

**PETER ACKROYD'S *CHATTERTON*:
HISTORY VS FICTION**

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Öz: Postmodern kuram tarihi geçmişin imgesel yorumu olarak görür ve tarih yazımının kurgu yazımıyla aynı evrelerden geçtiğini öne sürer. Tarihçi tıpkı bir roman yazarı gibi geçmiş olaylardan (açık açık belirtmiş olduğu ya da gizil tuttuğu) amacına yönelik hizmet edenleri seçerken okuyucuya iletmek istediği mesajla örtüşmeyen kısımları eler. Seçmiş olduğu bu olayları ideolojik bağlılıklarını göz önünde bulundurarak öznel şekilde yorumlar, hayal gücünü devreye sokarak olaylar arasındaki boşlukları doldurur ve anlamlı bir bütün oluşturur. Bu bakımdan, tarihin geçmiş gerçekliği olduğu gibi yansıttığı söylenemez ve dolayısıyla bu durum tarihin tarafsızlık iddialarını ortadan kaldırır. Peter Ackroyd, *Chatterton* (1987) adlı romanında tarihçilerin kullanmakta olduğu bu yönteme oldukça benzer bir yöntem benimser. Ackroyd, ünlü şair Thomas Chatterton'ın biyografisindeki boşluklardan yola çıkarak bu boşlukları - birçoğu yazarın resmi biyografisi ile çelişen- hayali olaylarla doldurur ve yazarın hayatını kurgusal bir hikâyeye dönüştürür. Yazar, romanında bir yandan şairin kurgusal hayat öyküsünü yazarken, diğer yandan da tarihyazımı sürecini gözler önüne sererek okurlarının tarih ve kurgu arasında gittikçe kaybolan o ince çizginin farkına varmalarını amaçlar. Bu bağlamda, bu makale Ackroyd'un *Chatterton* romanını temel alarak tarih yazımı ve kurgu yazımı arasındaki benzerlikleri irdelemeyi ve ilgili romanı Linda Hutcheon'ın "tarihyazımsal üstkurmaca" kavramı çerçevesinde incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Peter Ackroyd, Tarihyazımı, Thomas Chatterton, Biyografi, Tarihyazımsal Üstkurmaca, Postmodern Roman.

Introduction

Peter Ackroyd is one of the most important postmodern writers who address the issues of narrative representation and reconstruction of the past and the problematic relation between history and fiction. Highly conscious of ontological questions of postmodernism, Ackroyd displays a deep awareness of the postmodern understanding of history and explores the answers of such questions as whether it is possible to seize the past, how history is interpreted

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and constructed and to what extent historians can represent the past. Like Julian Barnes, Graham Swift, Salman Rushdie and other postmodern writers, Ackroyd adopts Lyotard's incredulity towards metanarratives including history, problematizes traditional history and questions the adequacy of history and the reliability of historical accounts. In most of his novels, Ackroyd reflects his sceptic attitude towards history, plays with the conventions of traditional history, breaks its boundaries and creates a fragmented and unreliable account of the past which is in direct contrast with the linearity and wholeness of traditional history.

Chatterton (1987) is one of these postmodern historical novels in which Ackroyd is concerned with ontological problems of historiography and explores the blurring boundary between history and fiction. Through *Chatterton*, Ackroyd foregrounds the fictionality of history by displaying the striking similarity between historiography and fiction and questions the objectivity and reliability of representations of the past. Allowing the existence of possible alternative histories by ignoring the official history and subverting the ways traditional history is written, *Chatterton* is regarded as what the Canadian academic Linda Hutcheon coined as "historiographic metafiction" (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 5). Thus, the aim of this paper is to explore possible similarities between historiography and fiction within the frame of Ackroyd's *Chatterton*, and to examine the novel in the light of Linda Hutcheon's conceptualization of "historiographic metafiction."

1. Postmodern Challenge to History

Adopting the postmodern understanding of history, Ackroyd rejects the claims of traditional historians that history is objective and reliable similar to empirical sciences. History is traditionally regarded "as an empirical search for external truths corresponding to what was considered to be absolute reality of the past events" (Onega, 1995, p. 12). However, postmodern theorists such as Hayden White and Paul Ricoeur oppose to this idea by asking such questions as:

[...] is it possible to say what really happened in the past, to get to the truth, to reach objective understandings or, if not, is history incorrigibly interpretive? What are historical facts (and indeed are there any such things)? What is bias and what does it mean to say that historians ought to detect it and root it out? Is it possible to empathise with people who lived in the past? Is a scientific history possible or is history essentially an art? What is the status of those couplets that so often appear in definitions of what history is all about: cause and effect, similarity and difference, continuity and change? (Jenkins, 1991, p. 4).

According to such theorists, the objective representation of history is not possible firstly because historians cannot seize the past as it is; they can reach the past only through historical documents written probably by other historians. What historians attain is not the past itself, but representations of the past; thus, the very opposition lies within the fact that history is not equal to the past. Jenkins (1991) clarifies the difference between history and the past as follows:

The past has occurred. It has gone and can only be brought back again by historians in very different media, for example in books, articles, documentaries, etc., not as actual events. The past has gone and history is what historians make of it when they go to work. History is the labour of historians (and/or those acting as if they were historians) and when they meet, one of the first questions they ask each other is what they are working on (p.8).

Having a deep awareness of this difference, Hayden White (1978) argues that history is the historian's interpretation of past events (p. 51). The historian searching for facts about the past comes up against a wide range of historical materials, which leads him to make a choice among these materials. Thus, he selects the appropriate ones in accordance with his intention while omitting others. According to Elisabeth Wesseling (1991), "the historian only selects as noteworthy those historical data that fit into the picture which he has in mind" (p. 126). In other words, the historian begins his search with certain questions and possible answers to these questions in his mind and looks for the facts which will support his argument. This selection is, for Wesseling, also ideological in that the historian is inevitably influenced by and reflects his ideological commitment in his narrative of the past. The process of interpretation of the selected materials undergoes the same influences, as well; that is, how the historian interprets these materials is closely related with what he aims to reveal. Considering this selectivity and influence of ideology and politics, postmodern theorists reject the claim that the past can be truthfully and objectively represented. Accordingly, what the historian presents as "history" can by no means be the actual representation the past; it is only one of the possible interpretations of past events.

When taking into account that history is composed of fragmented and incomplete events, what is meant by the historian's 'interpretation' is virtually to link these fragmented events to one another and create a whole which he calls "history". In order to compose a chronological whole out of pieces of past events, Alun Munslow (1997) states that these events are "correlated and placed within a context, sometimes called the process of colligation, collation, configuration or emplotment, which then leads the historian to generate the 'facts' " (p. 6-7). In other words, these events are turned into facts through the historian's narrativization.

Considering the role of emplotment, narrativization and selectivity in historiography, White asserts possible similarities between historiography and fiction. According to White, the historian composes his narrative of past events in the same way a novelist produces his novel out of imaginary events. As he marks:

The events are *made* into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and highlighting of others, by characterization, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies, and the like-in short, all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or a play (1978, p. 84).

The historian, just as a novelist, chooses a plot to present the historical events he has chosen, fills the gaps between these events with his imagination, sets imaginary relations and creates a story. Bearing in mind that history and fiction are both modes of writing, linguistic constructs and intertextual, Linda Hutcheon (1988), like White, emphasizes the relation between history and fiction by asserting:

[both] are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past (“exertions of the shaping, ordering imagination”). In other words, the meaning and shape are not *in the events*, but *in the systems* which make those past “events” into present historical “facts.” This is not a “dishonest refuge from truth” but an acknowledgement of the meaningmaking function of human constructs (p. 89).

2. Ackroyd's Vision of History

Ackroyd, who is obviously influenced by the theories of Hayden White, clearly displays his skepticism towards history which he regards as a product of the historian whose only difference from a novelist is that the materials he uses are real rather than being imaginary as those of a novelist. In *Chatterton*, Ackroyd employs a working method strikingly similar to that of a historian. He creates a fictional version of the famous poet Thomas Chatterton's life focusing on the gaps in his biography, and filling these gaps with imaginary events, many of which seem to contradict the official history regarding the poet. While writing about the poet's personal history, he also highlights the process of historiography with the purpose of making his reader aware of the blurring boundary between history and fiction.

Reflecting the postmodern theory of history, problematizing the relation between historiography and fiction and underscoring the fictionality of history, *Chatterton* is properly among postmodern historical novels which Linda Hutcheon labelled as historiographic metafiction. By historiographic metafiction, Hutcheon (1998) means “those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” (p. 5). Recalling Patricia Waugh's definition of metafiction as “fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (1984, p. 2), historiographic metafiction displays the process of historiography by both making use of and at the same time subverting the conventions of traditional historiography with the purpose of demonstrating the reader the unreliability and indeterminacy of history.

Although the materials that both historiographic metafiction and traditional historical novels use are the same, namely past events or personages, these two differentiate from each other in terms of how they use these materials. Traditional historical novelists do not make any amendment on historical materials; in other words, they use real events together with imaginary events

without interweaving them. In this sense, Georg Lukacs (1962) asserts in his book entitled *Historical Novel*:

A writer who deals with history cannot chop and change his materials as he likes. Events and destinies have their natural objective weight, their natural, objective proportion. If a writer succeeds in producing a story which correctly reproduces these relationships and proportions, then human and an artistic truth will emerge alongside the historical truths and on the other hand if his history distorts these proportions, then it will distort the artistic picture as well (p. 290).

While writers of traditional historical novels pay attention to preserving the authenticity of historical materials and avoid problematizing the boundary between history and fiction, historiographic metafiction writers aim to blur this boundary by deviating from historical events, blending history with fiction and presenting this blend in a non-chronological order. In such novels, the reader cannot differentiate what is real from what is fictional and the moment they believe in the truthfulness of a historical account, it turns out to be unreal, which shakes their faith and leads them to adopt an incredulous attitude towards any discourse including history.

Defining the difference between postmodern historical fiction, particularly historiographic metafiction, and traditional historical fiction, Wesseling recalls Brian McHale's theories on postmodernism. According to McHale (1987), postmodernist writing deals with ontological issues, that is the nature of existence, while modernist writing deals with epistemological ones (p. 9-10). Applying these terms to historical fiction, Wesseling (1991) argues that "modernist writing focuses on problems of interpretation in historical inquiry, whereas postmodernist writing flaunts alternative histories" (p. 117). Historiographic metafiction, as Wesseling declares, recognizes the silenced, propounds their untold histories and undermines the authority and objectivity of the official history, which is because the official history is regarded as equally fictional as alternative histories. Based on the postmodernist thought that there is not a single reality but realities which are actually linguistic constructs, historiographic metafiction is an assemblage of multiple realities, multiple representations and multiple histories. It does not suggest any objectivity or reliability, rather aims to foreground the multiplicity and unreliability of history.

3. *Chatterton* as a Historiographic Metafiction

Belonging to the category of historiographic metafiction, *Chatterton* functions as a parody of historiography which is reflected in terms of both form and subject matter. Choosing Thomas Chatterton, who is a well-known forger and Romantic poet, as its subject matter, the novel deconstructs the authenticity and originality of historical facts and art by employing various metafictional techniques and games. Before the novel begins, Ackroyd presents a biography of Chatterton, which serves as the official history of Chatterton's life. Chatterton's life is summarized as born in Bristol, beginning to write at the age of fifteen or sixteen after being inspired by the scraps of manuscript that his

mother gave him, composing verses under the name of Rowley by imitating medieval styles, moving to London with the hope of fame and committing suicide by swallowing arsenic in his attic room because of depression at the age of seventeen. Briefing the official biography of Chatterton which can be easily found in any encyclopaedia, Ackroyd intends to create a contradictory situation resulting from the difference between the official history of Chatterton's life and alternative histories that he will introduce in the forthcoming pages of the novel. Ackroyd, who regards both biography and fiction as "aspects of the same process" and being "just writing", creates characters who attempt to create the fictionalized version of Chatterton's life (Ackroyd & Onega, 1996, p. 213).

The plot of the novel is constructed upon four different stories in three different time periods, extracts of which are given just after one-page biography. These four extracts give hints about the stories following: The first story occurs in the eighteenth century and focuses on Thomas Chatterton's own life; the second takes Henry Wallis preparing a portrait of Chatterton's death with his model George Meredith in the nineteenth century as focus; lastly, in the twentieth century another storyline is given based on the attempt of another failed poet Charles Wychwood to represent the truth about the death of Chatterton by collecting historical documents about the poet just like a historian after discovering a portrait of the poet. In this time zone, Ackroyd depicts another story which is about Harriet Scrope who is a plagiarist novelist. These four stories occurring in different periods with different characters are connected to one another through Chatterton just in the same way that "everything [in Wallis' portrait] moved towards the center, towards Thomas Chatterton" (Ackroyd, 1987, p. 164)². Presented in fragments, interpenetrating into one another in a non-chronological order, each story serves as a means with the purpose that, in Onega Susana's words, "the protagonists of each story, the visionary poets Thomas Chatterton, George Meredith, and Charles Wychwood, can easily cross their respective historical boundaries and interact with each other" (1999, p. 60).

The novel begins with Charles Wychwood's discovering a painting which reveals a portrait of a dying man in an antique shop where he has gone to sell some books so as to support his family. The moment he notices the portrait, he forgets about the financial problems of his family and trades his books in return for the portrait. Charles, highly impressed by the portrait, spends all his time staring at it trying to remember who the man in the portrait is and finally finds out that he resembles Thomas Chatterton, the forger poet, with the help of his friend Philip. Later he discovers that the portrait dates back to 1805 although Chatterton is reported to have died in 1770. Upon this discovery, Charles's curiosity leads him to find the owner of the painting and acquire some

² Only page number will be given in the following quotations retrieved from the novel.

documents about Chatterton. Keenly examining these documents, Charles finds some manuscripts which end with the initials T.C. but actually belong to William Blake. This discovery together with Chatterton's being a forger leads Charles to infer the possibility that Chatterton might have faked his own death. Charles then notices the incomplete autobiography of Chatterton in which he declares his plan to forge his death and to go on writing his works under different names since he fears that people might have learnt about his forgery in his poetry. Having failed in publishing his poems, Charles gets excited with the idea of discovering something unknown about Chatterton and decides to write the poet's biography which will gain him fame and money that he couldn't manage to attain with his poems. Although the documents Charles has found are not complete, he starts writing the preface for the poet's biography by filling the gaps with his imagination as follows:

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 (p. 127).

A week before his death, Charles writes this incomplete preface but is not able to finish it because of his health problems. Through Charles' attempt to write a personal history of Chatterton's life, Ackroyd manages to depict the process of historiography. Charles begins his search for truths due to his personal interest, looks for the facts that will support his assumption and intends to compose a well-made story out of the historical fragments of the poet's life. What drives Charles into setting his historical research is, in Beverley Southgate's words, "a tentative hypothesis underpinned by a possibly unstated, but nonetheless specific purpose" which underlies every attempt to write history (1996, p.7). Each historian, just like Charles, approaches the past events with a picture in his mind and aims to draw this picture with the historical documents he selects; thus, all history is, as Jenkins (1991) states, not "as the history of past people's minds' then, but 'all history as the history of historian's minds' " (p. 57). In other words, it is the historian himself that turns the past events into facts just as Charles does. With Charles' version of Chatterton's biography, Ackroyd not only reveals to the reader how history is a human construct, but also highlights the multiplicity of histories. Charles challenges the official biography of the forger poet with his alternative history: in a one-page biography given in the beginning of the novel, Chatterton is reported to have committed suicide by swallowing arsenic due to his being depressed by poverty and failure; however, the poet is, in Charles' version, claimed to have forged his death just like forging his poetry in order to contentedly go on with his forgery and make money out of it. Ackroyd presents these two contradictory accounts of Chatterton's death together in the novel with the purpose of making the reader

grasp the fact that the official history might have been constructed in the same way Charles makes up his story of the poet's life.

Just after Charles' death, Harriet Scrope, who hired Charles to write her autobiography, takes up his documents with the purpose of gaining a triumph over literary critics by completing the alternative history of Chatterton's life. Harriet, who is a plagiarist novelist who takes her plots from an obscure Victorian novelist's works, does not refrain herself from receiving the documents about Chatterton and the portrait from Charles's wife by lying to her that she will publish Charles' poems and without mentioning her real intention. Soon Harriet discovers that the portrait is fake while at the same time Philip, who is a friend of Charles, learns that the autobiographical manuscripts of Chatterton were actually written by Chatterton's publisher after the poet's death and they are fake as well when he delivers them to the man from whom Charles has taken these documents. Thus, it is understood that Charles' assumption about the death of Chatterton has no actual grounding since the documents that he cites as evidence are all forgery.

Unfolding the whole process of Charles' writing the biography of Chatterton, Ackroyd problematizes historiography by displaying the fact that the historian creates the truth about the past. As Frank Ankersmit (1996) asserts, since it is impossible to experience the past exactly as it was, documents serve as clues that help the historian "to formulate hypotheses with regard to what the past has actually been like" (p. 48). In other words, what the historian knows about the past is limited to the documents he is able to attain. The historian bases his assumptions on these documents which he interprets according to the picture in his mind; however, what is problematic about this process of interpretation and creating hypothesis is the reliability of these documents. One can never be sure of the reliability of a human construct as seen in the case of the autobiographical manuscript of Chatterton, which directs the reader to essentially question the reliability of history written by being based on such documents.

Ackroyd creates a third version of Chatterton's death by presenting the scenes of Chatterton's last days parallel to the death of Charles. In this version, Chatterton is portrayed as full of vitality, prolific and optimistic in contrast to what is written in the official version of his life. The only problem that he seems to have is the venereal disease that he has come down with after having his first sexual intercourse with his landlady. Desiring to recover from this illness, he learns from one of his friends that drinking a mixture of arsenic and laudanum will help to heal it. On the night that he uses this mixture, he doesn't remember the exact measure of these chemical elements and drinks them randomly: "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" (p. 224). Thus, on his bed with a smile on his

face with the hope of healing, he accidentally and unintentionally dies of overdose.

Along with the one in the official biography, Ackroyd offers two alternative versions of Chatterton's death which all contradict with one another. In the official one, Chatterton is presented as having committed suicide by swallowing arsenic due to being "apparently worn down by his struggle against poverty and failure" (p. 1). In the second version, it is claimed that he forged his own death and continued to write under the name of William Blake since people began to realize that he is a forger. Lastly, he is revealed as happy with his life and his poetry but accidentally killed himself with arsenic while actually trying to cure himself. Through three different versions of Chatterton's death, Ackroyd depicts how the same event can be interpreted differently and turned into facts by the historians, which leads the reader to question the validity of the official version as well: "each biography described a quite different poet: even the simplest observation by one was contradicted by another, so that nothing seemed certain" (p. 127).

This discrepancy among the versions of Chatterton's biography blurs the distinction between what is real and what is imaginary because "the real world is just a succession of interpretations. Everything which is written down immediately becomes a kind of fiction" (p. 40). This reminds the reader of how meaning is constructed through writing; in Hutcheon's words, "[t]he real exists (and existed), but our understanding of it is always conditioned by discourses, by our different ways of talking about it" (1988, p. 157). Ackroyd highlights that since the real which existed in the past cannot be experienced as it occurred, it is brought to the present through its present interpretations. As Ackroyd states, "...the past is absorbed within that present so that all previous moments exist concurrently in every present moment" (qtd. in Appleyard, 1989, p. 54). That is, what is claimed to be history is just one of the representations of the past which are as fictional as the novel, which is because the moment the past event is written; it severs all its ties with reality and turns into fiction.

In *Chatterton*, Ackroyd problematizes not only the written representations of the past but also its visual representations by depicting the process of Henry Wallis' portraying Chatterton's death. Wallis draws a painting of the poet's death by using George Meredith as a model by composing a realistic setting in the attic where Chatterton lived. By making use of realistic decorum and costumes, Wallis is sure that he will create a realistic demonstration of Chatterton's death; however, it is obvious that he has no access to see how Chatterton died although he insists that he "can only draw what [he] see[s]" (p. 133). What he knows about Chatterton's death is limited with the official biography which is given in the beginning of the novel. He establishes a realistic setting which is, he assumes, similar to that of Chatterton and has Meredith wear the eighteenth-century clothes. Nonetheless, what he sees is not Chatterton himself, but Meredith who strives to pretend to be Chatterton in the

way Wallis has instructed him, which makes the reader pose the question “Is it Meredith or Chatterton or Wallis’ imagination on the painting?” Creating the same problematic situation with Wallis’s painting of Chatterton’s death as he does with the biography of the poet, Ackroyd points out that “[...]the greatest realism is also the greatest fakery” (p. 139). In this sense, Brian Finney (1992) 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.” (p. 255).

Throughout the whole novel, Ackroyd constantly deals with the idea of fakery by choosing a narrative technique which is based on pastiche and intertextuality. He introduces Chatterton as a forger poet “forming new and happy combinations” out of the works of medieval poets (p. 58). Chatterton describes his method of creating his poetry as follows:

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

Just like Chatterton attaining intertextuality, Harriet also plagiarizes the novels of a Victorian novelist and tries to hide this fact from everyone. The issue of fakery is valid for visual representations as well. Wallis draws the painting of Chatterton taking into consideration the official biography which is equally unreliable as other alternative histories while Charles’ wife Vivien works in a gallery where the paintings of famous artists are imitated and sold by being claimed to be original. Moreover, Charles attempts to write a biography of Chatterton by interpreting the autobiographical manuscripts which are fake as well. In this sense, Manguel states:

[Ackroyd] tells us, repeatedly, that fiction is deceit. That all art is forgery [...] Then he tells us a few facts and allows us to mark them as true or false. Within the fiction, we put them down as true because-we try to play this game as best we can—they are false in a historical sense, and therefore fiction [...] Ackroyd has always been interested in the play between the reader’s and the writer’s fictions (and their realities) (qtd. In Gibson & Wolfrey, 2000, p. 125)

As Manguel marks in his statement above, Ackroyd first constructs facts, then proves them to be unreal; by this way, he reverses the binary oppositions between forgery and authenticity; imitation and originality; representation and reality. By blurring the boundaries between these concepts, he plants the seeds of incredulity in the reader towards the nature of art and history. Unable to distinguish what is original from what is imitation in painting, the reader fails in understanding what is real and what is imaginary in history.

Conclusion

As the product of a novelist who adopts the postmodern incredulity towards history as a metanarrative, *Chatterton* problematizes history as a human construct which has no difference from a novel in terms of its use of the same narrative techniques. Ackroyd depicts history as an artifact and a discourse which has no right to claim any objectivity or reliability since history is only a representation of the past in the present actions; that is, in Hutcheon's words, "a dialogue with the past in the light of the present" (1988, p. 19). In the light of this, Greg Clingham (1998) rightfully asserts that "Ackroyd's novel conceptualizes the difference between then and now-repeats and defers the closure of history as a metaphysical system-by holding up a mirror to that trace and allowing us to see it more fully in operation" (p. 40). As Clingham remarks, Ackroyd mirrors the process of historiography by introducing three alternative representation of the same event that are equally unreliable and equally fictional, which is crucial in placing the novel in the category of historiographic metafiction. The novel corresponds exactly to Hutcheon's description of historiographic metafiction:

[it], like both historical fiction and narrative history, cannot avoid dealing with the problem of the status of their "facts" and of the nature of their evidence, their documents... It rejects projecting present beliefs and standards onto the past and asserts, in strong terms, the specificity and particularity of the individual past event. Nevertheless, it also realizes that we are epistemologically limited in our ability to know that past, since we are both spectators of and actors in the historical process... [It] suggests a distinction between "events" and "facts" that is one shared by many historians...[It] often points to this fact by using the paratextual conventions of historiography (especially footnotes) to both inscribe and undermine the authority and objectivity of historical sources and explanations (1988, p. 122-123).

Ackroyd successfully first constructs history as a metanarrative by borrowing the conventions of traditional history, but then deconstructs it in order to display its constructedness. In this sense, the novel challenges the authority of the traditional concept of history as "pure fact, independent of individual perception, ideology, or the process of selection necessitated simply by creating a written narrative" (Lee, 1990, p. 29). Rather it depicts history as a well-made story in a chronological order out of fragments of past events and portrays the historian just like a novelist who turns historical materials into fiction by employing the same narrative techniques that a novelist uses. Finally Ackroyd explicitly demonstrates that the historian, just like Charles who is "eating the past" (p. 15), takes past events away from their authentic place, disturbs their originality through the use of narrative techniques and turns them into fictional representations which no longer have ties with reality.

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PETER ACKROYD'S CHATTERTON: HISTORY VS FICTION

Abstract: Postmodern theory regards history as an imaginative construction of the past, and suggests that historiography undergoes the same process as fiction writing. The historian, just like a novelist, selects some past events in accordance with her/his stated or unstated purpose

while omitting others which s/he finds irrelevant to the message that s/he aims to convey to the reader. S/He interprets these events subjectively by taking her/his ideological commitment into consideration, and using her/his imagination constructs a meaningful whole by filling the gaps between these events. In this sense, history cannot truly reflect past reality, and therefore cannot claim objectivity. In his novel *Chatterton* (1987), Peter Ackroyd employs a working method strikingly similar to that of a historian. He creates a fictional version of the famous poet Thomas Chatterton's life focusing on the gaps in his biography, and filling these gaps with imaginary events, many of which seem to contradict the official history regarding the poet. While writing the poet's personal history, he also highlights the process of historiography with the purpose of making his reader aware of the blurring boundary between history and fiction. Thus, the aim of this paper is to explore possible similarities between historiography and fiction writing within the frame of Ackroyd's *Chatterton*, and to examine the novel in the light of Linda Hutcheon's conceptualization of "historiographic metafiction."

Keywords: Peter Ackroyd, *Chatterton*, Historiography, Postmodern Fiction, Biography, Historiographic Metafiction.