

THREE BORGESIAN CARTOGRAPHERS IN SEARCH
OF (HI)STORIES: E. L. DOCTOROW'S *RAGTIME*,
MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S *THE ENGLISH
PATIENT*, AND PETER ACKROYD'S
CHATTERTON

By

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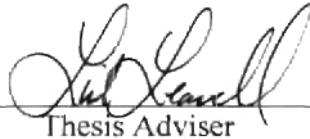
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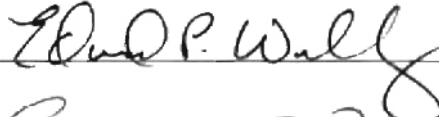
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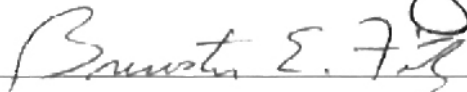
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. HISTORICAL AND FICTIONAL (TRANS)FORMATIONS IN E. L. DOCTOROW'S <i>RAGTIME</i>	16
III. FICTIONAL AND (INTER)NATIONAL PATIENTS OF THE WORLD.....	39
IV. REVISING THE HISTORY BOOK THROUGH FICTION: A LOOK INTO PETER ACKROYD'S REPRESENTATION, PLAGIARISM, AND INTERTEXTUALITY IN <i>CHATTERTON</i>	69
V. CONCLUSION.....	95
WORKS CITED.....	97

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“You may not be interested in history, but History is interested in you.” (Leon Trotsky)

In his satiric parable about history, fiction, reading, and interpretation called “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*,” Jorge Luis Borges creates an imaginary French author who transcribes Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*. Interestingly, the narrator of *Don Quixote*, who may be identified as Cervantes, explains that he is transcribing a translation of a history written in Arabic. Borges’ narrator argues that Pierre Menard has not copied Cervantes’ masterpiece word by word, but written it himself. After describing Menard’s sustained effort, the narrator compares a passage from Cervantes with the same words supposedly written by Menard and concludes that the latter’s passage – though identical with Cervantes’ – is far richer:

It is a revelation to compare the *Don Quixote* of Pierre Menard with that of Miguel de Cervantes. Cervantes, for example, wrote the following (Part I, Chapter IX):

... truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future’s counselor.

This catalog of attributes, written in the seventeenth century, and written by the ‘ingenious layman’ Miguel de Cervantes, is mere rhetorical praise of history. Menard, on the other hand, writes:

... truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future's counselor.

History, the *mother* of truth! – the idea is staggering. Menard, a contemporary of William James, defines history not as a *delving into* reality but as the very *fount* of reality. Historical truth, for Menard, is not “what happened”; it is what we *believe* happened. The final phrases – *exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future's counselor* – are brazenly pragmatic ... Menard has (perhaps unwittingly) enriched the slow and rudimentary art of reading of a new technique – the technique of deliberate anachronism and fallacious attribution. (Borges 94-5)

In other words, Menard's passage – written in the twentieth century – should make us rethink notions such as history and truth. Borges' satire is directed to the readers, who are reading the same words that Cervantes wrote in the seventeenth century but who no longer have any access to them because history has interposed between the culture in which they were written and our own. That is why the twentieth-century readers might interpret Cervantes' text differently because they have another perspective on life, culture, and history. On the one hand, history disrupts the close contact between generations and centuries and maintains this contact through texts; history both erodes the past and recreates it.

Our knowledge of historical truths starts with the history book and perhaps ends even while we are reading it; soon we realize that history has been transformed into fiction invented more or less by historians to support their theories. Historical truths

become problematic and slippery whenever one tries to disentangle them. The paradoxical nature of history lies in the fact that the past exists, but not for the people of the present. The more one attempts to unravel the past, the more one fictionalizes it and transforms it into personal interpretation. Historians do not have full access to history because they do not possess the necessary means for uncovering it completely. They work only with representations of history such as paintings, photographs, documents, reports, and archives that are themselves textual interpretations. The gap left empty by history is filled in by fiction, stories, interpretations, plots, subplots, theories, schemes, and intrigues.

Recurrent tendencies, such as blurring the boundaries between fiction and history and calling attention to the constructedness of history through discourse, abound in the works of E. L. Doctorow, Michael Ondaatje, and Peter Ackroyd. In their novels *Ragtime*, *The English Patient*, and *Chatterton*, they demonstrate how past events, monuments, or processes become fictitious. The juxtaposition of history and fiction in their novels align them with cultural philosophers such as Richard Rorty, Jean-François Lyotard, and Michel Foucault, who all reveal the fictional nature of grand-narratives. Since antiquity, critics have mused over the relationship between history and fiction. Aristotle, for instance, sees history and fiction (or poetry as he calls it) as antithetical subjects because “the historian,” he argues, “narrates events that have actually happened, whereas the poet writes about things as they might possibly occur” (48). Aristotle gives more credit to poetry, which is “more philosophical and more significant than history, for poetry is more concerned with the universal, and history more with the individual” (48). The distinctions mapped out by Aristotle are disregarded by twentieth-century critics because,

on the one hand, history is not regarded as a reliable domain that narrates truthfully the “events that actually happened” and, on the other hand, history and fiction are not separated anymore, but complementary.

Recent criticism stresses the textual and therefore fictional nature of history. Frederic Jameson sees narration as a means to create meaning in the chaos of the historical event. R. G. Collingwood defines the historian’s role as a mental activity “envisaging for himself the situation in which Caesar stood, and thinking for himself the situation and the possible ways of dealing with it. The history of thought, and therefore all history, is the re-enactment of past thought in the historian’s own mind” (215). Hayden White posits that historiography is a poetic construct in the sense that one narrates and interprets when one writes history. The historical work, he says, is “a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse” (*Metahistory* ix).¹ Furthermore, White believes that because historical or nonhistorical discourse is achieved through narrative, “one can produce an imaginary discourse about historical events that may not be less ‘true’ for being imaginary” (*The Content of the Form* 57). In his books, *Time and Narrative* and *History and Truth*, Paul Ricoeur also argues for the interweaving of history with fiction. In addition to viewing history as a mode of knowledge, Michel Foucault claims that we have access to the reality of the past only via representations, which hinders us from knowing the real.

A critic who writes extensively about the unreliability of history and about the fortunate meeting of history and fiction in historical novels is Linda Hutcheon. In her prominent books on postmodernism and in numerous articles, she emphasizes how history is de-constructed and re-constructed by writers in their works. The novelists who

write literary texts based on historical events have to respect – according to Hutcheon – at least two sets of conventions:

Like historians, they [writers] must use ‘emplotting’ strategies of exclusion, emphasis, and subordination of the elements of a story, and they must also deal with ‘a veritable chaos of events *already constituted*.’² But they have another set of conventions to confront as well: those of fiction. What we end up with is a new, curiously paradoxical form that we call ‘*historiographic metafiction*’ rather than historical fiction. (“Running in the Family” 302)

Historiographic metafiction according to Hutcheon displays both “a world of fiction ... self-consciously presented as a constructed one [and] also a world of public experience” (*Politics* 36).³ In *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, she argues that historiographic metafiction incorporates literature, history, and theory and that “its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs ... is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past” (5). In the same study, she defines historiographic metafiction as a domain that challenges notions such as historical truth and accurate knowledge of the past:

Historiographic metafiction refutes the natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact or fiction. It refuses the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their major claim to truth from that identity. This kind of postmodern fiction

also refuses the relegation of the extratextual past to the domain of historiography in the name of the autonomy of art. (93)

Historiographic metafiction cancels the truth-falsity binary that dominated traditional historiography and replaces it with the multiple truth tendency employed by postmodernism. Hutcheon demonstrates that history itself becomes a text because it can only be recovered via texts. We know the public and historical world today through discourses and texts or, as Hutcheon puts it, “traces of [past] historical events” (*Politics* 36). The past existed, but it can only be (re)constructed by the people of the present, who turn it into a text. We only have representations of the past that constitute the writers’ foundation for their fictions. Consequently, in historiographic metafiction, the historical truth (if it ever existed) becomes fictional truth or multiple fictional truths.

Not only do fiction writers transform the past into a fictional reconstruction, but they also rewrite the past in a creative way. Hutcheon includes in the term *parody* the authors’ use of ironic quotation, intertextuality, appropriation, and pastiche (*Politics* 93).⁴ For instance, Peter Ackroyd and to some extent E. L. Doctorow and Michael Ondaatje play with intertextuality and ironic quotations.⁵ Postmodern parody is important because it is, as Hutcheon puts it, “both deconstructively critical and constructively creative” (*Politics* 98), deconstructively critical because the authors scrutinize and criticize the past and constructively creative because parody brings a unique and altered past into present. In other words, parody with all the ramifications enumerated by Hutcheon, is another device – used by the authors of historiographic metafiction – to bring the past in the present.

Hutcheon gives many examples of authors of different nationalities that write historiographic metafiction: Christa Wolf, Salman Rushdie, Michael Coetzee, John Fowles, Julian Barnes, E. L. Doctorow, Umberto Eco, Gabriel García Márquez, Italo Calvino, Milan Kundera, William Faulkner, Don DeLillo, Peter Ackroyd, Graham Swift, Ronald Sukenick, Timothy Findley, John Dos Passos, D. M Thomas, Michael Ondaatje, E. M. Foster, and Thomas Pynchon. In her studies, Hutcheon alludes to all three authors that I examine in depth but comments on their works only briefly. Hutcheon is more interested in defining the concept of historiographic metafiction and in proving how this concept is reflected in different authors' novels than in a detailed analysis of the works of authors who write historiographic metafiction. I will analyze closely three historiographic metafiction – *Ragtime* (1975), *Chatterton* (1987), and *The English Patient* (1993) – written by three living English-speaking authors: E. L. Doctorow (b. 1931), Peter Ackroyd (b. 1949), and Micheal Ondaatje (b. 1943). The three authors and their novels belong to three different national and literary spaces: American, British, and Canadian. The authors' nationalities are significant because the three novels allude to their national identities through their characters, their themes, and their settings. Moreover, the novels were written during three different decades of the twentieth century – the 70s, the 80s, and the 90s – so these authors cover various time periods in English postmodernism.

Recent critics distinguish between historical novels and historiographic metafiction. Although the authors of historiographic metafiction imitate to some extent the traditional historical novel written even before the eighteenth century, they question notions of truth and history. For instance, Susana Onega argues that “historiographic

metafictions differ from traditional historical novels in that the former do not seek historical accuracy and realistic verisimilitude but, on the contrary, challenge the reparability of the two discourses” (*Metafiction and Myth* 1). The critics’, writers’, and readers’ attitudes toward history and truth changed in the twentieth century insofar as history is not regarded as a reliable domain that renders the past accurately. As far as the British historical novel is concerned, it is said that Sir Walter Scott created it. Avrom Fleishman’s study of the English historical novel includes the following authors: Scott, Dickens, Thackeray, Reade, Eliot, Shorthouse, Pater, Hardy, Conrad, and Woolf. However, the British postmodern authors who write historiographic metafiction – Durrell, Fowles, Swift, Barnes, Palfrey, Ackroyd, Byatt and so on – are more interested in parody, ironic games with language, and intertextuality than the American and Canadian authors of historiographic metafiction.⁶ Onega claims that the British postmodern authors combine their artistic creativity with critical awareness (*Metafiction and Myth* 3). She also believes that the British postmodern authors have an appetite for “irony and paradox, besides the metafictional foregrounding of their created worlds ... They all attempt to retreat into history and to blur the ontological boundaries between history, myth, and fantasy” (*Metafiction and Myth* 3). British historiographic fiction evolved from the writers’ bombastic rendering of the historical events to their cultural and literary techniques such as irony, paradox, and intertextuality. In *Chatterton*, for instance, Peter Ackroyd plays with notions such as plagiarism, intertextuality, and appropriation. In addition, Ackroyd alludes to his nationality in his novel because he describes the British artistic world in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries – a world full of poets, painters, biographers, and art critics.

Because the United States is a relatively young country, the historical genre has been less fertile there than in Europe. However, events such as the American Revolution, the Civil War, or the Westward movement triggered patriotic feelings in American writers who wanted to describe these historical events. Ernest Leisy argues that the historical novel in America “satisfies a desire for national homogeneity. It helps us realize the sacrifice for ideas and ideals, the sweat and blood that have made democracy work” (4). The American writers who base their fiction upon history usually focus on local historical events; they emphasize episodes from American history or the importance of patriotism and nation. Postmodern authors, however, have an ironic and more critical attitude towards American historical past. Authors such as Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and E. L. Doctorow present America as torn by disorder and chaos on the one hand and play and parody on the other. In *Ragtime*, Doctorow reveals an America in flux during the first decade of the twentieth century. The social, economic, and political changes shape the country’s as well as its citizens’ identities.

Speaking of Canadian literature, Keith argues that “For many years Canada has chafed under a sense of Third World status in cultural affairs, especially vis-à-vis our southern neighbor. Only recently have Canadian authors begun to appear with any regularity in the big anthologies of literature in English” (5). Because Canada itself and its people had to find their identity, a main part of their literature deals with this quest for selfhood. Thus, the Canadian historical novel, like the American one, poses questions of national identity.⁷ Klooss believes that America is depicted in many historiographic metafiction as the global economic power while Great Britain is no longer seen as the center of an empire. Canada, however, has never been a global economic or cultural

center like America or Great Britain, and while it struggles for cultural and political sovereignty, it remains somewhere in the middle. Klooss argues, furthermore, that Canadian literature is similar to the post-colonial cultures of Africa, Australia, New Zealand, India, the West Indies, and other countries that find themselves between European influence and the impulse to create an identity of their own (Klooss 60). The Canadian postmodern author, Michael Ondaatje, emphasizes this quest for identity in his historiographic metafiction. In *The English Patient* the characters' national identities are in flux and they overcome adverse circumstances to find out who they are and where their home is.

Postmodern authors of different nationalities – American, British, Canadian, Italian, Spanish, German, Russian, Polish, and Serbian – share an interest in history and historiographic metafiction. History seems to unite nations and bridge cultures. Consequently, a look into three historiographic metafiction written by three authors, who share the same mother tongue but have different nationalities, links notions such as history and fiction to the authors' spatial and cultural coordinates. Since there are so many authors of different nationalities who write historiographic metafiction, critics should examine the role of the authors' ethnicities in their rewriting of history. While there are many critical studies on the theory of historiographic metafiction and on single authors who write in the genre, there are few studies that compare more than one or two authors. Books such as *Historiographic Metafiction in Modern American and Canadian Literature* and *Studies on Canadian Literature* are collections of essays on individual authors. There are many articles that compare the authors of historiographic metafiction, but few extensive comparisons beyond the theses and dissertations by Polly

Elizabeth Detels, Timislav Longinovici, and Laura Frances Moss. Few studies of historiographic metafiction take into account the authors' nationalities and ethnicities. Because of the very nature of national and international historiography, the authors of historiographic metafiction must be understood within an international context.

Despite Ackroyd's, Ondaatje's, and Doctorow's various nationalities, their novels advance similar themes; *Chatterton*, *The English Patient*, and *Ragtime* all argue for the discursive nature of history. The authors search for Chatterton's lost manuscripts, Almásy's traces in the sands of the desert, or America's past and discover various stories and fictitious histories about them. The process of recreating, reinventing, and rewriting history is limitless; one can change, magnify, and fictionalize history *ad infinitum*. In "On Exactitude in Science," Borges speaks of the perfection attained by cartographers who built maps that occupied an entire territory: "In time, those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it" (325). When the empires declined, their ruined maps became relics exposed in a museum. Borges ironizes the cartographers' consistent yet utopian need for historical and scientific exactitude. I named the three British, Canadian, and American authors Borgesian cartographers because, like Borges' characters, they enlarge the fictional territory of history. Their version of history is rewritten and transformed into a chimerical fantasy.

Several questions arise. How are the authors rewriting history? What does the rewriting of history involve? How are their nationalities connected with their historical and fictional quests? All three authors attempt to rewrite history in their novels, and in doing that, they reveal and affirm characteristics of their national identities. History and

the rewriting of history are culturally and nationally oriented and this fact is represented differently in the works of these three authors. They attempt to rewrite (hi)stories that are connected to their nation and place of origin.

For Doctorow, history is local and national; in his bestseller *Ragtime* he focuses on the history of America in the first decades of the twentieth century. Like Ondaatje, Doctorow rewrites history by rewriting his characters' national identities. Doctorow's characters evolve throughout the novel because they change their destinies or national identities and by doing that, they shape the identity of America as well. Doctorow's vision of America – emerging from all the plots and subplots of the novel – is both nostalgic and ironic. The author invents incidents in the lives of famous historical personalities and at the same time makes these historical personages meet his fictional ones. The novel becomes a demonstration of how fiction changes or revises our understanding of history. Doctorow mixes historical and fictional details and focuses on ironies, symbols, and metaphors that describe American society

As a Canadian author, Ondaatje focuses more on rewriting and fictionalizing international history; he involves almost the whole world in his revision of history. Not only are Ondaatje's characters involved in a major international historical event, World War II, but his characters also rewrite and change their identities throughout the novel. Residing in a ruined Italian villa or in an Africa desert, the characters themselves become international. Moreover, the scenery and the landscape are also prone to change and rewriting. Ondaatje – who was born in India, lived in England, and eventually settled in Canada – writes about Canadian, Indian, English, and Hungarian characters who all meet in Italy.

For Ackroyd, the revision of history is connected to culture and art, more specifically to literature, language, and painting. As Susana Onega shows, British postmodern writers have exploited techniques such as irony, intertextuality, and appropriation in their writing. Ackroyd is indeed the most playful and ironical of the three authors under analysis; he plays with (mis)quotations, plagiarism, multiple plots, and copies more than Doctorow and Ondaatje do. Ackroyd also writes about a British artistic world populated with writers and painters and focuses on how representation in painting becomes a means of fictionalizing and changing history. In fact, with all his interests in literature, painting, and language, Ackroyd accentuates in *Chatterton* the British interest in literature and art in general.

If I could summarize the three novels under discussion – without trivializing their authors' historical endeavors – I would have to say that Doctorow produces a national historiographic metafiction, Ondaatje creates an international historiographic metafiction, and Ackroyd writes a literary historiographic metafiction. I start with Doctorow, who creates a local history of his country of origin, I continue with Ondaatje's international vision of the world, and end with Ackroyd's literary and fictitious variant of history.

Notes:

¹ In *Metahistory*, Hayden White argues for the textuality of history and focuses on ways in which Enlightenment and post-Romantic historians were in fact literary.

² The quote inside Hutcheon's belongs to Hayden White (see *Metahistory*)

³ Before Linda Hutcheon invented the term "historiographic metafiction," critics such as Avrom Fleishman, Alessandro Manzoni, and Georg Lukacs discussed historical fiction/novels. Later on, in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon argues that the poetics of postmodernism is realized in a particular type of novels called historiographic metafiction. These "well-known and popular" novels are "intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (5). Hutcheon states that historiographic metafiction does not mirror reality; instead, "fiction is offered as another of the discourses by which we construct our versions of reality" (40).

⁴ Linda Hutcheon wrote extensively on postmodern parody and irony. In her book entitled *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*, she both defends parody – which has been regarded in the last centuries as quite trivial – and believes that for twentieth-century authors, parody "is one of the major modes of formal and thematic construction of texts" (2). She further argues that parody "is related to burlesque, travesty, pastiche, plagiarism, quotation, and allusion, but remains distinct from them. It shares with them a restriction of focus: its repetition is always of another discursive text" (43). However, parody transforms the past into "a new and often ironic context [and at the same time] it makes similar demands upon the reader, but these are demands more on his or her knowledge and recollection than on his or her openness to play" (5). Furthermore, in a 1980 study, Hutcheon claims that in metafiction, parody

“invites a more literary reading [and] a recognition of literary codes” (25). Parody is not restricted only to mockery, ridicule, or imitation. Hutcheon states that “metafiction parodies and imitates as a way to a new form which is just as serious and valid, as a synthesis, as the form it dialectically attempts to surpass” (25). One of Hutcheon’s recent studies, *Irony’s Edge*, deals with the interrelations between irony and parody.

⁵ In an article called “‘The Pastime of the Past Time’: Fiction, History, Historiographical Metafiction,” Linda Hutcheon argues that postmodern intertextuality closes the gap between past and present and rewrites the past and places it into a new context (487). She also contends that intertextuality “uses and abuses . . . intertextual echoes, inscribing their powerful allusions and then subverting that power through irony” (487). For more explanations and comments on intertextuality, see *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction* edited by Patrick O’Donnell and Robert Con Davis.

⁶ In “British Historiographic Metafiction in the 1980s,” Susana Onega divides British authors in the tradition of historiographic metafiction into two generations. She claims that “The older one, including Golding, Fowles, Durrell and Byatt, goes back to the fifties and sixties and provides a link between Modernism and Postmodernism. The younger generation can be divided into two: those novelists whose literary careers started in the sixties or seventies, with Maureen Duffy, John Banville and Jim Crace and the generation of 80s *stricto sensu*, with Graham Swift, Jeanette Winterson, Julian Barnes, Peter Ackroyd, Rose Tremain, and Charles Palliser” (50).

⁷ Wolfgang Klooss divides Canadian historical fiction into three groups: historical romance, historiographic narrative, and postmodern historiographic (meta-)fiction (60).

CHAPTER II

HISTORICAL AND FICTIONAL (TRANS)FORMATIONS IN

E. L. DOCTOROW'S *RAGTIME*

"History ... is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake." (James Joyce)

"History is a nightmare during which I'm trying to get a good night's sleep." (Saul Bellow)

"History is a nightmare which we can best survive by rewriting it." (E. L. Doctorow)

In *Ragtime*, E. L. Doctorow addresses several aspects of American history at the beginning of the twentieth century. Although Doctorow shares Ackroyd's tendency toward playfulness and humor, his approach differs from Ackroyd's literary and fictional depiction of British history. Doctorow centers on the historical and social events of a clearly specified period: the Ragtime Era in America. Doctorow's nation-oriented novel also differs from Ondaatje's more inclusive and international interpretation of history. Doctorow refers specifically to the first decade of twentieth-century America, while Ondaatje analyzes the implications of an international evil: World War II. Nevertheless, like the other two authors, Doctorow focuses on the process of rewriting history through fiction.

In an interview with Paul Levine, Doctorow confesses: "history as written by historians is clearly insufficient. And the historians are the first to express skepticism over this 'objectivity' of the discipline. A lot of people discovered after World War II and in the fifties that much of what was taken by the younger generations as history was

highly interpreted history” (58-9). Doctorow offers in *Ragtime* an interpreted and fictional version of twentieth-century American history. Although *Ragtime* leaves the impression that this version is an almost reportorial account of American social life, the novel mixes persons that lived and events that happened in the twentieth century with fictional characters and events. Even if some characters and events are verifiable, for the most part, the author invents and recreates their history.¹ Doctorow achieves that by rewriting and changing his characters’ lives and identities and by inventing plots and stories about them. Moreover, Doctorow emphasizes the economic and social changes that took place in America during the Ragtime period and translates these transformations by rewriting the characters’ identities.² America at the beginning of the last century was on its way to becoming an economic power and at the same time it had to deal with poverty, waves of immigrants, and the blacks’ struggle for equality. Paradoxically, America was trying to search for its own identity while changing, integrating these changes, and consequently rewriting continuously its identity. Similarly, Doctorow’s characters change and rewrite their identity in order to find their own identity. The author juxtaposes the changes that occurred in the country with the fluctuations in the characters’ lives, and by doing that, he shows that history itself is in flux and is rewritten continuously. In the same interview with Paul Levine, the author contends: “It’s possible to cut and slice history [and I might add the characters’ histories] really any way you want to ... That’s probably why history belongs more to the novelists and the poets than it does to the social scientists. At least we admit that we lie” (67). Doctorow “cuts and slices” history and invents stories about both historical and fictional characters.

The title, *Ragtime*, refers both to the Ragtime Era in American history and also to a jazz type of music, very fashionable at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Doctorow's *Ragtime* opens with a passage that characterizes briefly the Ragtime Era in America:

Patriotism was a reliable sentiment in the early 1900's. Teddy Roosevelt was President. The population customarily gathered in great numbers either out of doors for parades, public concerts, fish fries, political picnics, social outings, or indoors in meeting halls, vaudeville theatres, operas, ballrooms. There seemed to be no entertainment that did not involve great swarms of people. Trains and steamers and trolleys moved them from one place to another. That was the style, that was the way people lived. Women were stouter then. They visited the fleet carrying white parasols. Everyone wore white in summer. Tennis racquets were hefty and the racquet faces elliptical. There was a lot of sexual fainting. There were no Negroes. There were no immigrants. (3-4)³

The time covered in Doctorow's book (1900-1917), known in American history as the Ragtime Era or the Progressive Era, was a period of great economical, industrial, social, and political turmoil.⁴ The population grew due to the arrival of European immigrants; people moved to the cities to find work. America was shaken by many changes that influenced its future economical growth. Doctorow emphasizes the period in American history of Teddy Roosevelt's presidency, Winslow Homer's painting, J. P. Morgan's and Henry Ford's money, and Emma Goldman's anarchist phase. He describes not only the flourishing of business leaders such as Ford, but also the struggle for affirmation of

blacks and the degrading state of the “filthy and illiterate” immigrants who “stank of fish and garlic” (13)

From a musical point of view, “ragtime” is the style of jazz inaugurated by Scott Joplin. Featuring the blues and the stride piano, it is a style of jazz characterized by elaborately syncopated rhythm in the melody and is the foundation for novelty piano, modern jazz, and blues rock. Both African dance rhythms and classical music influenced ragtime. Applying this type of music to Doctorow’s novel, one could argue that ragtime’s combinations of sounds and its vernacular and classical influences emphasize America’s melting pot characteristics. In the same way in which ragtime has various influences and roots, America itself is a mosaic of people with different nationalities and roots. Furthermore, like ragtime music, Doctorow’s prose is melodic, rhythmic and energetic.⁵ However, the author chose as an epigraph for the novel a quote from Scott Joplin: “Do not play this piece fast. It is never right to play Ragtime fast.” Whether Doctorow “played” his piece (the novel itself) fast or not is for the reader to decide. Joplin’s quote advises the reader how to interpret the novel. Doctorow seems to suggest that, despite his rapid narrative pace and his presentation of events, readers should slow down their reading and enjoy the historical palimpsest of early twentieth-century America.

Even before discussing the characters, one should analyze the narrator’s games and chameleon-like behavior in *Ragtime*.⁶ As in *The English Patient* and *Chatterton*, which also have omniscient narrators, the use of a third-person narrator implies objectivity and detachment – two qualities needed for historical inquiries. Doctorow’s prose is opaque as far as the narrator’s identity is concerned. Like the characters of the

novel, Doctorow's narrator changes his identity. Several questions occur: Does the novel have more than one omniscient narrator? If the narrator calls some of the characters Mother, Father, and Grandfather, and reveals secrets of the family, is he the little boy who narrates *Ragtime*? If he is the son of the family, is he a fictional character as well? Perhaps the little boy is both the novel's narrator and its character. Nonetheless, even when readers encounter episodes with the little boy, the narration is in the third person. There is one instance, however, when the narrator refers to himself in the first person:

Poor Father, I see his final exploration. He arrives at the new place, his hair risen in astonishment, his mouth and eyes dumb. His toe scuffs a soft storm of sand, he kneels and his arms spread in pantomimic celebration, the immigrant, as in every moment of his life, arriving eternally on the shore of his Self. (269)

Here, the narrator has finally conceded to call himself an "I." In addition, because the narrator refers to Father as "Poor Father," one could argue that the little boy is the narrator. But if so, because he was not with his father when the latter died, the little boy must interpret his father's last exploration and thus his entire family's history.

Several commentators have speculated on the narrator's identity or lack of identity in the novel. Geoffrey Harpham posits that *Ragtime* has "no consistent or even possible narrative persona." He further claims that Doctorow's text "gives the extraordinary impression of being self-generated, privileging no character and producing itself independent of any narrator" (88). The omniscient narrator moves periodically from narrating stories about the characters of the novel to describing events and situations in American society. The reader does not know whether the narrative voice dissociates

itself when the narrator tells the characters' stories as opposed to when he describes events from twentieth-century America. For instance, the novel has many chapters that simply describe different flashes of American history and social life apparently unrelated to the plots and subplots of the novel: "Most of the immigrants came from Italy and Eastern Europe. They were taken in launches to Ellis Island. There, in a curiously ornate human warehouse of red brick and gray stone, they were tagged, given showers and arranged on benches in waiting pens" (13); or "In the killing summer heat politicians up for reelection invited their followers to outings in the country. Toward the end of July one candidate led a parade through the streets of the Fourth Ward" (18). The novel abounds in comments and observations similar to the examples above – observations that are not connected to the characters' stories but complete Doctorow's portrait of American history. Christopher Morris argues that the narrative voice refers to itself "as the editorial 'we' when generalizing about history" (99). When the narrator comments on American history, the narration is still omniscient, but the reader gets the feeling that the narrator himself is part of the history he is narrating. The narrator identifies himself as an American narrating events from American history. "Of course at this time in *our* history the images of ancient Egypt were stamped on everyone's mind" (128); "This was the time in *our* history when Winslow Homer was doing his painting" (4); "And at this time in *our* history communication with the dead was not as far-fetched an idea as it had once been" (167); "*We* have the account of this odd event from the magician's private, unpublished papers" (267); "*We* have fought and won the war [emphases mine]" (270). All these references to American history suggest the narrator's identification with American nationality and citizenship. The narrator's identity remains ambiguous,

though; the critics themselves do not agree on a definite answer; some suggest that the omniscient narrator is the little boy; others reflect on the lack of a narrator's persona and on the possibility that the story tells itself in *Ragtime*.

Not only is the narrator's status slippery but also the narration does not follow a logical or chronological sequence in recording some of the characters' stories, thoughts and conversations, or commenting upon twentieth-century American history and society. At the end of the novel, the reader is left with a general overview of American society and the changes that occurred at the beginning of the last century but not necessarily with an in-depth message taken from the characters' dispersed stories. The characters' stories start *in medias res* and they are not necessarily connected to one another; they are scattered flashes of historical and social America. *Ragtime* is thus a descriptive and experimental novel – descriptive because its author observes the American social life and experimental because the narration's apparent lack of meaning and reportorial style produces meaning and newness. Doctorow's narrative experiment refers to his presentation of fictional situations in an objective, almost newspaper-like way. Doctorow's reportorial style can be misleading because the reader is inclined to think that what he/she reads is true. This is not the case because the author invents frequently stories about both historical and fictional characters. In addition, these semi-fictional, semi-historical events are presented at an engaging and rapid pace. The narrator shifts quickly and continuously from one plot or subplot to the next, seemingly rushing to get to the last page. Susan Brienza posits that "*Ragtime* (which Doctorow says has a furious pace, never standing still) accumulates unexpected events in intricate patterns" (204).

The events of *Ragtime* unfold in an accelerated pace over four parts. Doctorow discusses the various transformations that occur in his characters' identities over the course of their lives. The novel focuses mainly on the history of three families: an Anglo-American family, a European immigrant one, and an African-American family. Hutcheon argues that the action in *Ragtime* "disperses the center of the first [family] and moves the margins into the multiple 'centers' of the narrative, in a formal allegory of the social demographics of urban America" (*Poetics* 61). As the novel is roughly divided into four parts, some of the plots and sub-plots from previous parts are continued in the subsequent parts; others, however, unfold only during one part. With a few exceptions, the events of the plots and subplots are not connected with each other, so that at the end of the novel, the reader gets various stories and instances of American life and the changes that occurred in their lives. One of the plots in the first part centers on the upper-middle class family from New Rochelle whose members are Mother, Father, Grandfather, little boy, and Mother's Younger Brother and on how the family disintegrates and is reintegrated in a different fashion. Father is an amateur explorer who goes on an expedition to the Arctic. While he is on his expedition, Mother discovers a black child, who is buried in her garden, and eventually she invites his mother, Sarah, and her newborn to stay in her house. One sub-plot focuses on Mother's Younger Brother, who is in love with Evelyn Nesbit, the wife of the wealthy Harry Thaw, who in his turn is charged with the murder of the architect, Stanford White. Evelyn Nesbit is rescued from a police raid by Emma Goldman, the anarchist whose political rallies and activities constitute another sub-plot in *Ragtime*. So do the deeds of the magician Harry Houdini, who goes to Europe, learns how to fly a plane, and meets the Archduke Franz Ferdinand,

the heir of the Austro-Hungarian throne. A last plot in the first part refers to the second important family in the novel, that of Tateh, a Jewish immigrant and socialist, who after an affair with Evelyn Nesbit, flees to New York with his daughter, named in the novel the little girl.

The second part of the novel opens with Father's return from his trip to the Arctic and with the mystery around who the father of Sarah's baby is. Readers find out eventually that the black ragtime musician, Coalhouse Walker, is the father of Sarah's baby; together they represent the third important family of the novel. The destruction of Coalhouse's Ford car by the Irish immigrants of the Emerald Isle Fire Station and Sarah's death drive the musician toward revenge. Doctorow portrays the discrimination against blacks at the beginning of the last century. Meanwhile, the artist Tateh gives up the socialist workers' struggle and finds a career in the moving picture business. In the second part of the novel, Doctorow also facilitates the meeting of historical figures such as J. P. Morgan and Henry Ford, invents imaginary dialogues between them, and puts them in fictional contexts.

In the third part, the author presents Coalhouse's guerilla attacks on the firehouse. His actions and anger at society finally come to an end when the fire chief, Willie Conklin (Walker's enemy), rebuilds Coalhouse's car in front of the Morgan library. Father tries to settle the conflict between Coalhouse's gang and the police by becoming the messenger between the two parties. While a negotiator, Father discovers that Younger Brother has joined Coalhouse's team – a fact that will preclude any reconciliation between the two. Another episode of the third part finds Mother and Father in Atlantic City during the summer. There they meet Tateh, now a film producer,

whose name has changed to Baron Ashkenazy; he is accompanied by his shy but beautiful little girl. Tateh's recently acquired success shows how easily people's fates can change in twentieth-century America.

The fourth part contains one short chapter of conclusions: Coalhouse surrenders and is killed by the authorities in front of the library; having inherited his car, Younger Brother drives to Mexico and is killed in the Mexican Revolution while he is fighting for Zapata; Morgan goes to Egypt to visit the pyramids; Houdini finds that the Archduke Ferdinand is assassinated; Father sails to England, but his ship is sunk by a German U-boat; Mother marries Tateh, whom she fancied in Atlantic City, and together with the little boy, the little girl, and Sarah's black child, they move to California. The last scene of the novel shows how the three important families of the novel merged into a controversial mix of identities. The newly formed family presented at the end of the novel proves that the American family became an inter-racial and multiethnic entity.

The novel's ending contradicts its beginning. The ironic narrative voice presents at the very beginning of the text an idealistic view of America that will be deconstructed throughout the novel. Although the narrator describes America as being devoid of Negroes and immigrants ("There were no Negroes. There were no immigrants"), the new family formed at the end of *Ragtime* is the epitome of a mix of identities that includes immigrants and Negroes. It turns out that "There were/are Negroes. There were/are immigrants" in early twentieth-century America. Mother, for instance, marries an immigrant and adopts a black child. This mingling of families, races, and ethnicities underlines both the history and the destiny of America and of Americans who based their national identity on a paradoxical mix of new peoples, and at the same time it alludes to a

re-writing and revision of history. When the American family accepts members of different ethnicities and identities, it constantly re-writes and revises its history.

The physical, mental, social, and political metamorphoses that the characters undergo reinforce the rewriting and revision of history itself. Tateh, for instance, changes his name and even his political views; no longer an idealist working-class radical, he becomes Baron Ashkenazy, a successful film producer. When asked by Larry McCaffery why Tateh achieves financial success even though he sells his moral beliefs, Doctorow answers that “very often a man who begins as a radical somehow – with all his energy and spirit and intelligence and wit – by a slight change of course can use these gifts to succeed under the very system he’s criticizing” (45). Tateh renounces the cause of the left and becomes successful by undermining it. His new profession advances him on the scale of the equally new film business. Film – according to Baron Ashkenazy – is the photographed version of reality. By extrapolation, film is a copied version of history: “In the movie films, he said, we only look at what is there already. Life shines on the shadow screen, as from the darkness of one’s mind. It is a big business. People want to know what is happening to them” (215).

If Tateh rewrites his history by changing his identity and embracing a simulacrum of reality, the little boy discovers books and “replicates” himself in the mirror. The little boy’s “duplicated event” continues Tateh’s success with copying persons and objects on the big screen because the little boy copies his own self. His double-sided replica reflected in the mirror resembles the way various actors are reproduced in a film or a photograph. The little boy is described as an introverted child without friends, who turned to literature instead of playing outside. He enjoys the lessons of history and

fiction given by his grandfather, who reads to him from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Ovid's texts "were stories of people who became animals or trees or statues. They were stories of transformation. Women turned into sunflowers, spiders, bats, birds; men turned into snakes, pigs, stones and even thin air" (97). As the narrator himself comments, Grandfather's stories taught the little boy that things and persons can change and become something else: "Grandfather's stories proposed to him that the forms of life were volatile and that everything in the world could easily be something else" (97). The little boy will transfer and apply Ovid's stories of transformation to his own self. In a narcissistic gesture, he investigates the physical and psychological transformations that his body and mind have suffered over time: "he took to studying himself in the mirror, perhaps expecting some change to take place before his eyes" (98). However, although he looks at himself in the mirror for a long time, he does not notice any immediate physical changes in his body. Instead, the little boy "duplicates" himself and sees two selves resembling one original self. He describes his whole experience as a disembodiment of "a self" from the other part of himself: "He would gaze at himself until there were two selves facing one another, neither of which could claim to be the real one. The sensation was of being disembodied. He was no longer anything exact as a person. He had a dizzying feeling of separating from himself endlessly" (98). This double reflection probably has roots in the boy's fascination with movies. This parallelism between the two selves, that both became unreal, anticipates the copies of selves seen on the big screen. The boy wants to separate his body from himself and to see his fictionalized body in the mirror or on the big screen. The narrator explains that the boy "knew the principles of photography but also that moving pictures depended on the

capacity of humans, animals or objects to forfeit portions of themselves, residues of shadow and light which they left behind" (97-8). In fact, the novel ends with Tateh's idea to make a film about his three children and to transform them into unreal selves – a possibility anticipated by the little boy's self-examination

Mother also changes her identity and rewrites her individual history when she marries Tateh and becomes a stepmother of two children: the little girl and Sarah's son. Younger Brother wants to change his identity as well and become black in order to join Coalhouse's team: "He shaved his blond moustache and he shaved his head. He blackened his face and hands with burnt cork, outlined exaggerated lips, put on a derby and rolled his eyes" (205). Younger Brother is willing to give up his privileged identity as a white man in order to defend the rights of a black man. He waits four nights in front of a bar only to get to speak with Coalhouse and let him know that he (Younger Brother) could help him. Younger Brother deserts and betrays his own family in order to serve the interests of an African American.

Even outside the three main families of the novel, characters are prone to changes and transformations. Morgan and Ford are both obsessed with reincarnation and repetition. Morgan believes in universal cycles that keep repeating themselves over time: "Suppose I could prove to you that there are universal patterns of order and repetition that give meaning to the activity of this planet. Suppose I could demonstrate that you yourself are an instrumentation in our modern age of trends in human identity that affirm the oldest wisdom in the world" (123). In other words, Morgan thinks that history and the past are still "present" in our time. In his conversation with Ford, he elaborates and clearly fictionalizes on the Rosicrucians' knowledge and their "secret wisdom" of

reincarnation and claims that this secret wisdom and magic came from the Greek translations of the Egyptian priest, Hermes Trismegistus (124) Morgan eventually shows Ford the sarcophagus of the mummified Pharaoh of the Nineteenth Dynasty, Seti the First. He invites Ford to join him on a journey to Egypt, where they could find the truth about who they are, who they incarnate, or who they replicate. Ford contends that he too cherishes a belief in reincarnation: "Reincarnation is the only belief I hold ... some of us have just lived more times than others" (127) However, Ford finds some "enlightening" ideas on reincarnation in a cheap book: "And in this book [*An Eastern Fakir's Eternal Wisdom*], which cost me twenty-five cents, I found everything I needed to set my mind at rest" (127). The author mocks Morgan's apparently serious attempts to unravel historical mysteries by juxtaposing them with Ford's not so in-depth research. Their conversation is humorous and ironical as the author emphasizes Morgan's enthusiasm and excitement and Ford's aplomb and self-control. While Morgan exposes secrets about reincarnation and almost loses his breath, Ford contemplates his shoes. "Morgan had to recover his composure. He pulled back one of the chairs and sat down at the table. Slowly his breathing returned to normal. Ford ... remained quiet and stared at his own shoes. The shoes, brown lace-ups, he had bought from the catalogue of L. L. Bean" (125-6). Moreover, their theories that resemble the characters' endless investigations in *Foucault's Pendulum* by Umberto Eco are purely fictional. The dialogue between the two businessmen, their preoccupation with reincarnation, and their tools of researching history are Doctorow's invention. It is doubtful that Ford and Morgan ever had a conversation on reincarnation

Houdini, on the other hand, practices a different kind of reincarnation and metamorphosis. He defies death by challenging it constantly, he dies and is born again with his every performance. He escapes from chains and milk cans; he asks to be buried alive, and so on. His exercises of resurrection are fake because Houdini succeeds in manipulating his audience and changing their sense of reality. His performance depends on the audience's reaction, their entertainment, fear, and anxiety. Through Houdini, the audience learns to challenge death, escape from reality, and then return to it. Angela Hague argues that Houdini's audiences pay because of "their fascination with his ability magically to transform – and escape from – a reality previously perceived as static and impervious to manipulation" (173). When the narrator muses on Houdini's fate as a magician, he says: "For all his achievements he was a trickster, an illusionist, a mere magician. What was the sense of his life if people walked out of the theatre and forgot him? ... The real-world act was what got into the history books" (82). The questions are naturally: What is real? What differentiates the real world from Houdini's illusionary one? His name deserves to be in the history book next to other pseudo-historical individuals such as Ford, Morgan, Goldman, and Freud.

Another type of reincarnation is, metaphorically speaking, the rewriting of historical traces; it has to do with Doctorow's source of inspiration for his novel and with intertextuality. Doctorow does not construct his entire novel on intertextual webs between authors and texts, like Ackroyd does, but he borrows a plot line from a nineteenth-century German author and rewrites it. The events related to Coalhouse's story are copied and adapted from Heinrich von Kleist's "Michael Kohlhaas." Furthermore, von Kleist's story is based on a medieval chronicle of the history of Hans

Kohlhasen (Morris 106). In other words, Doctorow writes a fictional text by rewriting another fictional text that is already based on a historical one. By this act of intertextual plagiarism, he creates a new character and story. In an interview with Larry McCaffery, Doctorow confesses that he rewrote Kleist's 1808 novella: "I had always wanted to rework the circumstances of Kleist's story. I felt the premise was obviously relevant, appropriate – the idea of a man who cannot find justice from a society that claims to be just" (44). Doctorow adapts Coalhouse's story to twentieth-century American standards, which is why his hero rides a Ford and not a horse. In Kleist's short story, Michael Kohlhaas (whose name resembles, of course, Coalhouse's) is a horse-dealer who was swindled. In an attempt to find the justice that was repeatedly denied to him, he raises a militia and starts looting towns. He is eventually punished for the atrocities he incited. Coalhouse remains a fictional character that is rewritten after his nineteenth-century fictional ancestor. Maria Diedrich speculates that Doctorow's black protagonist, Coalhouse Walker, borrows characteristics and similarities from both fictional characters such as Michael Kohlhaas and historical ones such as David Walker and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (113-23). Like Coalhouse, the last two historical personages fought for racial equality and for civil rights.

Whether he arranges occasional meetings between fictional and historical characters in the same chapter or the omniscient narrator intermediates dialogues between them, Doctorow combines the fictional with the historical to the point that nobody knows which is which anymore.⁷ Although both Ackroyd and Ondaatje also mix historical figures with fictional ones, Doctorow bases almost his entire novel on this playful game. Carol Harter and James Thompson argue that "one major device in the novel is arranging

the meetings of fictional and historical personages, as well as having historical figures meet and interact with each other fictionally" (50). The author's interweaving of fictional and historical characters is aleatoric; Doctorow does not follow any preexisting rules or conventions but instead breaks all the rules when he puts together invented stories about fictional and historical characters. Like Ackroyd, he creates fictional situations for both historical and fictional characters. Ackroyd divides his novel into three main plots whose events take place in three different centuries as follows: the eighteenth-century plot covers the death of the historical and literary figure, Chatterton; the nineteenth-century plot revolves around Wallis' fictional life as a painter; the twentieth-century plot centers on fictional characters and actions. Although there is no clear-cut spatial delimitation between these three plots, Ackroyd does not mix the characters from all these different plots. Moreover, although Ackroyd invents fictional situations for both fictional and historical personages, he rarely facilitates dialogues or meetings between fictional characters and historical ones. Michael Ondaatje's technique resembles Doctorow's, as the Canadian author also bases his novel on the more or less fictional actions of a historical personality, Count Almásy, and his fictional meetings with other characters in *The English Patient*.

Doctorow himself comments on the real-unreal or historical-fictional dichotomies that abound in *Ragtime* and other historiographic metafiction and concludes that truths, if they ever existed, are not relevant; the variety of possibilities that fiction proposes is what matters. He contends:

I'm under the illusion that all my inventions are quite true. For instance, in *Ragtime*, I'm satisfied that everything I made up about Morgan and

Ford is true, whether it happened or not. Perhaps truer because it didn't happen. And I don't make any distinction any more – and can't even remember – what of the events and circumstances in *Ragtime* are historically verifiable and what are not ... writers are independent witnesses and, theoretically at least, not connected to the defense of any institution, whether it be the family or the Pentagon or God ... I certainly would much rather trust as a source of truth the variousness of literature, and its width and its breadth, than, for instance, a press release from a government agency, or even a sermon. It seems to me what must be maintained is the absolute multiplicity of us all, the numbers of us who color the palette from which the society draws its own portrait. (69)

Doctorow's answer to the question about truth and fiction in his novel sheds light on what truth (if there is such a concept in historiographic metafiction) really is or better said, is not. Both characters and readers should embrace the bedazzlement brought by the lack of truth and enjoy the infinite possibilities resulting from this lack.

Critics have asked what kind of novel Doctorow writes: a historical novel or a fictional one, or both. Doctorow is not a historian; he is a novelist. Despite the novel's apparently realistic way of presenting a historical era and the author's blending of historical and fictional characters, *Ragtime* remains a work of fiction. The author offers a possible description of American history and society; he puts historical characters in situations they have never been in before and he makes them say words they have never uttered previously. Doctorow creates fictional stories for his historical characters and

succeeds in illustrating a fictional gist of the Ragtime era: the struggle for survival, the social tensions, people's hopes, and changes in their lives.

Doctorow includes actual figures such as Harry Houdini, J. P. Morgan, Henry Ford, Andrew Carnegie, Sigmund Freud, and Emma Goldman with fictional characters such as Mother, Father, little boy, Grandfather, Younger Brother, and Coalhouse Walker. Interestingly, Mother's and Father's family have connections with both fictional characters like Sarah, Coalhouse's wife, and with historical characters like Houdini. But even the family's connections with the great magician and their conversations with him are purely fictional. Doctorow does not respect any conventions or clear delimitations between the fictional and historical characters in *Ragtime*. For instance, some of the fictional characters are named (for example Coalhouse Walker) and some are given generic names such as Mother, Father, Grandfather, or Younger Brother. One might expect Doctorow to use generic names for all his fictional characters, but this is not the case.

Whether Doctorow invents fictional situations for his fictional and historical characters or transforms a historical situation into a fictional one, he still manages to construct a vivid though fictional panorama of American life. His fictional characters interact with historical ones to form a mix of ethnicities, nationalities, races, backgrounds, and religions. Henry Ford has lunch with J. P. Morgan to discuss reincarnation. Harry Houdini visits Mother's and Father's family and plays with the little boy. Younger Brother watches how the famous Evelyn Nesbit is massaged by Emma Goldman; later on, he fights for general Zapata in Mexico. Freud comes to America with

his disciples, Jung and Ferenczi, and is extremely disappointed by American food and facilities; he finally confesses that “America is a mistake, a gigantic mistake” (33).

In *Ragtime*, Doctorow achieves two things simultaneously: on the one hand he presents a social, political, and economic mosaic of American society during the Ragtime period; on the other hand, he invents characters and situations that interact with each other and with this historical period. The changes that shake his characters' lives have to do with the fluctuations and transformations that occur in America during the Ragtime period. Doctorow's interesting amalgamation of historical and fictional characters suggests once again that truth and the quest for truth can only be fictional. Or, as Doctorow puts it in an interview with Larry McCaffery, “All history is composed. A professional historian won't make the claims for the objectivity of his discipline that the lay person grants him ... Fiction has no borders, everything is open. You have a limitless possibility of knowing the truth” (43-7). Doctorow's words also apply to Ondaatje's *The English Patient*; for the Canadian author attempts to demonstrate – as will be evident in the next chapter – that history, fiction, and his characters' stories go beyond national borders.

Notes:

¹ Gerhard Bach summarizes Doctorow's attempt to rewrite American history: "On the one hand, there is agreement on the historiographic, quasi-documentary mode of narrative Doctorow employs in building a monumental mosaic of turn-of-the-century America – its social, political, economic and artistic trends, impulses and moods. On the other hand, there is also agreement about the fact that Doctorow apparently did not pay very much attention in history class. he jumbles his facts, dates, places and persons in an erratic, irresponsible way. If the critics are literary critics, Doctorow gets away with this – he fictionalizes. If they are historiographers, he does not pass – his is a kind of history that flies in the face of academically accepted 'fact'" (165).

² Bettina Friedl analyzes insightfully the relationship between the characters and images in the novel; she believes that Doctorow's characters are subject to changes and transformations. They "find themselves, or they lose themselves in explorations; they actively change their identity, or passively react to changes in the factual world, the movement of time, and the force of the individual event" (Friedl 91).

³ Speaking of the first passage of the novel, Paul Levine states: "*Ragtime* begins with the conventional view of the turn of the century as an age of innocence but then reveals the social and economic conflicts that remained barely suppressed beneath the surface" (*E. L. Doctorow* 51-2). Barbara Foley claims that "the opening passage of *Ragtime* in some ways echoes the ironic dawn-of-the-century newsreel" (160). Furthermore, Linda Hutcheon finds the first passage of the text both ironic and nostalgic: "The opening of the novel sets the pattern. Describing the year 1902, the narrating voice introduces a potential nostalgia, but surely it is one already tinted with irony" (*Poetics* 89).

⁴ Mark Busby describes the Ragtime Era in American history as follows: “Most [people] settled in the cities as America became an urban rather than a rural nation. Some languished in a poverty they did not expect to find; others found jobs in assembly lines and the automobile greatly affected the course of American history. The growth of labor unions, begun in the late nineteenth century, continued. Political leaders resisted the unions, but most Americans were confident that humankind was moving toward perfection. Women, likewise, believed in and worked for positive change. The nature of leisure altered as well: the magic lantern turned into the motion picture; musical tastes turned toward ragtime music” (177). In fact, critics who have written on Doctorow’s *Ragtime* and historians in general admit that during this period, the United States became a global industrial power. The literary critic, Allan Winkler, states that “the period from the end of Reconstruction to the start of the 20th century was, in historian Carl Degler’s phrase, the Age of the Economic Revolution. Business leaders relied on entrepreneurial skill to consolidate and combine, and to create the gigantic industries that made America great” (106).

⁵ R. Z. Sheppard comments on the musical quality of *Ragtime* and asserts that “its lyric tone, fluid structure, and vigorous rhythms give it a musical quality that explanation mutes” (69).

⁶ Many critics address Doctorow’s experimentation with narrative. The reader gets the feeling that the narration both tells itself and at the same time is told by an omniscient narrator. Harpham does not necessarily pinpoint the center of the narration in *Ragtime* but believes that the narration is conducted by a “local instance” (88). Harpham argues that “Doctorow does most of his ruminating through the character of the young boy, who

is accorded a fitful privilege as the center of the migratory narrative voice” (Harpham 88). In other words, when the story does not tell itself, it is told by the omniscient narrator called “the little boy.”

⁷ Allan Winkler claims that Doctorow’s *Ragtime* was a best-seller but the novel’s importance “comes not simply because of the public acclaim it achieved, but because of its unique blend of the real and the imaginary in early 20th century America in a way that conveys the texture of the times” (105).

CHAPTER III

FICTIONAL AND (INTER)NATIONAL PATIENTS OF THE WORLD

“End Fact. Try Fiction.” (Ezra Pound)

While Peter Ackroyd focuses on a chapter of British literary history and E. L. Doctorow presents an era of American history, Michael Ondaatje concentrates on a worldwide historical event: World War II. In *The English Patient*, Ondaatje centers on individuals of different nationalities and places them in international contexts. He emerges, thus, as an “international writer in the best sense of the word” (Maver 65). If Ackroyd emphasizes England and Doctorow America, Ondaatje prefers a more international historical approach. A writer of Indian origin, who lived for a decade in England and eventually immigrated to Canada, Ondaatje writes a story that engages various nations and nationalities. Without writing an autobiographical novel, Ondaatje discusses how people’s identities and places of origin influence their lives. Moreover, two of his protagonists are Canadian, one is Indian, and one is supposedly English. In fact, these are the three nationalities that also shaped Ondaatje’s personality and life.

In an article on Ondaatje and Findley, W. M. Verhoeven argues that “Canada is a country virtually unique in the western world in its awkwardly self-conscious passion for identity” (283).¹ Ondaatje’s concern with his characters’ identities is striking in the novel. What is even more interesting is that the characters’ identities shift and fluctuate continuously. The characters move from one place to another and inhabit different spaces; they undergo identity crises as far as their countries of origin or their place in the world are concerned; they develop and change during the war. Every character has a

story; every individual becomes a text and an open book. Moreover, the settings of the novel are also in flux. The settings, such as the naturally ever-changing desert or the artistically destroyed Italian villa, accommodate people of different nationalities; the languages that characters speak are also diverse. All the characters' shifts in identity depend on and are influenced by history; their private stories of love and betrayal interfere and intersect with history as the historical circumstances depicted by the author influence the course of characters' lives. Hana confesses at the end of the novel that "From now on I believe the personal will forever be at war with the public" (292). There are many instances in the novel when the personal is at war with the public and when the official version of history is contradicted by a private and fictional one.

When Almásy remembers how he took out Katharine's inert body from the Cage of Swimmers, he muses: "We die containing a richness of lovers and tribes, tastes we have swallowed, bodies we have plunged into and swum up as if rivers of wisdom, characters we have climbed into as trees, fears we have hidden in as if caves. I wish for all this to be marked on my body when I am dead" (261). Ondaatje attempts to present one of the various fictional sides of history. He focuses metaphorically on the richness of lovers, on the tastes one swallows, on one's fears and happiness, on the people one plunges into, and on all unwritten stories that one cannot find in the history book. In other words, the author is not only concerned with World War II *per se* but with how the characters' lives interfere with the war and how their histories affect and are affected by the war. This intersection brings forth characters such as Almásy, who would sacrifice history for his love for Katharine, or Kip, who would give up Hana for the sake of history and nationality. Travis Lane argues that "Ondaatje would have us consider that the

parallels between our dreams and our histories are somewhat of our own making – that our history is to some extent the effect of our perceptions, our fears, and our behaviours – that we create the myths and circuses of our lives, that what comes to us in reality is, like our dreams, both beyond our control and created by us” (150-1).

History affects all the characters of the novel in one way or the other. The action of the novel takes place at the end of World War II, but the characters’ stories extend over longer periods of time: the war, their youth, and their childhood.² The war mediates and makes possible the meeting of the four protagonists in a neutral, cultural, and exotic land – Italy. Michelangelo’s country becomes in *The English Patient* a space, where nations, nationalities, history, and politics coexist and intersect fructuously with fiction, stories, and memories. Italy, or more precisely the Villa San Girolamo in Tuscany, provides the illusion of the suspension of history and at the same time the mirage of the free play of fiction. The desert – another topos of the novel, where the English patient’s story mainly takes place – also nurtures different nationalities and histories: “We were German, English, Hungarian, African ... Gradually we became nationless ... Erase nations!” (138-39). This statement ultimately calls for the erasure of ethnocentrism and the embracing of an international identity. Furthermore, the love between Hana, the beautiful Canadian nurse, and Kip, the Indian sapper, is never fulfilled because of their different ethnic identities. All the characters’ connections of their private histories with the war, their love affairs, their stories, and their nationalities tie together in a ruined Italy. The author’s vision of history in *The English Patient* is shaped by fiction, as the fate of nations and wars depend on the treason and betrayals of the characters. The lives

of several individuals in the novel influence and are influenced by war and politics and the author interweaves them in a continuous exchange and flux.

The historical and geographical references range from India to England, from Arabia to Canada, in order to reveal themselves fully in Italy. The Italian villa shelters Hana, a twenty-year-old Canadian nurse who lost her child and father to the war but agreed to look after the dying and nameless “English patient” who proves to be the desert explorer Ladislau Almásy; David Caravaggio, a thief and a spy from Canada who befriended Hana’s father; and Kirpal Singh, an Indian sapper in the British army. Not only do the four protagonists form a unique ethnic group that has witnessed the changes of history, but also the location where all the characters’ stories emerge is distinctive. The villa itself is a palimpsest of historical shadows from the past, a tower of Babel of nationalities and identities, and a bricolage. The villa – “built to protect the inhabitants from the flesh of the devil” (43) – was first a nunnery and a monastery transformed later on into a battleship and a hospital (12). The Italian edifice becomes a metaphor for the intersection of past and present and at the same time it stands for the interweaving of history and fiction in the novel. Almásy claims that the villa is an old historical building that once belonged to a fifteenth-century poet, Poliziano, who knew Michelangelo, Pico della Mirandola, and Lorenzo di Medici. Almásy’s very detailed and specific explanations, like “Poliziano would lecture every day for two hours in Latin in the morning, two hours in Greek in the afternoon” (57), make us question the accuracy of the patient’s information and knowledge. How does Almásy know with certainty so many historical details that cannot be verified? Mark Kemp argues for the narrative

unreliability of Almásy's knowledge and actions: "there are gaps and contradictions in his story" (141).

The fifteenth-century villa was modified several times over the centuries. Parts of it were bombed in the twentieth century and transformed into something else; parts of the building remained in ruins: "Sections of the chapel were blown up. Parts of the top storey of the villa crumbled under explosions" (12). The building becomes the witness of a blurry history and at the same time the victim of the atrocities of war. The history and architectural beauty of the construction are partly gone and lost to the war. The construction does not house Poliziano, who would speak Latin and Greek, but has become a ruined battlefield. The villa was bombed during the war and "had housed a hundred [German] troops" (12); it has been a spectator of a cultural past and of a devastating present. However, these continuous transformations that culminated with the bombings of the villa are significant because they established various functions for the villa. The building finally becomes a place with no walls, doors, or other types of borders: "There seemed little demarcation between the house and the landscape, between the damaged building and the burned and shelled remnants of the earth" (43). The continuation of this man-made construction into the natural landscape suggests that historical buildings are doomed to become ashes in time. Thus, history is either lost in the natural landscape or transformed and continued into it; history becomes, then, *pantha rei* in nature. This surrender of a man-made historical construction such as the Italian villa and, implicitly, of history into the natural surroundings, is significant; it proves again that history is not meant to last. Furthermore, this continuation of the villa into the landscape alludes to the destruction of borders. John Bolland comments that the settings

in *The English Patient* “break down hierarchies and divisions, such as between outside and inside, bedroom and library, and disrupt the clear relation between architectural form and function” (47).

The villa originally built by a skillful engineer (to use Derrida’s and Lévi-Strauss’ terminology) in the past is used in the present by twentieth-century bricoleurs. The four protagonists and the German troops are the bricoleurs that have lived in the villa and transformed it according to their own needs. This transformation alludes to a continuous re-writing of history as the uses of the villa have been modified in time. The construction is no longer the household of poets and artists but a place for prayer and, later on, for wounded people. When Hana, Caravaggio, Kip, and the English patient go to the house, they find it deserted. Hana, like a veritable bricoleur, learns to use the house effectively: “The staircase had lost its lower steps during the fire that was set before the soldiers left. She had gone into the library, removed twenty books and nailed them to the floor and then onto each other, in this way rebuilding the two lowest steps” (13). Hana uses books instead of steps for the staircase. With this gesture, Hana does not take advantage of the usual function of books – which are historical sources of knowledge, information, documentation, and entertainment. She wants to establish another possible meaning and use of books by revising their initial utility – an action that defines her as a bricoleur. However, later on in the novel, Hana shows interest in reading and listening to the stories of the cultivated English patient. She “revises” and “rewrites” other historical spaces of the villa and gives them another function. For instance, she is “converting domestic spaces into her bedroom by fixing her hammock to the walls” (Bolland 47) or she considers that “the wild gardens were like further rooms” (43). For Hana, the space of

the villa is fluid and it can be redesigned, remodeled, rewritten, and revised according to her needs. Hana arranges the rooms, the yard, and the pieces of furniture as if they were paragraphs in a text. The lack of doors, windows, and spatial demarcations between rooms or between the house and the yard suggests the lack of transitions in a text. The bricoleur and the architectural writer, Hana, will revise some of the paragraphs (rooms) of the text (villa). The ruined villa – with its wrecked library, its missing walls and rooms – becomes a place with no clear demarcations that foreshadows Ondaatje's metaphor of the desert.

Hana is not the only one who modifies the purpose of books; the circumstances of war change the fate of the small library in the Italian villa. The library seems to be a safe space, an oasis of history, fiction, and knowledge protected from the war outside. This protection proves to be provisional because the library has a hole in it due to a bomb attack: "Some rooms could not be entered because of rubble. One bomb crater allowed the moon and rain into the library downstairs" (7-8). Because of this hole, rain or bad weather penetrated the library and deteriorated the books; they only decorate a devastated room:

Between the kitchen and the destroyed chapel a door led into an oval-shape library. The space inside seemed safe except for a large hole at portrait level in the far wall, caused by mortar-shell attack on the villa two months earlier. The rest of the room had adapted itself to this wound, accepting the habits of weather, evening stars, the sound of birds . The shelves nearest the torn wall bowed with the rain, which had doubled the weight of the books. (11)

War and history seem to be the source of destruction of the library and of the entire villa. In other words, history (war) destroyed and damaged history and fiction (books). Moreover, the potential devastation is imminent because “the German army had mined many of the houses they retreated from, so most rooms not needed, like this one [the library], had been sealed for safety, the doors hammered into their frames” (11). That is why the whole villa and the people in it risk being blown to pieces at any minute. Both the books that are documents of history and the people who contributed to the actual “writing” of history (Hana – by taking care of the wounded; Kip – by disarming mines; Almásy – by being a cartographer and a spy; Caravaggio – by being a thief and a spy) are in danger of disappearing. What remains, however, are the stories of their lives told at the end of War World II in an Italian villa with an oval-shaped library and the perilous interweaving of their lives with history. Nevertheless, the characters’ acts of telling their stories and speaking their lives aloud in the Italian villa are not meant to last; they are whispered and lost to the landscape like history itself as all characters vanish when the war is over.

Hana, the devoted nurse, is the catalyst for all the other characters’ stories and actions in *The English Patient*. Almásy is her dying patient for whom she left the convoy of other nurses and decided to live in the villa; Caravaggio is her father’s friend and a spy who knows Almásy; Kip is Hana’s lover. However, Hana’s own identity is still in flux; her personality is not completely shaped. The narrator characterizes her several times as childish. This “half adult half child” (14) is brave and fearless. She faces the dangers of mines and bombs with a certain amount of craziness, innocence, and immaturity. Hana is attracted to the mystery that envelops the dying and initially nameless patient who was

burnt in the desert. Her fascination with the Englishman is probably related to her ongoing educational process. Both Hana and Kip look at the patient with awe and consideration because they are educated and instructed by him.

The English patient asks his nurse to read books aloud so Hana, who used to make staircases out of books, starts appreciating books and her patient's stories: "This was the time in her life that she fell upon books as the only door out of her cell. They became half her world" (7). Hana is ready to face the danger of potential mines that can explode in order to read Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, Kipling's *Kim*, or Stendhal's *The Charterhouse of Parma*. She thus confronts history and war in order to regain history and fiction through reading. However, in order to avoid stepping on the mines planted by the Germans in the villa, she takes precautions and "walk[s] backwards, stepping on her own footprints, for safety" (12). Furthermore, Hana writes her thoughts in the margins of these books. Like Ackroyd's characters, she writes her story and places it into other authors' stories. Ondaatje finds, on the one hand, new contexts for well-known literary pieces and, on the other hand, he situates his work in an international and sophisticated literary environment:

She opens *The Last of the Mohicans* to the blank page at the back and begins to write in it. *There is a man named Caravaggio, a friend of my father's. I have always loved him. He is older than I am, about forty-five, I think. He is in a time of darkness, has no confidence. For some reason I am cared for by this friend of my father.* (61)

To further this act of appropriation (understood as both "confiscating" and as "intertextuality"), Caravaggio confiscates, metaphorically speaking, the identity of a

protective Natty Bumppo in *The English Patient*, while Hana becomes a courageous Cora. With Hana's gesture of writing her notes into a work of fiction like *The Last of the Mohicans*, the author not only integrates intertextual allusions in his text, but he also integrates his fiction (Hana's fictional comments) into a well-known nineteenth-century novel.

The authors of historiographic metafiction (Ackroyd and Doctorow included) often exploit the relationship between texts. Intertextuality bridges the gap between past authors and texts and present ones. Some of the intertexts in the novel are *The Last of the Mohican*, *Kim*, *Paradise Lost*, *Anna Karenina*, *The Charterhouse of Parma*, *The Tempest*, the Gyges-Candaules episode in Herodotus, Caravaggio's painting of David, and the Grail legend. The story from Herodotus anticipates the love affair between Katharine and Almásy. Moreover, Kipling's novel is centered on an Indian boy, Kim (a name phonetically similar to Kip) who sets out on a journey from Lahore across India in a quest for wisdom. Kim is recruited by a British officer who educates him and trains him to become a spy. Kip's story is similar because he himself is trained by the British and ends up fighting for them. In both the novels, Kip and Kim are troubled by questions of identity and by British colonialism in India. As far as the Grail legend is concerned, Bill Fledderus and John Bolland connect this legend to the Fisher King. The king's land is cursed to remain infertile until a knight –sometimes aided by the Grail maiden – saves it. Bolland argues that “the fertility myths and the Grail legend offer the pattern of sterility and desolation followed by renewal of life and fertility” (55). In Ondaatje's novel, the land becomes infertile because of the atrocities of war; the beautiful villa with its library are ruined because of the war. Kip proves to be one of the saviors of the land

because he tries to take out mines from the ground or disarm bombs. All these examples show how *The English Patient* intersects with other works written or created in the past and, at the same time, they demonstrate that there is a continuous dialogue between texts and authors.

The books that Hana reads to the English patient are incomplete. They have missing pages and chapters; the plots are fractured and the stories are fragmentary: “So the books for the Englishman, as he listened intently or not, had gaps of plot like sections of a road washed out by storms, missing incidents as if locusts had consumed a section of tapestry, as if plaster loosened by the bombing had fallen away from a mural at night” (7). The books are wrecked just like the library from which they come is wrecked. The books and the library – as symbols of knowledge and information – refuse knowledge and information. The missing chapters from the books parallel the gaps in the chapters of history. History will never be complete and completed by individuals because it depends on the historians’ interpretations and their diverse viewpoints. Neither the English patient nor Hana seems to mind the gaps in the plots; they both enjoy the stories and the incompleteness of fiction: “She was not concerned about the Englishman as far as the gaps in the plot were concerned. She gave no summary of the missing chapters. She simply brought out the book and said ‘page ninety-six’ or ‘page one hundred and eleven’” (8). What is between page ninety-six and one hundred and eleven has to be fictionalized and imagined.

This unique combination and interweaving of history and fiction is also reflected in Ondaatje’s metaphors and symbols, such as the ruined villa and library, the book with washed up pages, and Hana’s books with gaps in plot. A wrecked fifteenth-century villa

and library or a book with missing pages and gaps all suggest an ideal situation in the past: the villa and the library were not wrecked; the books were not missing any pages or plots. However, historians and critics of the present can only speculate and fictionalize over what happened in the past. In the present, a ruined villa suggests both history and fiction at the same time and belongs to both past and present simultaneously; one can only imagine in the present how the villa looked in the past. Similarly, one can speculate on how the plot or the pages were completed. The readers and the characters of the novel can only be interpreters of a discursive history, a ruined villa, and a book with missing pages.

Hana is not only drawn to the world of books but is also fascinated by the English patient's stories and especially by the mystery around his identity, nationality, and adventurous life: "There was something about him she wanted to learn, grow into, and hide in" (52). When Hana reads books, she imagines that she is an explorer or a historian whose goal is to fill in gaps with possible answers: "She felt like Crusoe finding a drowned book that had washed up and dried itself on the shore" (12). The book with washed up pages is like a ruined villa; the book and the villa show only half the truth because the rest belongs to fiction and invention. Hana feels like Crusoe because she is willing to listen to people's stories, to explore them, and to fictionalize around them. She wants to participate in the stories and live with and for the stories: "She entered the story knowing she would emerge from it feeling she had been immersed in the lives of others, in plots that stretched back twenty years, her body full of sentences and moments, as if awaking from sleep with a heaviness caused by unremembered dreams" (12). Hana desires to be more than a simple explorer; she wants to understand people's past by living

in their stories. However, the whole process becomes more or less an “unremembered dream” for her both because people’s past life stories become fictitious when retold and because she can live in these stories only fictitiously. Thus, Hana ends up being only an attentive listener to the English patient’s convoluted story.

Like Hana, readers are also captivated by the patient’s stories and life. Readers know from the very beginning that his story probably ends tragically; even at the beginning of the novel, he is a dying, burned, and lonely man who is taken care of by strangers. However, his story enralls because the English patient’s identity is enigmatic. This dying, “nameless, almost faceless man” recalls his years spent in the desert as an explorer (52). The reader and some of the characters are not even sure that he is who he says he is – an explorer and a lover who became a spy during war. For Hana, he is simply the English patient; for Caravaggio, he probably is Almásy – the Hungarian aristocrat; Kip realizes at the end that Almásy symbolizes Englishness and as a result – the enemy. The man with a burnt face becomes an open book drowned in the ocean with washed up pages that dried on the shore; he becomes a wrecked library in a ruined Italian villa. Because no one can recognize his face, one can only guess and reinvent his identity:

A man with no face. An ebony pool. All identification consumed by fire. Parts of his body and face had been sprayed with tannic acid, that hardened into a protective shell over his raw skin. The area around his eye was coated with a thick layer of gentian violet. There was nothing to recognize in him. (48)

Despite his unrecognizable face, the readers and the characters have to believe and trust the patient's stories and his presupposed identity.

Ondaatje's choice of recreating Count Ladislau Almásy – a historical person in a fictional context – fits the genre of historiographic metafiction. Not only did Almásy exist in reality but Katharine Clifton and Geoffrey Clifton were also historical persons. On the first page of the novel, the author writes an excerpt from a Geographical Society meeting in London:

Most of you, I am sure, remember the tragic circumstances of the death of Geoffrey Clifton at Gilf Kebir, followed later by the disappearance of his wife, Katharine Clifton, which took place during the 1939 desert expedition in search of Zerzura. (1)

Furthermore, in the novel's Acknowledgements, Ondaatje makes the following statement:

While some of my characters who appear in this book are based on historical figures, and while many of the areas described – such as the Gilf Kebir and its surrounding desert – exist, and were explored in the 1930s, it is important to stress that this story is a fiction and that the portraits of the characters who appear in it are fictional, as are some of the events and journeys. (305)

After he posits that his novel is indeed a fiction even though it has some historical characters, Ondaatje continues with a list of books and articles that helped him with his research for *The English Patient*. They include history books, literary texts, excerpts from different books, and the archival material from *Geographical Journals*.

The border between history and fiction is extremely transparent in historiographic metafiction; the reader cannot tell for sure where history ends and where fiction begins. In Ondaatje's case, this task becomes easier because he provided a list with the historical material that he studied and used in his novel. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek goes beyond Ondaatje's research, in pursuit of the historical data behind the authors' fiction. He concludes, however, that the success of *The English Patient* rests on the author's "fictional treatment of some of history's marginal figures" and that "'truth is stranger than fiction'" in the Ondaatje's novel (148). Zepetnek finds out that there are connections between the fictional English patient from the novel and Lázló Ede Almásy, Count of Zsadány and Törökszentmiklós – an Africa explorer and discoverer (Zepetnek 143). Zepetnek cites Autóval Szudánba, who argues that Count Almásy discovered the lost oasis of Zarzura in the Libyan Desert and the prehistorical paintings in the caves of the Uweinat Mountains (143). Almásy also made maps of the Libyan Desert, developed civil aviation in Egypt, and published several works in French, Hungarian, and German about his travels, discoveries, and explorations (Zepetnek 143). However, other historians cited by Zepetnek, such as János Gudenus, László Szentirmay, and Gert Buchheit, claim that Almásy was not an aristocrat (Zepetnek 143-44). Thus, Almásy's historical identity is slippery and mysterious, a point that (coincidentally or not) Ondaatje tries to get across when he puts together his character's fictional identity in *The English Patient*.

If Almásy's historical and fictional identity is unreliable, then the secret that surrounds his intelligence activities during the war is equally ambiguous. While the historians do not know many details about these events, Ondaatje offers a fictional

answer: love. Almásy is willing to collaborate with the Germans and show them his maps in order to save his lover, Katharine Clifton. When he comes back into the desert to ask for help, the English imprison him because he gives them the wrong name. He says that Katharine is his wife and that her name is Almásy:

‘Are you telling me the English did not believe you? No one listened to you?’

‘No one listened.’

‘Why?’

‘I didn’t give them a right name.’

‘Yours?’

‘I gave them mine.’ (250)

One could claim that Katharine Clifton dies because of history and Almásy’s nationality. The English authorities think that Almásy is a foreign spy and arrest him, so by the time he returns to the desert, Katharine is already dead.

Zepetnek’s information on Lady Clayton East Clayton (née Dorothy Mary Durrant) alias Katharine Clifton in the novel, is revealing (146-47). Lady Clayton was a pilot and a sculptor who accompanied her husband on his expeditions in the desert; after her husband’s death, she continued the expeditions in the Libyan Desert. Zepetnek claims that she knew Almásy from her previous expedition with her husband (147). However, Ondaatje creates a fictional persona totally different from reality; Katharine Clifton bears little or no resemblance to Lady Clayton. Lady Clayton’s husband, Sir Robert Clayton East Clayton (Geoffrey Clifton in *The English Patient*) was an aristocrat who liked traveling and expeditions; he joined Almásy on some expeditions but died

young of a disease similar to infantile paralysis (Zepetnek 146). Ondaatje, however, describes him as a jealous husband and a British spy. The author preserves some accurate features and characteristics of his characters, but for the most part he invents and recreates their lives. Fiction overcomes history in Ondaatje's novel because he creates new contexts and stories for their lives – a technique that both Ackroyd and Doctorow exploit.

It is impossible for historians to put the pieces of the puzzle together when it comes to Almásy's historical identity. It is also impossible for readers to distinguish between what is historical and what is fictitious in the novel because the author used some marginal historical figures in fictional contexts.³ Throughout the novel, Caravaggio is not convinced that the patient is Almásy: "There is still no clue to who he actually is, nameless, without rank or battalion or squadron" (96) or "He [Caravaggio] needs to know who this Englishman from the desert is, and reveal him for Hana's sake. Or perhaps invent a skin for him, the way tannic acid camouflages a burned man's rawness" (117). Things become even more complicated when the reader finds out that Almásy's fictional identity is related so much to history. The English patient proves versed and cultivated when it comes to history, geography, archaeology, language, and literature. For instance, he reads Herodotus; he knows the history and geography of the desert; he knows the history of the Italian villa; he can speak several foreign languages (Hana thinks he is English, but in fact he is Hungarian); he writes books in foreign languages.

A symbolic image of history and of reading history is Herodotus' book, which Almásy considers sacred. He believes that "the histories in Herodotus clarified all societies" (150). When Katharine wants to borrow that book, he says: "I have my notes

within it. And cuttings. I need it with me ... It is unusual for me to travel without it” (231). Like Hana, Almásy also writes his own history into Herodotus’ book and inserts his own story within history. In this way, his twentieth-century personal account is interwoven with Herodotus’ past variant of history. Almásy becomes Herodotus’ fictional collaborator in the writing of history: “It is the book he brought with him through the fire – a copy of *The Histories* by Herodotus that he has added to, cutting and gluing in pages from other books or writing in his own observations – so they all are cradled within the text of Herodotus” (16). Interestingly, the collage book survived the fire that broke out in Almásy’s plane while his entire body was burned.⁴ Nicola Regner argues that Almásy, Herodotus, and Ondaatje rewrite history: “Almásy writes his own history into the book documenting that which might otherwise be lost, just as Herodotus does in his *Histories*, and Ondaatje in his novels, proving once more that history will always need ‘revision’” (115). Ondaatje, a fiction writer, Herodotus, a historian, and Almásy, an explorer, were all trying to prove that history can only be rewritten with the help of fiction.

The English patient interprets Herodotus’ version of history as “cul-de-sacs within the sweep of history” and “the supplementary to the main argument” (119). He sees Herodotus completing the gaps of history with legends and “piecing together a mirage” (119). Almásy imagines that Herodotus sees history as influenced by personal affairs such as betrayals of other nations and love stories. Private matters that remain unknown to the public and sometimes even to historians determine official versions of history. Renger contends that “as his [Almásy’s] real self is contrasted with his officially inscribed identity, the discrepancy between the two versions of history – the private story

versus the public interpretation – is revealed” (118). In the novel, the official version concerning the Africa explorer defines him as a spy; readers of *The English Patient*, however, find out that he became a spy because he wanted to save his lover. This brings us back to what Herodotus has said about the subjective and personal events that influence the fate of nations. Almásy falls in love with Katharine when she reads from Herodotus: “This is a story of how I fell in love with a woman, who read me a specific story from Herodotus” (233). The story from Herodotus about the adulterous queen anticipates their affair. When their love is over, Almásy records the war on their domestic front in the history book: “He bought pale brown cigarette papers and glued them into sections of *The Histories* that recorded wars that were of no interest to him. He wrote down all her arguments against him. Glued in the book – giving himself only the voice of the watcher, the listener, the ‘he’” (172). With this gesture, Almásy inscribes their story in the history book and underlines the point already made by Herodotus that history is the result of private matters. Moreover, he wants to detach himself from himself and to textualize his persona in the history book. He wants to be the “he,” the “listener,” and the “watcher” of his own story in a history book.

Ondaatje explores the personal, private, and fictional sides of Almásy’s identity that the character “glues” in Herodotus’ history book and at the same time the public aspect of his identity – that of an explorer and cartographer. The English patient not only participates in the making of history; he is also a historiographer, one who makes/writes and re-makes/re-writes history. Almásy draws maps of the desert and discovers the oasis of Zerzura. He characterizes himself as one who can recreate the past in the present:

I am a man who can recognize an unnamed town by its skeletal shape on a map. I have always had information like a sea in me ... I knew maps of the sea floor, maps that depict weaknesses in the shield of the earth, charts painted on skin that contain the various routes of the Crusades ... When I was lost among them, unsure of where I was, all I needed was the name of a small ridge, a local custom, a cell of this historical animal, and the map of the world would slide into place. (18-9)

Almásy needs only some clues and traces in order to reconstruct the past in the present; he fictionalizes history from topography and geography. He sees in every fragment of the past a hologram that promises and at the same time encapsulates a fictional whole: "Give me a map and I'll build you a city. Give me a pencil and I will draw you a room in South Cairo, desert charts on the wall" (145). However, he is ready to "sell" his public image and to give his maps to the Germans in order to rescue Katharine.

The English patient's adventures and explorations take place in the desert – a place where the traces of history are easily hidden. The sand of the desert covers, erases, swallows, and destroys the fragments of history. It seems that history ceases to exist on the surface of the desert unless it is resurrected by historians from underneath. History is lost beneath the sand and the historians have to dig out the lost cities, the oases, and the textual life that lies there. Almásy and his crew believe that there was an ocean before the desert was formed there: "Here in the desert, which had been an old sea where nothing was strapped down or permanent, everything drifted" (22). Knowing that the people who lived in the desert are water people, Almásy can speculate and interpret their past lives and customs.

Moreover, the desert is a place that lacks any demarcations or borders: “In the desert it is easy to lose a sense of demarcation” (18). The desert cannot be traced; it can only be interpreted. For Ondaatje, *topoi* such as the desert or the Italian villa are fluid, transformable, and borderless. John Bolland argues that the organization of space in the novel “can be linked to its critique of the power structures inherent in colonialism” (47). The author’s settings undermine the historians’ and cartographers’ conceptions of delimitations and territories. The desert lacks a master and does not master anybody; it “could not be claimed or owned – it was a piece of cloth carried by winds, never held down by stones” (138). The desert is a free and independent space devoid of colonial constraints.

Ondaatje’s desert becomes an international and peaceful space where individuals of different ethnic backgrounds can coexist. The sand – that washes up borders and frontiers – seems to erase, metaphorically speaking, the characters’ national identities to the extent to which the inhabitants of the desert become “nationless” and international. Almásy emerges as a representative of the international state of the desert: “We were German, English, Hungarian, African – all of us insignificant to them. Gradually we became nationless. I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation-states” (138). People’s national identity and the fact that they belong to a certain national territory compel them to participate in wars, defend their countries, hate, and kill their foreign brothers in order to play a useless and power-driven political and historical game. The solution for an individual like Almásy is to go to the desert, explore other people’s and peoples’ civilizations and history, and deny himself any affiliation with a national identity. He advises Hana, Caravaggio, and Kip to “Erase the family name! Erase

nations!” and adds that he “was taught such things by the desert” (139). The desert teaches Almásy to give up being a slave of history and of his own identity or nationality: “But I wanted to erase my name and the place I had come from. By the time war arrived, after ten years in the desert, it was easy for me to slip across borders, not to belong to anyone, to any nation” (139). At the end of his desert experience, Almásy is a citizen without citizenship and a man without a face. No one knows for sure what his nationality, mother tongue, and name are; that is why the characters of the novel invent a nationality for him and call him “the English patient.” Although they speculate on his true identity and are captivated by the stories he tells under morphine, they (and he too) could fictionalize the faceless, nameless man.

This erasure of borders is perhaps possible in a neutral, non-western, and mysterious space like the desert. The explorers of the desert want to bury their history and their national identity and emerge as free from any territorial constraints: “All of us, those with European homes and children in the distance, wished to remove the clothing of our countries ... We disappeared into the landscape” (139). Interestingly, the author interprets for the second time the landscape as a receptacle which swallows history and identity. Ondaatje referred first to the bombed Italian villa as a continuation of its natural surroundings; now, he is making a connection between Almásy and his crew and the desert. The villa and the historians of the desert are continuations of the natural environment. It seems that historical constructions and even the people that explore history become (sometimes and under certain circumstances) part of geography; one can read them as maps. The Italian villa and the desert turn into two textual *topoi*, where history, geography, nationality, and fiction meet and become one.

Darryl Whetter subtly observes that “the figuration of landscape as text and the portrayal of body in the desert travels of Almásy (the ‘English’ patient) as landscape establish the desert itself as a character in the novel and as Almásy’s companion” (445). For instance, when Almásy writes his book, *Récents Explorations dans le Désert Libyque*, he imagines the desert as a text on the page: “[I was] coming closer and closer to the text as if the desert were there somewhere on the page, so I could even smell the ink as it emerged from the fountain pen” (235). In fact, Almásy is a cartographer whose duty is to write the desert and translate it into a map. The desert, like the textual Italian villa, becomes a text that can be written, rewritten, and revised by Almásy. Symbolic characters such as the desert and the Italian villa become texts and at the same time metaphors of the historical reconstruction in the novel.

Not only do the desert and the villa become textual landscapes in the novel, but the characters themselves are also personified as texts. Both characters and settings are subject to historical and textual reconstruction. First of all, the English patient’s body and face can be fictionalized upon. Readers and the other characters can guess what lies beyond the patient’s burned face and body and consequently inscribe his physique with various stories. The author draws an almost transparent line between the reliability and unreliability of the narration when he and the other characters give the patient a name. One could argue that Almásy’s story and life do not coincide with the English patient’s. However, readers have to accept Ondaatje’s game of reliability and unreliability and trust the patient’s memory. The so-called Englishman characterizes himself or is characterized by the narrator as a text: “You must talk to me, Caravaggio. Or am I just a book?” (253); “He listens to her, swallowing her words like water” (5); “I am a person who if left alone

in someone's home walks to the bookcase, pulls down a volume and inhales it. So history enters us" (18). Ondaatje's technique of transforming his characters into texts is also emphasized and used extensively by Ackroyd. Like Charles Wychwood in *Chatterton*, who literally swallows pages from Dickens' *Great Expectations*, Almásy eats words like food and breathes historical texts like oxygen. While texts enter Almásy's body via his mouth and lungs, readers and characters can create texts around his identity.

Furthermore, Hana becomes a fictional participant in the English patient's story by being so fascinated with it that she confounds herself with its sentences and situations: "She entered the story ... she had been immersed in the life of others, in plots ... her body [had been] full of sentences and moments" (12); "her body full of stories and situations" (36). Hana's body becomes the recipient of history and fiction because she both reads historical and fictional books to her patient and listens attentively to his stories. When he writes his travel book on the desert, Almásy textualizes his lover, Katharine: "I was unable to remove her body from the page. I wished to dedicate the monograph to her, to her voice, to her body" (235). When Almásy writes about the desert, he celebrates his love for Katharine to the extent to which the writing of the desert becomes the writing of Katharine's body. Katharine too is inspired by texts and words: "She had always wanted words, she loved them, grew up on them" (238). Finally, Almásy believes that all people are books that can be read or maps that can be explored:

I believe in such cartography – to be marked by nature, not just to label ourselves on a map like the names of the rich men and women on buildings. We are communal histories, communal books. We are not

owned or monogamous in our taste or experience. All I desired was to walk upon such an earth that had no maps. (261)

The English patient claims that every individual is an open book full of stories and situations. However, these “human texts” are not subject to the rules of history or to the borders of cartography.

Although the English patient argues for a humanistic message in a time of great adversity and hopes that the borders between nations are erased, not all the characters of the novel share his view. Caravaggio, for instance, wonders why they are all in the wrong country fighting other nations’ wars instead of being at home: “‘The trouble with all of us is we are where we shouldn’t be. What are we doing in Africa, in Italy? What is Kip doing dismantling bombs in orchards, for God’s sake? What is he doing fighting English wars?’” (122). This statement refers to Kip, who fights for the British army but who eventually revolts against British imperialism. Caravaggio too earns a living by stealing and spying during the war; he is a Canadian spy who travels from Africa to Europe. It is difficult to keep track of him, as Caravaggio is always on the run. The only moment of pause is a photograph of him that he wants destroyed. That photograph – which Hutcheon would probably call representational – shows Caravaggio’s true identity. The other masks that Caravaggio puts on while he is a spy are only fictitious. Caravaggio’s identity is in flux because he tries to conceal it; he embraces other false identities in order to serve a duplicitous game of history.

While Caravaggio moves from one place to another and changes his identity, Kip teeters between two civilizations and worlds: Orient and Occident. As an Indian who fights for the British and who falls in love with a Canadian girl, Kip seems to embrace

fully Western civilization. However, this proves to be an illusion because Kip eventually rejects the West and returns to India. It is the dropping of the atomic bombs in Japan that makes Kip revise his feelings for the West. He revolts against all Western nations and especially against British colonialism.⁵ For him, Europe and the West coincide with Englishness and with British domination of the world; Kip attributes all the misfortunes, carnages, and wars of the world to the English people: “American, French, I don’t care. When you start bombing the brown races of the world, you’re an Englishman. You had King Leopold of Belgium and now you have fucking Harry Truman of the USA. You all learned it from the English” (286). He follows his brother’s advice and becomes a hater of Europeans: “Never trust Europeans ... Never shake hands with them” (284). At the end of the novel, we find him in India respecting an Indian tradition according to which the second son becomes a doctor: “he is a doctor, has two children and a laughing wife” (299). Hana, on the other hand, does not belong to any tradition; fatherless and childless, she goes back to Canada and becomes “a woman of honour and smartness whose wild love leaves out luck, always taking risks” (301).

Although Ondaatje’s ideas on love, cultural diversity, and the erasure of borders between nations do not triumph in the novel, the characters’ stories about these issues and about their own lives do. History and nationalities divide the love between people instead of saving them. In an essay entitled “Cultural Clashes? – East meets West in Michael Ondaatje’s novels,” Josef Pesch argues that despite “the efforts of multicultural individuals like Kip or the patient or the international desert” or the Italian villa, I might add, the novel does not “seem to be able to ultimately and permanently bridge the gaps across the cultural divides” (Pesch 73). *Topoi* such as the desert and the villa that

sheltered and brought together many people of different nationalities prove to be provisional. If an international identity for Ondaatje's characters is not possible, then their fictional existence could be. Although some of their histories are lost to the landscape of the desert or to the natural surroundings of the Italian villa, some of their private stories are glued in Herodotus's book or in *The Last of the Mohicans*. Fiction is eventually triumphant because it benefits from perpetual revision. The triumph of fiction and the rewriting of history are two ideas that Peter Ackroyd develops in his novel, *Chatterton*. The next chapter will show how he transforms history and literature into plagiarism, copies, and playful (mis)quotations.

Notes:

¹ Igor Maver also believes that Ondaatje's use of "the 'national' search for a Canadian literary identity by using 'international' postmodern techniques falls within the paradigm of contemporary postcolonial and postmodern cultural production, which is in Canada characterized by pluralism, decentralization and the creation of a multicultural 'mosaic'" (65).

² Many critics discuss the polyphonic structure of the novel and its multitude of stories. In "Post-Apocalyptic War Histories: Michael Ondaatje's 'The English Patient,'" Josef Pesch argues that the "diverse tales of World War II which its protagonists tell suggest that a History of the War ... can, indeed, no longer be told as if it were the only one ... It cannot be reduced to some single truth, some linear history triumph" (131-2). Maggie Morgan contends that the "dispersed, broken and divided" structure of *The English Patient* "manages to present a multiplicity of stories and of voices" (161). Ondaatje's historiographic metafiction "attempts to re-work a certain period of history" by combining historical events with historical and fictional characters (Morgan 161). Darryl Whetter summarizes Ondaatje's project in *The English Patient*: "The novel's principal travels, those of Almásy through the North Africa desert of 1930-1939, are of exceptional note for two reasons: first, Ondaatje's well-documented situation of these fictional travels within accurate geographical and historical circumstances, and, secondly, their overt affiliation with the project of storytelling" (443).

³ Some critics point out Ondaatje's unreliable narration and the text's indeterminacies. For instance, in an article entitled "Canadian Patient: visit with an ailing text," O. W. Pollmann analyzes the indeterminacies and flaws of Ondaatje's novel. "Among these

[flaws] would certainly be plot contrivances, the practically impossible survival of the copy of *The Histories* by Herodotus through the crash and fire of the plane, the unbelievable presence of Almásy in a field hospital near Florence, and therefore also the curious gathering of four characters at the Villa San Girolamo toward the end of the second World War” (Pollmann 149). However, what Pollmann calls flaws and indeterminacies fit the genre of historiographic metafiction, where history and fiction not only meet but become one. Ondaatje brings these characters together to show that cultural diversity, survival, and, to some extent, happiness are possible during war although they are temporary. The presence of the Hungarian explorer, alias the dying English patient, in the Italian villa and his mental journeys in the desert trigger debates and discussions around the issue of history. Douglas Barbour argues that, in Ondaatje’s hands, “even the documents of history slide away from factual representation toward a haunting apprehension of indeterminacy” (207).

⁴Renger claims that Ondaatje “emphasizes his sense of the flux and hybridity of history by letting Herodotus’s book itself undergo change” (115). Renger refers, of course, to Almásy’s insertion in the book of his cuttings and clippings so that “the book metamorphoses into Almásy’s histories” (115). Morgan, on the other hand, suggests that “As we watch Hana writing in the flyleaf of *Kim*, and we see Almásy and Katharine adding their stories to the pages of Herodotus, we become aware of how easily the stories that become our Histories are written” (171)

⁵Many critics discuss how Ondaatje portrays the problem of colonialism in the novel. Mark Kemp analyzes Kip’s political epiphany and argues that “Kip must leave because he too has been assisting the enemy and realizes he must now fight for his own country”

(151). He continues by saying that Kip and Hana “share fond memories and a cultural synchronicity” (151) while in Italy. When Kip hears of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he “recognizes his own colonization by an essentially destructive and self-destructive force when he confronts the Englishman with the truth that the West would have never used such a weapon against a white race” (Jacobs 11). Maggie Morgan, on the other hand, argues that Kip “had to react in anger against the injustices done to the ‘brown race’” but his reaction is “deflated” because “all those in the Italian monastery, including the ‘English’ patient were also victims of colonialism and war “ (163-4). Other critics focus on geographic spaces like the desert, which escape the forces of colonialism. Nicola Renger believes that “Ondaatje’s choice of the desert as the location to be mapped reveals his desire to subvert the colonial practices implicit in cartography” (112). Count Ladislaus de Almásy is a cartographer, a desert archaeologist, and explorer, but the desert is a place of “perpetual flux, which, through its nomadic populations and its vast and changing surface, makes spatial control and colonial appropriation through maps, nearly impossible” (Renger 112).

CHAPTER IV

REVISING THE HISTORY BOOK THROUGH FICTION: A LOOK INTO PETER ACKROYD'S REPRESENTATION, PLAGIARISM, AND INTERTEXTUALITY IN *CHATTERTON*

“There is properly no history; only biography.” (Ralph Waldo Emerson)

“Time present and time past

Are both present in time future,

And time future contained in time past.” (T. S. Eliot)

Peter Ackroyd in an interview with Susan Onega argues that historical fact and fictional fancy are not separate activities but “simply aspects of the same process” (210). In his 1987 novel, *Chatterton*, Ackroyd shows that “the past is unrecoverable, being constantly amalgamated into contemporary experience to suit the needs of that experience” (Finney 257-8).¹ Ackroyd’s approach to history and fiction differs from Ondaatje’s and Doctorow’s insofar as the British author uses literature and language as means to rewrite history, while Doctorow and Ondaatje deal more with national and international identities. Ackroyd inscribes himself in the tradition of British postmodern authors, who usually emphasize self-reflexivity, parody, irony, intertextuality, plagiarism, and games with language in historiographic metafiction more than American or Canadian authors do.² Furthermore, while Doctorow describes a version of America at the beginning of the twentieth century and Ondaatje shows how his characters question and find their Canadian, Indian, Hungarian, and English identities, Ackroyd portrays a

British world of artists and pseudo-artists of the eighteenth century, nineteenth century, and twentieth century, a world dominated by writers, painters, and critics of literature and art.

Chatterton offers an example of how history is constructed or deconstructed by representations, copies, plagiarism, and quotations. Sabine Hotho asserts that with *Chatterton* Ackroyd demonstrates how “truth escapes as the authenticity status of all sources constantly shifts, as the lines between fact and fiction constantly blur” (389). The novel’s complicated plots and subplots revolve around the portrait, the manuscripts, and ultimately the history of the eighteenth-century poet and forger, Thomas Chatterton. Moreover, Ackroyd’s characters cannot and do not necessarily want to simplify and reveal Chatterton’s life, but they choose to continue and amplify his myth. The novel consists of three plots set in different centuries, each of them centering on a form of plagiarism and a practice of faking reality. Ukko Hänninen argues for the novel’s “fragmented structure and multiple plots that echo and mirror each other” (76). The eighteenth-century plot presents the last days of Chatterton himself who dies intoxicated with arsenic and opium. The second plot, which takes place in the nineteenth century, recounts Henry Wallis’ recreation on canvas of Chatterton’s death with the help of a model, the Victorian writer, George Meredith. The third and amplest plot focuses on the twentieth-century poet, Charles Wychwood, and his obsession with Chatterton’s fake portrait and manuscripts. Ackroyd’s depiction of past and present is a series of plagiarized acts, as throughout the centuries all the characters in the novel complicate history with the help of simulacra and forgeries. Not only is truth a phantasm, impossible to grasp, but it also becomes insignificant: “if there were no truth, everything was true”

(127). The nostalgia, the dream, and the fictionalization of/for/around history keep its presence alive over centuries. The author, his omniscient narrator, and the characters participate in this chaotic estrangement from history because they want to contribute to its fictionalization.³ Through play, quotations, misquotations, copies, and representations, they want to rewrite history and transform it into a (inter/hyper)textual and fictional experience. There are no originals in the novel because the characters are not capable of discovering or willing to find definite answers. Instead, they turn into Borgesian cartographers who make maps bigger than territories; or into writers who produce hundreds of books and articles all different in content about one forger poet who died at eighteen. The simulacra of history, such as representations, plagiarism, and playful (mis)quotations, allude to the fictive, textual, and discursive nature of history. My analysis will unravel representations of death in history (of both Ackroyd's fictive characters and real painters like Henry Wallis), the characters' tendency to plagiarize, and ultimately Ackroyd's postmodern gesture of appropriating and misappropriating other authors' words.

Upon discussing the transmission of the past in the present, one needs to refer to the representation of history and more specifically to the representation of death since at least three of the protagonists are involved in this tangled dilemma. In *Chatterton*, historical knowledge/misknowledge is mainly achieved through paintings. At the beginning of the novel, Charles buys a nineteenth-century portrait of an old man whom he believes to be Chatterton. At this point his belief contradicts the official version of the poet's life and the short biographical sketch that Ackroyd wrote, both claiming that Chatterton committed suicide at the age of eighteen.⁴ What does Charles' discovery

mean? Does it mean that Chatterton did not die young? What happened to Chatterton between 1770, the year when he supposedly died, and 1802, the year when the “Portrait of an Unknown Man” is dated? According to Charles, Thomas Chatterton “kept on writing ... [and] faked his own death” (23). Both these theories *vis à vis* a life so enigmatic as Chatterton’s may be correct depending on which one readers want to believe. “But who is to say what is fake and what is real?” (113), one of the characters asks, blurring the boundaries between history and fiction. Paradoxically, Chatterton is both dead and alive according to the theories presented in the novel. Up to a certain point in the novel, when the mystery of the portrait is partially uncovered, Chatterton finds himself in the same situation as Schrödinger’s cat. It is up to the reader to decide which historical past he/she is going to embrace.

Curiosity might not really kill a cat, but Edwin Schrödinger, the famous physicist could have. Schrödinger’s cat paradox revolves around the experiment of putting a cat into a box with a bottle of deadly poison, a hammer, and a radioactive atom. If the atom decays, then a mechanism detects this, swings the hammer, breaks the bottle of poison, and kills the cat. If the atom does not decay, the poison stays in the bottle and the cat lives. Until we open the box to measure the atom we do not know which state the cat is in, because the cat, according to quantum mechanics, is in a mixture of two states: both dead and alive. Or, to put it differently, the cat has a 50% chance of survival. The question is not whether the cat is alive or dead when one opens the box, but rather, the question is, what is happening to the cat while the box is closed. One can only speculate on the cat’s fate without knowing certainly what has happened or what is going to happen with it. Similarly, one can only speculate on what has happened to Chatterton and when

exactly he died. Supposing that the cat is found alive in the box once the experimenters open the box, one could claim that this measurement altered the state of the system and from a cat that is both dead and alive, the cat becomes only alive. The same is true if the cat is dead. Whereas a measurement, the act of looking inside the box, alters the state of a quantum system, historians' interpretations alter history as well. History will always display several boxes, several cats, and several choices. There are no lies when one restructures the past, only endless possibilities.

This realm of endless possibilities makes impossible the knowledge of history with the help of cause and effect. Before the twentieth century, physicists believed that everything could be explained. For instance, if we see some pieces of broken glass on the floor, we could immediately assume that those pieces formed a pane. Similarly, if Charles saw a portrait of an old man who looked like Chatterton, he could easily make the case that the eighteenth-century poet is not dead. However, twentieth-century physicists, including Werner Heisenberg, argue that we cannot describe and analyze simultaneous objects or phenomena with certainty. The relationship between cause and effect should be eliminated from physics and history because it is unreliable and incomplete. Historians or the characters from *Chatterton* deal with the effects produced by past causes and events. For example, they can state that there was a man called Chatterton and that he was a poet and a forger. If we want to know more about Chatterton, we might discover that not everything we find out about him is true. The more we try to find out about Chatterton's life, the more we fictionalize his existence.

Now that we have seen how uncertain the death of Chatterton is in Ackroyd's text, a look into the representation of his death complicates the novel even more.

Ackroyd exploits an interesting juxtaposition between the decay of the painting and the decay of Chatterton's and even of Charles' bodies. According to his scenario, Chatterton dies because he takes too much poison by mistake, whereas Charles dies because of a brain tumor. But after Charles buys the portrait, he starts to behave funny and eventually becomes sick. Only his son, Edward, notices how strange his father looks: "His mouth has gone all funny, Mum" (166), "his head [was] swaying and dipping" (126), "he could feel his scalp quivering" (129). Edward concludes that the man in the portrait caused his father's illness: "Can't you see that he's trying to hurt you?" (129), "He knew that 'Chatterton' had some connection with his father's own death" (229). Moreover, Charles starts to see a distorted Gothic reality populated by ghosts from the past and at the same time he enters an occult world of dreams and visions: "Charles turned to his invisible companion. 'The dream unfolds,' he said . . . And he realised at once that these words were not his words, but those of someone other" (78). Neither Charles nor the reader can decide whether these mysterious events take place in Charles' imagination or not.

Charles' vision of his son decaying prophesizes both Chatterton's death and the decay of the portrait itself: "Then the left side of his son started to disintegrate, as if the boy were going through the stages of youth, age, death and decay in front of him" (165). All three men that Ackroyd sets in three different centuries die or decay: young Chatterton, middle-aged Charles, and the old man from the portrait. Soon after Charles' death, his Chattertonian dream will also vanish as Ackroyd interestingly parallels Chatterton's and the portrait's decay: "The saliva fills Chatterton's mouth, a river overflowing its precious banks . . . I am being melted down" (227) and "Small bubbles and creases were forming on the surface of the picture . . . he watched in horror the

dissolution” (228). When the painting dissolves, Merk sees two faces on the canvas, a young one and an old one: “The face of the sitter dissolved, becoming two faces, one old and one young” (228). This Janus-like presence on the “dying” painting reinforces Ackroyd’s juxtaposition between his paragraphs about Chatterton’s death and the paragraphs about the decay of the portrait. Pedro Garcia-Caro argues that “the apocryphal painting reveals a similar structure to that of the novel, which is also created through a series of parallel narratives and intertexts, different texts and different plots that demonstrate a parallel concern for artistic production” (164). In other words, there is a connection between Ackroyd’s written paragraphs and the painting’s layers.

Furthermore, “young” Edward is the only one who understands or intuits the connection between Chatterton’s death and the portrait’s destruction because when Philip tells Vivien that “the painting has been destroyed” (230), Edward exclaims, “‘Chatterton’s dead! Chatterton’s dead!’” (230). Like his father, Edward believes that the portrait renders old Chatterton, but unlike his father, he thinks that Chatterton tried to hurt and succeeded in hurting his father. Edward is the only character whom Ackroyd allows to look between and beyond the author’s dense thread of plots and sub-plots: the little boy will have a vision of Chatterton’s death as portrayed by Ackroyd. What is surprising is that when Edward looks at Wallis’ picture in the gallery, he does not see the reality of the painting (how Wallis painted Meredith), but he sees how Chatterton’s body is discovered: “They were standing beside the body and the woman had put a handkerchief over her mouth and nose ... I smell the arsenic, Mrs Angell” (229). Moreover, Edward does not see Chatterton lying dead on the bed, but his father: “Edward had not yet chosen to look closely at the man lying upon the bed but now, when he did so, he stepped back

with astonishment: it was his father lying there” (229). For Edward, all three men merge into one person: an eighteenth-nineteenth-twentieth-century historical male figure whom he perceives through representations. The three centuries are blurred in one distorted historical representation. In fact, the boy looks at a representation (Wallis’ painting of Chatterton’s death) and sees another representation (Ackroyd’s representation of Chatterton’s death) and at the same time he sees his reality (his father’s death), which is framed by all these three representations (Ackroyd’s fictional world, Wallis’ work of art, and Chatterton’s death) and consequently transformed into a representation.

All three men (Chatterton, Charles, and the old man in the painting) are a multiplied version of the same historical construct over centuries. In the beginning of the novel, all three had, like Schrödinger’s cat, a 50% chance to survive, but they missed it. Their death, or better said, their transformation from flesh and blood individuals of the present moment into past constructs constitutes a removal from historical truth and at the same time an openness toward fiction. There are no originals anymore (Chatterton, the old man himself if he existed, or Charles), but only representations and copies (Chatterton’s biographies, portraits, and his forgeries, the old man’s portrait, and Charles’ poems and the future novel written by Philip about him). The absence of originals and the constant presence of copies justify the characters’ avidity to erase the variants of history, change them, and mold them into fiction. Charles’ and the other characters’ fascination with the fictitious versions of history are what matters. Reiterating Charles’ experience after his death, Philip muses: “the truth he had found in his discoveries, the trust he had placed in them, must not have been false” (212). In other words, the dream/fiction/imagination must have been more real than reality itself

The death known through representations – a theme that traverses the novel – is exploited by Ackroyd in connection with other characters besides Charles and Chatterton. Sarah Tilt, the famous art critic, “has been writing for six years a book “provisionally entitled *The Art of Death*” (33) in which she is trying to analyze the image of death in various paintings. In fact, she attempts to overcome her own fear of death by studying about it. Her book remains unwritten partly because “all the time it had been as if she were watching her own death” (33) and partly because she cannot have access to a genuine experience of death. She only deals with representations that – according to her – make death more beautiful (34). She has done research on this topic and she has accrued many ideas and sketches, but her own insignificant contribution is restricted and doomed to repetition and indirect plagiarism. That is why all she can do is “[turn] death into a spectacle” (34) instead of telling the truth about it. The same happens with Wallis’ painting which uses Meredith as a model. Although Wallis and Meredith go to see Chatterton’s room and use it as décor for Wallis’ painting, the painter is not able to reproduce a real image of Chatterton’s death but a fictionalized one. The prolonged discussions between the painter and his model related to how much reality and fiction are invested in the painting are meaningless. Nineteenth-century Wallis and nineteenth-century Meredith cannot entirely reconstruct eighteenth-century Chatterton but create only the impression that they do. Meredith becomes so immersed in playing Chatterton that he starts believing in the reality of this role: “Then I will become a perfect Chatterton and surely die” (138), “I will be immortalised” (161). He foresees that the future viewers of the painting will not be able to make any distinction between the original (Chatterton) and its copy (Meredith). These two identities will merge into one

with the help of representation and history. Another layer (Meredith) is added to Chatterton's immortal and mysterious legend. Ackroyd conflates Chatterton's identity with historical figures like Meredith and fictional ones such as the old man and Charles.

Another significant simulacrum of history that proves its fictiveness is plagiarism. The characters' tendency to plagiarize other characters works against accuracy in history. If everything proves to be plagiarized and copied, how can readers of history acquire *the truth, the original, and the genuine*? The answer is that they cannot because these notions do not exist and even if they were, the characters would not want to discover them. In *Chatterton* the reader has to go through all the layers of textual reality in order to find out that historical reality is only provisional and fictitious. The characters of the novel invent intricate theories and plots based on plagiarized and copied material. Chatterton himself is remembered as the great forger who falsified a part of English literary history by creating a fifteenth-century monk, Rowley, who supposedly produced poems in a medieval style. Moreover, the only portrait of Chatterton known in existence was painted by Henry Wallis; he did not freeze Chatterton's face for posterity but used George Meredith as a model. As twenty-first-century readers and lovers of art, we do not have full access to Chatterton's portraits or his oeuvre because we cannot make the distinction between fact and forgery in his life and work. Furthermore, Chatterton is said to have influenced the Romantic poets and especially William Blake. Yet Chatterton's enveloping power does not stop with Romantic poets. Philip Slack, Charles' friend, who is a librarian, discovers in a book that George Meredith was saved "by the intervention of ghostly Thomas Chatterton" (71) when the former wanted to commit suicide. In his discussion with Andrew Flint (who amusingly enough writes Meredith's biography),

Charles admits that the writers of the present are watched and influenced by Blake, Shelley, Coleridge, and Meredith, who “got it all from Chatterton” (77). Chatterton, who became famous by forging other works, has had such a strong impact on literature that contemporary poets are still fascinated by his mysterious life. Even after Charles’ death, his friend Philip will continue fictionalizing Chatterton’s history by writing a novel that will address Charles’ theories about Chatterton. Ackroyd’s novel is about plagiarizing the plagiarists’ plagiarized works *ad infinitum*.

Plagiarism, forgeries, and fakes spread even further and affect all the plots and subplots of the novel. “Everything is copied,” Charles declares (93). Charles exchanges his two-volume *The Lost Art of Eighteenth-Century Flute-Playing* by James Macpherson – who was himself a forger and a plagiarist (*Metafiction and Myth* 62) – for a fake portrait. Moreover, Charles will die not knowing that the Chatterton manuscripts in which he believed arduously are fake. When Phil goes back to Bristol, he finally discovers the truth (or one of the possible truths) about Chatterton:

so that was it, after all, a joke. The memoirs had been forged by a bookseller who wanted to repay him in kind, to fake the work of a faker and so confuse for ever the memory of Chatterton; he would no longer be the poet who died young and glorious, but a middle-aged hack who continued a sordid trade with his partner. This was the document which Charles Wychwood had carried back with him. (221)

The discovery of a possible truth at the end of the novel is not as important as the multitude of fictive scenarios that were built when Charles or Phil did not know the truth. The fact that Phil knows a version of the truth will not prevent him from writing a novel

about Charles' blind belief in Chatterton's manuscripts and the validity of the portrait he found.

Another writer who plagiarizes her texts and consequently fictionalizes literary history is Harriet Scrope. She copies a plot formula from another author: "She picked at random *The Last Testament* by Harrison Bentley ... why should she not take this [plot] and use it as a plain, admittedly inferior, vessel for her own style?" (102). Plagiarism is a starting point for Harriet and a means of inspiration for her own novels. Seen from this perspective, plagiarism becomes the author's muse. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," T. S. Eliot argues that "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is his relation to the dead poets and artists" (35). Eliot believes that there has to be a melding between tradition and the authors' new creations. The difference between Eliot's artists and Ackroyd's paper artists is that Ackroyd's characters steal tradition (they copy materials from the past) and they change it and transform it into a new text. A good example of this alteration of the past is seen in the collaboration between Merk and Seymour. It is Merk who painted Seymour's last paintings because the latter suffered from arthritis: "You don't see that / painted all of Seymour's last pictures" (114). Even though Merk's technique relies more on "mimesis rather than invention" (205), he changes Seymour's style and invents a new direction in the latter's painting. Ironically enough, Sadleir realizes that Seymour's paintings are fake, but he does not want "to ruin a good trade," so he eventually "come[s] to some kind of arrangement" with the experts from the gallery (114).

Whether they do it willingly or unwillingly, consciously or unconsciously, almost all the characters plagiarize, copy, or steal. However, their acts should not be condemned

but praised because they are skillful *bricoleurs* who transform the plagiarized snapshots into new and valuable texts. Even if they start with copied material, they end up improv(is)ing and restructuring it, transforming themselves from thieves into creators. Meredith, for instance, calls Wallis a “Resurrectionist [who] can bring the dead to life” (156). At the same time, the painter created a new representation, a new face, and a new context for Chatterton’s biography and scholarship. This new scenario adds to the complexity of the previous ones. Furthermore, Chatterton, around whom all the intrigues of the novel revolve, is the greatest forger of all and at the same time the finest creator of fictive history: “The poet does not merely recreate or describe the world. He actually creates it” (157). As shown above, Charles’, Meredith’s, and the old man’s identities seem to converge toward one – Chatterton – who attracts like a magnet everything and everybody: “So everything moves towards the centre, towards Thomas Chatterton” (164). Paradoxically, Chatterton is both a *bricoleur*, who plagiarizes and arranges the copied materials together, and an engineer who creates a new text.

Ackroyd uses not only representations, plagiarism, copies, and fakes to mark the fictitious nature of history, but he also inserts in his own text quotations and playful misquotations from different writers and artists. Not only do the characters in Ackroyd’s novel plagiarize, but the author also does the same thing; both creator and the created plagiarize, quote, and misquote. In *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon places under the word *parody* the author’s game of quotations and misquotations: “Parody – often called ironic quotation, pastiche, appropriation, or intertextuality – ... is a value-problematizing, de-naturalizing form of acknowledging the history ... of representation” (93-4).⁵ Gibson and Wolfreys argue that Ackroyd plays “within a given

text, across his own texts, and between the texts which his name signs and those to which he alludes, from which he cites or otherwise borrows" (9). His intertextual quotations lose their initial meaning and at the same time gain another one because the author places them in a new context. Ackroyd himself becomes a plagiarist like Chatterton as he consciously uses all these quotations, sometimes without quotation marks. The author becomes a *Homo Ludens* who destabilizes the notion of history and literary history. Cross-, intra-, and intertextual allusions and references bewitch readers and deepen the mysteries of Ackroyd's labyrinthian text. Sometimes the reader is not even aware that Ackroyd puts quotations in his characters' mouths. In fact, the author does not even want his readers to recognize all the quotations in his novel. In this way, readers themselves become plagiarists if they write about or discuss Ackroyd's *Chatterton*.

A focus on quotations/misquotations that are not attributed, quotations that are appropriated, Ackroyd's quotations or paraphrases from his own novels, synonyms and translated words, and finally the characters' invented stories underscores the fictionality of history. Harriet Scrope, the funny and witty old woman writer, confesses: "I've been quoting all my life!" (35). Harriet misquotes authors most of the time and reinforces the idea that each person appropriates the past in his/her own way. One of the quotations for which neither Harriet nor Ackroyd cite the author is a line from one of William Wordsworth's poems called "Resolution and Independence": "We poets in our youth begin in gladness ... But thereof in the end come despondency and madness" (35). Harriet misquotes one of the poet's lines; the correct version is: "But thereof come in the end despondency and madness" (204). The reader has two choices: he/she can either find the quote and discover that Wordsworth's seventh stanza of "Resolution and

Independence” refers to Chatterton or he/she can go on reading without noticing this detail. Wordsworth dedicates one stanza of the aforementioned poem to the marvelous boy called Chatterton:

I thought of Chatterton, the marvellous boy,
The sleepless soul that perished in his pride;
Of him who walked in glory and in joy,
Following his plough, along the mountain-side.
By our own spirits we are deified;
We Poets in our youth begin in gladness,
But thereof come in the end despondency and madness. (204)

At the end of the novel, it is Chatterton’s turn to quote again the two lines from Wordsworth’s poem: “We poets in our youth ... begin in gladness, but thereof come in the end despondency and madness” (233). This time Chatterton quotes correctly Wordsworth’s poem and does not invert “come” and “in the end” as Harriet does. In addition, in both cases the omniscient narrator inserts his own commentary between the two lines of Wordsworth’s quote: “She waved her hands joyfully in the air” and “he calls to them across the infinite abyss” (233). In this way, the author creates two new fictional contexts for this quote. I say fictional contexts because both Harriet and Ackroyd’s Chatterton are fictional characters. Furthermore, Chatterton could not have known Wordsworth’s quote because he died in 1770, the year when Wordsworth was born. This anachronism opens up new possibilities, new contexts, new novels centered on the topic of whether or not William Wordsworth is the author of his poems. This two-line quote

and so many others suggest that there are unseen texts behind Ackroyd's quotations and misquotations, texts that unfold beyond *Chatterton*.

Before Harriet uses Wordsworth's line, she quotes from Christopher Marlow's *Dr. Faustus* without acknowledging him. Instead of reciting the correct line, "Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight," she says, "'Cut is the bough ... that might have grown full straight'" (34). It is her friend Sarah who corrects her: "'It was a branch, dear, not a bough. If you were quoting'" (35). In other words, only if she is quoting, does she have to say branch and not bough. Sarah probably does not consider misquotations as plagiarism. But not all the quotations that the characters use are plagiarized; sometimes playful Ackroyd gives the names of the quoted authors and has his characters engage in elevated and funny discussions on literary authors. The conversation between Charles and Harriet about Eliot's line from "Ash Wednesday," "Why should the aged eagle stretch its wings?" ends in a debate on who the author of this quote is, Eliot or Shakespeare:

'It's a quotation from Eliot.'

'It sounded like Shakespeare to me.'

'It was Eliot.'

'Well, you know these writers. They'll steal any ... Anything, that's right ... It's called the anxiety of influence'. (100)

Their conclusion is that it does not matter which of these two canonical authors produced the quote because all the writers are eventually plagiarists. Moreover, Ackroyd opens all three parts in the novel with epigraphs from Chatterton's work. Their dialogue also alludes to Harold Bloom's theory of "anxiety of influence." Bloom argues that new

poems originate from old poems and young poets struggle to get out of the shadow of old masters; strong poets, however, can overcome the “anxiety of influence.”

The list of examples of intertextuality and plagiarism does not end here. Brian Finney demonstrates that Ackroyd plagiarizes himself (253). The introductory sentence of Charles’ preface to his book that never gets written is repeated twice: once in *Chatterton* and once in another Ackroyd novel, *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*. Funnily enough, in this sentence Charles alludes to writers’ tendency toward plagiarism: “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” (126). Ironically, a part of Charles’ sentence – which Finney calls “defense of plagiarism” (253) – is taken from an art catalogue from Vivien’s gallery: “She [Grandma Joel] wanted to explain the entire material and spiritual world in terms of imitation” (109-10). Secondly, a part of Charles’ initial sentence is taken from the author’s earlier novel, *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, where Wilde describes Chatterton as “a strange, slight boy who was so prodigal of his genius that he attached the names of others to it” (67). Finney believes that this last quote “is indebted to Wilde’s lecture of March 1888 on Chatterton” (253). The act of plagiarism never ends; we are surrounded by copies and representations of history. One could argue, for instance, that the title of Harrison Bentley’s novel *The Last Testament* (the author who inspires Harriet Scrope) is taken from Ackroyd’s 1983 novel *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*.

A look into how the characters use synonyms and translated words sheds more light on the author’s language games and his indirect plagiarism. Charles plays with homonyms and partial synonyms of the word “memoirs” when Harriet asks him to write

her biography: “‘Oh, your memoirs. Memories. Memorials ... Mimosas’” (40). Charles interprets the word “memoirs” with the help of synonyms and at the same time moves away from the initial meaning of the word. Ackroyd exploits the same technique in the dialogue between Chatterton and the idiot boy whose name will become Tom as a result of this dialogue. However, instead of using synonyms, the characters use echoes and homonyms.

What is your name? See, my name is Tom. Tom. He points to himself.

Who are you?

Whoyou? ...

Tom. I am Tom. Who are you?

Tom. The boy points to himself, in imitation and smiles. Tom ...

You must leave here he [Chatterton] says, or you will die ...

Dyen? ... Dyen?

Without words, Chatterton thinks, there is nothing. There is no real world.

Without words I cannot even warn or protect you ...

Worlds ... Wordso. Woods. (209-10)

This is an excellent example of how words and their meanings are modified by other words and other meanings. Chatterton’s assertion, “Without words ... there is no real world” (210), proves wrong because in this case it is words that modify the real world and transform it into textuality. Hänninen argues that “the boy gains his very identity by imitating Chatterton” (82). From now on, the boy’s name will be Tom: “Gradually Chatterton faded from his memory, and the street itself was changed, but the idiot boy was always known as Tom” (211). Other examples of plagiarism and intertextuality

show how words transform reality into a pseudo-reality, a chimera, and ultimately a text. The same is true of Flint's Latin quotations that have lost their initial meaning and become parodic paraphrases of a distorted past:

'Sunt lacrimae rerum, don't you think? Mentem mortalia tangunt?'

'Does that mean, *they're dropping like flies?*' ...

'Exeunt omnes – ' he began to say.

'In vino veritas.' ...

'Dies irae,' he added ...

'Veni, vidi, vici.' They both laughed ... (177)

Both Flint and Harriet make fun of the Latin quotations and give them a new meaning by placing them in a parodic and humorous context.

The last issue in connection to plagiarism and quoting has to do with the characters' capacity to change the past and create an alternative reality. I will call it "misplagiarism"/"misquoting" because some of the characters think they are repeating instances from the past, but in fact they are inventing it on the spot. When Harriet talks to Charles, she says: "'You once told me a very beautiful thing, Charles. You told me that reality is the invention of unimaginative people.'" (39). Harriet is in fact lying; she read that phrase in a book review but she attributes it to Charles who "smile[s] delighted to be reminded of words he must have used" (40). Not only does Harriet invent Charles' past through language, but she also lures him into believing that the past belonged to him. Harriet makes up stories about herself and other people. When she meets the blind old man in the street, she lies to him and tells him that she was a taxidermist. "Harriet enjoyed inventing stories about herself" (30) and also changing these stories and applying

them to others. That is why she reinvents the story and retells it to Sarah: “I met a most peculiar blind man today. He told me he was a taxidermist” (32). Because her memory is unstable and because she does not care about anyone except herself, Harriet lies and creates new contexts for past events. When Vivien wants to tell her about Charles’ illness, she covers up her lack of interest with a lie: “He was looking a little pale, I thought’ ... but she “had no idea what she [Vivien] meant” (119). She does the same when she talks with Philip about the night at the restaurant and forgets that Charles had a stroke then: “I think Charles enjoyed it, too, don’t you?” (225). Throughout the novel, Ackroyd’s characters rely on storytelling as a means of recovering and creating the past.

Because past facts and people can be recuperated only through representations, plagiarism, and intertextuality, the characters themselves become textualized. In *Chatterton* characters like Harriet, Charles, Chatterton, and Meredith are either protagonists in books written by others about them (Chatterton, Meredith, Charles, Harriet) or they become texts (Philip, Harriet, Charles, Chatterton, Meredith). First of all, several authors write or read (auto)biographies within Ackroyd’s novel. Flint, for instance, writes a biography on Meredith; Charles consults Chatterton’s biographies and remarks that “each biography described a quite different poet” (127); Harriet wants someone else to write her memoirs; Philip wants to write a novel about Charles, and so on. Second, the characters aspire to become texts, words, letters, and fictions and be re(presented) in a form or another. Philip dreams of a world of books where the human body is surrounded by words: “And if you crossed the threshold into that world, you would be surrounded by words; you would crush them beneath your feet, you would knock against them with your head and arms, but if you tried to grasp them they would

melt away" (71). In Philip's textual world, words function as symbols and cryptograms; one should not try to decipher them because this act will ruin their textual existence. Harriet – who is constantly using figures of speech (106) is quoting and misquoting (35,100) – desires to become "a slim volume" (148) and at the same time she wants to have an identity outside her own books: "A librarian can call me Harriet. So you won't think of me as just a book" (148). Charles literally eats pages of books and textualizes his body: "then he tore another strip from a page of *Great Expectations*, rolled it into a ball and popped it into his mouth" (58). The novel ends with Philip's promise to turn Charles into a text. Moreover, Chatterton is transformed by the poster master into letters that form the word YOU: "And what do these human symbols form but YOU, sir? You! You!" (203). Ironically, Chatterton (the great forger) is the only one in the novel whom Ackroyd allows to be an "I" (see chapter 6). He cannot escape completely the tyranny of the omniscient narrator but strives for his own voice in the novel. He becomes a text and pseudotext in Ackroyd's novel, in the biographies that the authors have written about him, in Charles' preface, in Philip's future novel, and in Wallis' painting. Like Chatterton, Meredith is turned into a text in the writers' biographies about him and in Wallis' representation of Chatterton. This textualization/literalization/fictionalization of these characters proves again that history and historical figures are doomed and at the same time blessed to remain texts.

Peter Ackroyd provides in *Chatterton* an exemplum of how characters get lost in the multiple fictitious layers of history. Whether he achieves this goal through representations of death, characters' plagiarism, or playful quotations and misquotations, Ackroyd demonstrates that one can hear and see only echoes and shadows of the past.

These echoes and shadows leave room for historians' imaginations to unfold. The seekers of truth become avid interpreters of fiction and texts in *Chatterton*; they transform and expand facts into storytelling and narrative. Ackroyd reveals how history and historical and fictional characters are veiled in representations and how words and ideas are lost in plagiarism and playful (mis)quotations. The way the characters in *Chatterton* view history is similar to how Adso of Melk, one of Umberto Eco's protagonists in *The Name of the Rose*, reconstructs history. After the library – a symbol of historical reminiscence of the past – is destroyed, Adso tries to recover it, but he discovers only “a library made up of fragments, quotations, unfinished sentences, amputated stumps of books” (500). Furthermore, Adso admits that the incomplete pages of the books in the library have been more present in his life than the complete ones would have been. He imagines himself a new author of these books:

I have almost had the impression that what I have written on these pages, which you will now read, unknown reader, is only a cento, a figured hymn, an immense acrostic that says and repeats nothing but what those fragments have suggested to me, nor do I know whether thus far I have been speaking of them or they have been spoken through my mouth. But whichever of the two possibilities may be correct, the more I repeat the story that has emerged from them, the less I manage to understand whether in it there is a design that goes beyond the natural sequence of the events and the times that connect them (501)

Ackroyd's characters go through similar phases: they combine life with representations of history. Although representations, plagiarism, and intertextual quotations make

impossible one's tracing of original answers, the quest for these answers is significant. The quest for truth – which is ultimately the chimerical quest for a *fata morgana* – and for the key to the puzzle are more adventurous than finding impossible truths and the keys. It is through the layers of representation, textuality, plagiarism, intertextuality, and memory that fiction creatively reinvents history.

Notes:

¹ Susan Onega acknowledges in “Self, Text and World in British Historiographic Metafiction” that Ackroyd has written “nine historiographic metafictional novels that he has alternated with the writing of three biographies, on three of his ‘dominant precursors’: Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot and Charles Dickens” (101). In a 1999 study, Onega claims that Ackroyd’s novels follow closely the requirements of historiographic metafiction: “all of them are self-conscious and parodic novels that level history and literature to the same status of human construct” (181).

² Some of the critics who address the British postmodern novel and Ackroyd in connection to history are Tatjana Jukic, Catherine Bernard, Sabine Hotho, Greg Clingham, and Martha Rozett. Sabine Hotho believes that authors like Ackroyd and Byatt “engaged in revisiting literary history in order to rewrite it and, through rewriting it, to regenerate it” (387). Tatjana Jukic concentrates on the shifts in the portrayal of the Victorian period that occurred in the postmodern era. When she discusses *Chatterton*, Jukic compares the twentieth-century plot with the nineteenth-century openings in the novel and concludes that “while the eighteenth-century opening conveys a poetic thought very different from Ackroyd’s postmodernist gloom and deconstruction, the Victorian and the twentieth-century ones respond completely to postmodernism” (81). Greg Clingham focuses on a comparison between postmodernism and the eighteenth century in *Chatterton* and argues that the two periods share some historiographic principles: “first is that historical understanding is provisional ... second is that the historian’s language is aware of its own relativity ... and third that history makes its specifically historical meanings through narrative” (39).

³ Literary critics such as Greg Clingham, Susana Onega, John Peck, François Gallix, Edward Ahearn, Catherine Barnard, and Aleid Fokkema address Ackroyd's novels (*Chatterton* included) and place them in the tradition of historiographic metafiction. Speaking of *Chatterton*, John Peck argues that the novel involves history and literature in an ingenious fashion: "in the possibility that Chatterton did not die young, history itself might be a literary forgery" (445). Greg Clingham thinks that Ackroyd's intention is not "to offer an alternative historical explanation for the death of Chatterton ... [but to] draw attention to the metaleptic process by which historical (and biographical) narratives, and therefore, historical (and biographical) truths are made and formalized" (44). Catherine Barnard believes that with *Chatterton* Ackroyd asks a radical question: "la littérature ne serait-elle que chimères apocryphes rêvant de répéter un texte original idéal? Serait-elle condamnée à n'être qu'un jeu de simulacres dans une caverne à l'issue masquée par des miroirs biseautés?" (35) Barnard further claims that Ackroyd is obsessed with the idea of origin; that is why his characters "écrivent au nom symbolique du père, à la poursuite d'une origine enfouie, perdue dans les ruines de sable circulaires de l'oubli, des ruines de Borges, cet autre montrer de simulacres n'aura cessé. lui aussi, d'explorer" (35).

⁴ Readers might question Ackroyd's bibliographical sketch at the beginning of the novel. The author does not provide any source for his one-page biography on Chatterton. The minibiography is as fictitious as the novel itself. In fact, one could say that the novel starts with this questionable and problematic account of Chatterton's life.

⁵ In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon dedicates an entire chapter to intertextuality, parody, and history – three discourses exploited by Ackroyd. She astutely states that the "intertextual parody of historiographic metafiction ... offers a sense of presence of the

past, but a past that can be known only from its texts, its traces – be they literary or historical” (125). Gibson and Wolfreys point out that Ackroyd achieves “maze-like effects” in his novels through intertextual reference and plagiarism and through reintroducing figures, tropes and motifs “which dance on the surfaces of his writing” (12). Ukko Hänninen specifically discusses how intertextuality functions in Ackroyd’s novels. He wonders whether intertextuality falls under the category of plagiarism or true poetry and concludes that Ackroyd is “most unique when imitating other styles and other writers” (75). Aleid Fokkema admits that Ackroyd’s intertextual games are ingenious, but, on the other hand, fears that his “preoccupation with the linguistic universe” might make his work less serious (169). Pia Brinzeu praises the virtues of intertextuality because “it links all literary productions in a common network, annihilating the limits of individual creation by including it within an infinite text” (27).

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

“Not bad, not bad at all ... To arrive at the truth through the painstaking reconstruction of a false text.” (Umberto Eco)

The three Borgesian cartographers investigate history with the help of fiction and complicate it with invented plots and (hi)stories. Readers themselves are enchanted by the unsolved mysteries of the past or by the lost territories of history; they are seduced by the gaps left by Ackroyd, Ondaatje, and Doctorow in their novels. The authors’ endeavors of expanding historical events into ample plots and stories reminds me of Eco’s main characters in *Foucault’s Pendulum* – who fictionalize, fantasize, and obsess over an old manuscript that eventually proves to be a joke:

People are starved for plans. If you offer them one, they fall on it like a pack of wolves. You invent, and they’ll believe ... We invented a nonexistent Plan, and They not only believed it was real but convinced themselves that They had been part of it for ages, or, rather, They identified the fragments of their muddled mythology as moments of our Plan, moments joined in a logical, irrefutable web of analogy, semblance, suspicion. (618-9)

The characters’, the authors’, and the readers’ credulity in endless conspiracies, mysterious stories, in unexplained phenomena of history and at the same time their skepticism toward a definite yet impossible answer is what keeps historiographic metafiction alive.

In *Ragtime*, *The English Patient*, and *Chatterton*, Doctorow, Ondaatje, and Ackroyd stress that fiction can ironically solve the controversies of history by deepening its mysteries. In the process of rewriting the discourse of history, the authors remember their national roots. The three Borgesian cartographers rewrite history according to their national and cultural boundaries. In an article entitled "Historiographic Metafiction: Parody and Intertextuality," Hutcheon states that history and fiction "are both part of the signifying systems of our culture. They both make and make sense of the world. This is one of the lessons of that most didactic of postmodern forms: historiographic metafiction" (28). Not only are history and fiction part of national, cultural, didactic "signifying systems," but they are also absorbing, satisfying, and pleasurable reads.

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6

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