works on multiple layers, transporting questions of artistic value and aesthetics from Wilde's novel onto Ackroyd's text by constantly questioning the interconnection of originality and forgery.

Interestingly, *Chatterton* does not only draw on other texts on the meta-level, but frequently broaches the issue on the story-level as well. Ackroyd here discloses questions of (self-)plagiarism. He does this not only in the character of Harriet Scrope, who writes her books by copying storylines from antiquated trashy novels, but also in Stewart Merk who 'ghost-paints' for the deceased James Seymour: "And what do you see? The real? The ideal? How do you know the difference?" (*Chatterton* 133).

García-Caro has argued that the tension between cultural tradition and originality is the recurring theme behind these multifarious examples of plagiarism (cf. 163) and indeed, these instances provide a sort of meta-commentary on Ackroyd's novel as a whole by once more foregrounding its construction as a piece of fiction drawing on numerous literary predecessors: "[…] identifying history as 'writing about the trace,' about that which has past (and passed) and is known in the present by its textual traces" (Clingham 51).

One of the few characters who is not himself involved in any case of artistic forgery is Philip Sack, Charles's old friend. Even though Philip is eventually the one who finds out about Harriet Scrope copying her novels from other works of fiction, he himself sticks "to the romantic concept of originality [and is thereby] terrified of the spectral world of language" (Finney "Postmodernist Play" 10). This becomes particularly clear when Philip suddenly feels overwhelmed by the amount of textuality surrounding him in the library's basement: "The books stretched away into 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" (*Chatterton* 71). As Brian Finney has pointed out, Philip fears "the threat that the free play of this textual world poses to his sense of identity and authenticity as a writer" (Finney, *English Fiction* 30). The textual haunting and its assumed deconstructionist consequences cause a writer's block in Philip and it takes a while for him to realise that originality comes with one's own re-shuffling of the texts of the past and that thereby a text achieves distinctiveness.[v] This realisation goes along with what Ackroyd has always claimed – that true genius is in fact related to mimesis – and may therefore explain his preoccupation with the topic of forgery and plagiarism. Finney has argued that "[j]ust as Chatterton assumes the voice of a medieval poet, so Ackroyd, having pored over Chatterton's papers in the British Museum, assumes the eighteenth-century voice and diction of Chatterton in the book" (Finney, *English Fiction* 25). History, thus,

is subject to, while at the same time belonging to, the world of textuality; and narrative is deeply connected to pre-existing plots: "I suppose that's the trouble with history. It's the one thing we have to make up for ourselves" (*Chatterton* 226).

If one sees literary haunting as a "phantom, embodying a secret of the 'other', a crypta of others buried within us" (Ratmoko 5), one can argue that the textual spectres in *Chatterton* are obviously a means to "deciphering the … legacy" of the literary past (ibid.). At the same time, they function to mark the text as a novel that is aware of its own fictitiousness and leave room for multiple interpretations.

Conclusion

It is evident that the use of intertextuality in Ackroyd's novel can be seen as exploring the ramifications of Derrida's notions regarding the 'trace'. The text denies the category of transporting one truth or one meaning while at the same time rescinding the author in accordance with Barthes "the voice loses its origin, the author enters his own death" (Barthes 142). This is further emphasised by the various strata and an intermingling of narrative voices, both on the story and the discourse level.

The double-layered element of haunting in *Chatterton* emphasises the postmodern notion of a plurality of meaning and constantly points to literature being a constructed product representing a merely assumed reality. It thereby self-consciously replicates the gap between artistic creation and extra-textual 'reality' which is becoming increasingly obvious in the postmodern period, and conveys this idea via 'genuine' spectral visitations or textual traces. The historiographic component thus highlights the constructedness of fiction and disrupts any understanding of (postmodern) literature as a realist artefact.

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[i] It is, of course, rather subjective to see the Wychwood storyline as the central plot in the story. However, I shall here consider it to be just that as this storyline obviously functions as a 'bridge' that brings all subplots together.

[ii] As all quotations from this article refer to the online edition, page numbers here indicate the general numbering of the site's print version.

[iii] Cf. Jacques Derrida's concept of the "trace" as elaborated in, for example, *Writing and Difference*: "The trace is not a presence but is rather the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself. The trace has, properly speaking, no place for effacement" (403). See also *Of Grammatology* (65 ff.).

[iv] Even though Eliot has never himself termed his concept a 'collective unconscious', it may be argued that, when drawing a connection to Jung, the parallels between the two notions are rather distinct. Of course, Jung refers to the purely psychological realm. However, just like Eliot's idea of literary influence, Jung's collective unconscious is universal and predates the individual. For a good overview and further information see Jung's *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (1969).

[v] Cf. Frederic Jameson's concept of postmodernism in his *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991): "Postmodernism [...] ceaselessly reshuffles the fragments of preexistent texts, the building blocks of older cultural and social production, in some new and heightened bricolage: metabooks which cannibalize other books, metatexts which collate bits of other texts—such is the logic of postmodernism in general" (96).