

The electric shepherd and the marvellous boy: literary evocations of Thomas Chatterton's 'suicide' in Philip K. Dick's *A Scanner Darkly* and elsewhere<sup>1</sup>

John Goodridge

I think the thing about suicide is that something happens to your sense of time and space. Space closes in on you [...] and so does time, very ominously. You are living in an extended now, which seems as if it will never end. It's like an LSD trip in which linear time has stopped unrolling. [...] A person who has never entered a suicidal period simply has no idea what it's like—the congealing, cooling world where no birds sing ... people receding, their voices dimming, heard less and less frequently. The shock of loss, the pain of shock, and the awful self-doubt. I think there is an actual evil voice within which whispers, 'Do it.'

(Philip K. Dick, Letter to James R. Bass, 10 November 1977)<sup>2</sup>

Hark! how he groans! see! see! he foams! he gasps!

And his convulsive Hand the pois'nous Phial grasps.

(Edward Rushton, *Neglected Genius: Or, Tributary Stanzas to the Memory of the Unfortunate Chatterton* (1787))<sup>3</sup>

The most enduring image of English Romanticism, we have recently been reminded, is that of a 'poet in a tiny garret, sprawled supine on his bed: young and beautiful, an exquisite corpse.'<sup>4</sup> This image, with its many variants, indeed permeates our culture, and is a common source of ideas not only about suicide, but about the nature of youth and death, reality and illusion, poetry and the role of the artist. Numerous examples might be considered: one thinks, for example, of the youthful corpses of rock music's iconic figures, from Jimi Hendrix to Kurt Cobain. In the present essay, however, I have chosen a single, transatlantic example of the ways in which the image of Chattertonian suicide may be appropriated in the postmodern era, which I want to use to try and focus the subject. It is from a novel by one of the key figures in the development of science fiction and postmodernist writing, Philip K. Dick.

In the worlds of Dick's fiction, paranoia is a characteristic mentality, consensual reality a crumbling stage-set, and despair an ever-present temptation. A crucial moment in *A Scanner Darkly* (1977), which chronicles the division and collapse of narcotics agent Robert Arctor's identity, is the suicide of the drug addict Charles Freck. It is a fine set-piece of Phildickian bathos, and draws on ideas and images whose archetype is the romantic suicide at the age of seventeen of the English

poet Thomas Chatterton (1752-1770), as portrayed in innumerable plays, paintings, poems, novels and biographies over the past two centuries.<sup>5</sup> Dick may have had more immediate sources in mind when he wrote the passage: his own suicidal phases, for example (see the first heading quotation, above), and the deaths of friends, as chronicled in the ‘Author’s Note’ at the end of the novel. Nevertheless *suicide à la Chatterton* is the underlying *leitmotif*, and it is one which might offer fertile juxtapositions: between Romanticism and postmodernism, between the languages of poetry and science fiction. Dick’s portrayal of Freck’s suicide can help us to consider how the image of youthful self-destruction has mutated between Chatterton’s time and our own. I shall be looking at Chattertonian aspects to Dick’s description of the death of Charles Freck, and comparing the passage with earlier creative responses to the death of Chatterton.

The suicide concludes chapter 11 of the novel, and begins matter-of-factly:

Charles Freck, becoming progressively more and more depressed by what was happening to everybody he knew, decided finally to off himself. There was no problem, in the circles where he hung out, in putting an end to yourself: you just bought into a large quantity of reds and took them with some cheap wine, late at night, with the phone off the hook so no one would interrupt you.<sup>6</sup>

Two fundamental Chattertonian motifs here are the disposability of creative youth and the easiness of suicide. No-one seems to care whether Freck lives or dies, his life is unvalued and suicide is ‘no problem’. Many creative responses to Chatterton dwell on the coldly ‘uncaring world’ theme. For example Edward Rushton’s poem ‘Neglected Genius’ (more melodramatically quoted in the second heading quotation, above), has Chatterton dying ‘Unfriended, foodless, and forlorn’.<sup>7</sup> A poet calling himself ‘Benedict’ wrote bitterly in 1791 that:

The sordid world repays the Minstrel’s skill,  
With cold contempt, or Envy’s rambling sting.<sup>8</sup>

A few years earlier Chatterton’s fellow Bristolian, the ‘milkmaid poet’ Ann Yearsley, had used the image of a fragile harebell brought to the tomb of the poet as an ‘Emblem of Merit in a frozen world’:

Thine azure tints shall yet our garland grace;  
Like thee this joyless youth was quickly hurl’d,  
From Hope’s fair height, to Death’s unloved embrace.<sup>9</sup>

Another pseudonymous poet, writing in 1839, imagines Chatterton himself ranting against the uncaring world, shortly before his suicide:

O world of icy-hearted men,  
Tardy to aid, but speedy to destroy.<sup>10</sup>

The idea of the disposable poet was of course a familiar one in the eighteenth century, made memorable by Pope and Hogarth. Chatterton would become its archetypal youthful emblem in the nineteenth and twentieth century.

Charles Freck's plan for an easy suicide involves leaving the phone off the hook, and we are reminded that privacy and secrecy are important elements in the Chatterton suicide myth. Chatterton is usually portrayed as a solitary and secretive youth, and there is biographical evidence to support this. As a young apprentice, he was mortified to have to share a bed with another boy. At Shoreditch he 'spooked' the boy he shared a room with, by his strange nocturnal habits. At Brooke Street he was at last alone to commit the ultimate secret and solitary act. In his 1893 play, Ernest Lacy splendidly melodramatises the self-imposed privacy of this, by having Chatterton's landlady knocking at the door and urgently calling him, both at the beginning and the end of the play (a reminiscence, perhaps, of the knocking at the door in *Macbeth*).<sup>11</sup>

Dick's portrayal of Freck's suicide, ironic rather than melodramatic, continues by describing 'the planning part':

The planning part had to do with the artifacts you wanted found on you by later archeologists. So they'd know from which stratum you came. And also could piece together where your head had been at at the time you did it.

He spent several days deciding on the artifacts. Much longer than he had spent deciding to kill himself, and approximately the same time required to get that many reds. He would be found lying on his back, on his bed, with a copy of Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* (which would prove he had been a misunderstood superman rejected by the masses and so, in a sense, murdered by their scorn) and an unfinished letter to Exxon protesting the cancellation of his gas credit card. That way he would indict the system and achieve something by his death, over and above what the death itself achieved.

Actually, he was not as sure in his mind what the death achieved as what the two artifacts achieved; but anyhow it all added up, and he began to make ready,

like an animal sensing its time has come and acting out its instinctive programming, laid down by nature, when its inevitable end was near. (pp. 147-8)

Chattertonian suicide is often read as a wilful, reckless and vengeful act. Until relatively recently suicide was both a sin and a crime.<sup>12</sup> Although the modern world would be more likely to read it through such psychoanalytic concepts as oedipal revenge and defiance (suicide as ‘a bomb under the living-room table’), a sense of condemnation remains part of the response to suicide. Its wilfulness may be signalled either by reckless, spur-of-the-moment spontaneity, or by very deliberate and careful planning. Chatterton somehow managed to do both, writing a precocious suicide note months ahead of the event, but apparently doing the deed spontaneously, in response to very different circumstances.<sup>13</sup> Charles Freck falls between the two stools, spending an unimpressive ‘several days’ planning his suicide, and so bathetically emphasising the emptiness of his final act.

Wilfulness, recklessness and vengefulness are often important elements in creative responses to Chatterton’s life and death. Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s famous sonnet begins with the idea of Chatterton’s satanic wildness and pride, to which he gives a grandiose literary ancestry:

With Shakespeare’s manhood at a boy’s wild heart,—  
Through Hamlet’s doubt to Shakespeare near allied,  
And kin to Milton through his Satan’s pride.<sup>14</sup>

While Rossetti clearly admires these qualities in Chatterton, the earlier nineteenth-century self-taught poet James Montgomery seems both to berate Chatterton for them, and at the same time to wish to share them:

Rash Minstrel! who can hear thy songs,  
Nor long to share thy fire?  
Who read thy errors and thy wrongs,  
Nor execrate thy lyre?<sup>15</sup>

The late-eighteenth century poet Hannah Cowley had similarly written what she called ‘A mingled Lay of Censure and of Praise’ in her ‘Monody on the Death of Chatterton’.<sup>16</sup>

Chattertonian suicide is ritualised, and much of the humour in Dick’s account of Freck’s suicide lies in the bathetic juxtaposition of solemn ritual and mundane reality. The technique has something in common with Chatterton’s own outrageous

parody of a suicide note, the ‘Will’ he wrote ‘bet[ween] 11 and 2 o’clock Saturday in the utmost Distress of Mind April 14 [1770]’ (i.e. many months before his own death). It intersperses ostentatious proposals for his funeral and disposal, with bequests to his friends that turn out simply to be cheap jibes at their expense:

Item I give and bequeath all my Vigor and Fire of Youth to Mr. George Catcott being sensible he is in most want of it.

Item I give and bequeath unto Mr. Mat: Mease a Mourning Ring with this Motto Alas! poor Chatterton. Providing he pays for it himself—<sup>17</sup>

Charles Freck’s ‘artifacts’, the equivalent of Chatterton’s disposal instructions, are the guarantee that his suicide will be read correctly by what Dick facetiously calls ‘later archeologists’. He will be ‘found lying on his back’, the classic posture of Chattertonian suicide, captured in the most famous and widely-imitated image of Chatterton, the Henry Wallis painting of 1856.<sup>18</sup> Here Chatterton lies on his back on his bed, suggesting vulnerability and the ‘sleep of death’. His arm trails limply down, and he seems to gesture ineffectually towards the ‘artifacts’ he has left behind him: torn-up manuscripts, signalling literary defeat, the failure to communicate his marvellous words. Charles Freck, aware that some kind of documentation of this sort is needed, eschews the eloquent non-communication of torn-up papers in favour of two other literary ‘artifacts’, though one will be left studiously ‘unfinished’.

First, he will have by him Ayn Rand’s *The Fountainhead*, a key modern philosophical text which will ‘prove he had been a misunderstood superman’. Like Chatterton, he will deepen the mystery of his life and death by associating himself with unexpected and esoteric knowledge. For Chatterton, this emerges in such stories as that of his practising necromancy, and reading strange and arcane texts of all sorts (including Cornelius Agrippa). His sister testified that ‘Between his 11th and 12th year he wrote a catalogue of the books he had read to the number of 70’. History and divinity were ‘the chief subjects’.<sup>19</sup> Another self-taught poet of the early nineteenth century, Ebenezer Elliott, writes of Chatterton’s ability to ‘read’ the world and its mysteries:

In Severn’s vale, a wan and moonstruck boy  
Sought, by the daisy’s side, a pensive joy;  
Held converse with the sea-birds as they pass’d,  
And strange and dire communion with the blast,  
And read in sunbeams, and the starry sky,

The golden language of eternity.<sup>20</sup>

The ‘moonstruck’ youth portrayed here, with his St Francis-like power of communication with the ‘sea-birds’, suggests a strange kind of innocence. But the hints of knowledge beyond his years are important, and might seem to offer a supernatural explanation for the extraordinary ability to re-invent the medieval world through the Rowley project, the work for which—apart from his suicide—Chatterton was and is most celebrated.

Charles Freck’s second ‘artifact’ is his unfinished letter to the Exxon gas company ‘protesting the cancellation of his gas credit card’. This introduces an important political and economic element to the suicide. The failed plea to an unfeeling representative of those who hold the power is a familiar element in the Chatterton myth. Its biographical underpinning is the correspondence the poet had with the publisher James Dodsley and with Sir Horace Walpole. Walpole’s ‘rejection’ of Chatterton formed the basis for one of the most fertile and powerful images of the Chatterton myth, that of the aristocratic boot trampling down on the struggling proletarian youth. Chatterton himself suggested the theme by claiming that Walpole at first had liked his work, but then rejected it once he had learnt of the poet’s humble background. It was strongly reinforced by many early accounts of Chatterton, and particularly by the lines beginning ‘Walpole! I thought not I should ever see / So mean a heart as thine has proved to be’, printed and ascribed to Chatterton in the notorious John Dix biography (discussed below), but quite possibly of Dix’s own invention.<sup>21</sup> T.J. Matthias, writing at the end of the eighteenth century, faithfully repeats this charge:

The Boy whom once patrician pens adorn’d,  
First meanly flatter’d, then as meanly scorned.<sup>22</sup>

While Christopher Middleton, in a recent (1996) poem, nicely represents the theme in terms of competing languages, as well as classes:

Those eighteenth-century smooth gentlemen  
Booted your writ away;  
Your syntax made a lattice for the tongue,  
A *welken* game their tut-tut could not play.<sup>23</sup>

Freck’s unfinished letter is intended to show how the power companies, representing capital, destroy the individual, whilst the Ayn Rand text enables Freck to

claim he has been ‘rejected by the masses’. Thus he neatly alienates himself from both capital and labour, who seem to unite to destroy him. This is a purposely bathetic parody of a central theme in the Chatterton story, that of the artist as a social outcast at all levels, a misfit whose genius can never be understood by those around him. This is now such a familiar way of reading the lives of many great writers and artists (one thinks at once of Clare or Van Gogh), that it perhaps deserves little comment. Chatterton offered an archetype which appealed to many writers who felt they had reason to share his sense of unbelonging. Self-taught poets, for example, such as those I have cited here (Clare, Yearsley, Montgomery, Elliott) often felt a special kinship with Chatterton, as did a number of women writers.<sup>24</sup> There is evidence of a tradition of actresses taking the lead in plays about Chatterton, and of other cross-gender perspectives on the poet.<sup>25</sup> Vita Sackville-West in her play *Chatterton* (1909), celebrates the almost privileging alienation, vulnerability and otherness of the creative artist. She puts this in terms of a division between body and soul, and an ultimate lack of free will or agency. When Chatterton is asked whether he knows what inspiration means, his reply is characteristically diffident:

Do I? who can tell? At any rate,  
I know what it may mean to leave the earth  
In spirit, while the body, dead machine,  
Unconsciously records the spirit’s thoughts.  
My eyes, my hands, are strangers to me then,  
I scarcely know what they will make me do.  
I am not present, and my will is gone;  
Some other will compels me to obey,  
And sways me,—hell or heaven-born, who knows?<sup>26</sup>

Sackville-West’s Chatterton is a Hamlet-like figure driven not to action but to suicidal helplessness, by ‘some other will’ which may be either angel or devil. (We shall meet this phantom again.)

Freck’s letter to Exxon aims to ‘achieve something by his death, over and above what the death itself achieved’. Since we are then told that Freck is ‘not sure’ what the latter would be, this is essentially a meaningless piece of rhetoric, designed to lead us to understand that Freck’s suicide is in fact futile and absurd. Freck cannot see this because the drug that rules him, pointedly named ‘substance D’ (for ‘Death’), masks any insights he might have.<sup>27</sup> His suicide underlines the novel’s central concern with oblivion and the loss of self, either through death or drugs or mental breakdown. In contrast to Dick’s ironic approach, Chatterton’s biographers rush to fill

the motivational gap, desperate for meaning in the suicide. Chatterton consequently has far too many motives, and we may choose from shame, guilt, wickedness, perversity, failure, humiliation or starvation. The Leicestershire poet John Dainty, writing in 1902, chose the last of these, seeing ‘the fight for bread’ as the straw that broke the camel’s back:

Shame on the men who left so frail a flower  
To wither by the wayside in despair.  
Learn from his death that poets live in thought,  
And such incessant toil sufficient is  
Without the struggle of the fight for bread.<sup>28</sup>

Edward Dowden, writing a few years later, paints a scene of tortured emotion, with poverty augmenting itself into something more complex:

Poor, proud, o’erwrought, perplex’d in the extreme  
By poetry, his demon, and by love—  
Powers of the deep below, the height above—  
Ringed by a world with dreams and love at strife  
Rejects in fiery spleen the gift of life.<sup>29</sup>

This is a familiar mystification, implying that Chatterton’s suicide is somehow inevitable, an idea parodied in the clichéd social Darwinism of Dick’s comparison between Freck’s death, and an animal ‘sensing its time has come and acting out its instinctive programming’.

On this mock-portentuous note Dick’s narrative uses a blank line to pause between paragraphs, before moving to what he calls ‘end-time’, the narrative denouement :

At the last moment (as end-time closed in on him) he changed his mind on a decisive issue and decided to drink the reds down with a connoisseur wine instead of Ripple or Thunderbird, so he set off on one last drive, over to Trader Joe’s, which specialized in fine wines, and bought a bottle of 1971 Mondavi Cabernet Sauvignon, which set him back almost thirty dollars—all he had.

Back home again, he uncorked the wine, let it breathe, drank a few glasses of it, spent a few minutes contemplating his favorite page of *The Illustrated Picture Book of Sex*, which showed the girl on top, then placed the plastic bag of reds beside his bed, lay down with the Ayn Rand book and unfinished protest letter to



Exxon, tried to think of something meaningful but could not, although he kept remembering the girl being on top, and then, with a glass of the Cabernet Sauvignon, gulped down all the reds at once. After that, the deed being done, he lay back, the Ayn Rand book and letter on his chest, and waited. (p. 148)

The keynote here is bathos. What Charles Freck really likes to read—as we could have suspected—is not Ayn Rand, but *The Illustrated Picture Book of Sex*, whose image of ‘the girl on top’ displaces the presumably more noble thoughts he strives to summon, as he waits for the end. We may compare this to the way Chatterton’s sexuality is portrayed. On the one hand he is emasculated and de-sexualised. His youth and physical slightness are emphasised, he is called a ‘boy’, he may be played by an actress, and there is a pervasive tradition of his temperance and asceticism. This is neatly linked to two other themes we have seen (starvation and badly-timed approval), by the nineteenth-century labouring-class poet John Nicholson, the ‘Airedale Poet’:

A luxury he thought a single tart,  
 And study and long starving broke his heart.  
 He who to water got sometimes no bread,  
 We see applauded, when the youth is dead.<sup>30</sup>

The ascetic, asexual image of Chatterton protects the idea of his martyred innocence.<sup>31</sup> (Dick, by contrast allows Freck to meet his fate virtually, if bathetically, *in flagrante*.) However there is another, very much more sexualised Chatterton, highlighted in modern psychoanalytic studies of him, and most evident in the obscene banter of Chatterton’s paraphrase of the ‘Letter from an unknown girl’:

My loving dear I send thee this  
 To tell thee that I want to piss  
 Pray let me speak the matter blunt  
 I want to stretch my narrow cunt.<sup>32</sup>

This is a rarer Chatterton than the ascetic youth, principally because the ‘obscene’ writings, though they were largely known to the earliest Chatterton scholars, were only hinting at or printed in censored forms before 1971.<sup>33</sup> The sexual Chatterton appears at the end of the freer 1960s, and is mirrored by the feckless Freck, a figure from this same era.

As he finds his favourite page in the beloved book of sex, Freck allows himself a few glasses of the ‘connoisseur wine’ he has purchased to drink with the ‘reds’. This is, as Dick correctly observes, ‘a decisive issue’, for in the iconography of Chatterton’s suicide special significance is given to the poison cup that is represented in Dick’s narrative by the glass of Cabernet Sauvignon with which Freck washes down his reds. For the early nineteenth-century poet Arthur Brooke, it was a friend to be greeted: ‘This friendly phial holds the welcome draught’, while for the slightly older poet Samuel Egerton Brydges Chatterton ‘sung, the cup of poison steaming / E’en at his lips’. The pseudonymous poet ‘Albert’ in 1793 wonders about the ‘thirst’ that led the poet to the poison cup:

By what intemperate thirst for praise,  
Too sure presage of shorten’d days...  
Nor yet, to quench thy ardent soul,  
Appear’d the horrors of the bowl!<sup>34</sup>

The ‘horrors’ of Charles Freck’s ‘bowl’ though, turn out to be ‘kinky psychedelics’, as Dick sinks the ritualised seriousness of Chattertonian suicide into farce:

However, he had been burned. The capsules were not barbiturates, as represented. They were some kind of kinky psychedelics, of a type he had never dropped before, probably a mixture, and new on the market. Instead of quietly suffocating, Charles Freck began to hallucinate. Well, he thought philosophically, this is the story of my life. Always ripped off. He had to face the fact—considering how many of the capsules he had swallowed—that he was in for some trip. (p. 148)

As it happens, there is also an intriguing question of mixed-up substances in the real death of Thomas Chatterton. Richard Holmes ingeniously argued, in a 1971 article, that Chatterton may have died from an accidental overdose of a drug cocktail taken to combat venereal disease, rather than from suicide by arsenic poison, as previously thought. Forensic tests made on one of Chatterton’s notebooks revealed the presence of opium, but beyond that the evidence is inconclusive.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless the radical suggestion that Chatterton’s death was not a suicide at all has begun to gain acceptance in the scholarly community, and the *New Dictionary of National Biography* entry says, with a modern touch, that ‘he died simply from unwisely mixing his venereal medicine with his recreational drugs’.<sup>36</sup> The intriguing possibility that such a potent myth as Chatterton’s suicide, with all its enticing

variations and re-tellings, may stem from an event as meaningless and random as Charles Freck's suicide, is a piece of bathos even Philip K. Dick could not have foreseen.

Dick's narrative in fact takes the plot device of mixed-up substances in quite a different direction, as the references to 'kinky psychedelics' and Freck being 'in for some trip' might suggest. His story ends not with simple oblivion, but with a strange confrontation, a parodic version of the Christian idea of judgement:

The next thing he knew, a creature from between dimensions was standing beside his bed looking down at him disapprovingly.

The creature had many eyes, all over it, ultra-modern expensive-looking clothing, and rose up eight feet high. Also, it carried an enormous scroll.

'You're going to read me my sins,' Charles Freck said.

The creature nodded and unsealed the scroll.

Freck said, lying helpless on his bed, 'and it's going to take a hundred thousand hours.'

Fixing its many compound eyes on him, the creature from between dimensions said, 'We are no longer in the mundane universe. Lower-plane categories of material existence such as "space" and "time" no longer apply to you. You have been elevated to the transcendent realm. Your sins will be read to you ceaselessly, in shifts, throughout eternity. The list will never end.'

Know your dealer, Charles Freck thought, and wished he could take back the last half-hour of his life.

A thousand years later he was still lying there on his bed with the Ayn Rand book and the letter to Exxon on his chest, listening to them read his sins to him. They had gotten up to the first grade, when he was six years old.

Ten thousand years later they had reached the sixth grade.

The year he had discovered masturbation.

He shut his eyes, but he could still see the multi-eyed, eight-foot-high being with its endless scroll reading on and on.

'And next—' it was saying.

Charles Freck thought, At least I got a good wine. (pp. 148-9)

Freck's unexpected nemesis, the multi-eyed 'creature from between dimensions' (or creatures—for 'it' soon becomes 'they'), with its 'ultra-modern expensive-looking clothing' and stern Old Testament manner, seems uniquely Phildickian. Indeed, this most fantastic, science-fictional element of the narrative parodies a series of visionary events that happened to Philip K. Dick himself in February-March 1974,

which he spend the rest of his life attempting to understand and explain.<sup>37</sup> (It may also, perhaps, hark back to earlier confrontations in Dick's life, such as the visit he received from two red-hunting FBI agents, back in his Berkeley days.) But the mythical Chatterton also has an unearthly creature to confront. It appears most strikingly in John Flaxman's pen and ink study, 'Thomas Chatterton receiving a bowl of poison from Despair', c. 1775-80, in which the monstrous personified figure of 'Despair' looms over the terrified youth, offering a poison-bowl that he yearns to accept. For Hannah Cowley, the monster Despair is female, a nightmare: 'Despair her sable form extends / Creeps to his couch, and o'er his pillow bends'.<sup>38</sup> For 'Benedict' the creature is called 'Green Envy', and has some nasty friends with her ('Hate' and 'Pride'):

Green Envy heard—and, urg'd by Hate and Pride,  
She gave the Bowl:—the Youth, indignant, drank and died!<sup>39</sup>

While for Edward Rushton, Despair and Pride are the parents of the suicide-monster:

The offspring of Despair and Pride,  
Came stalking in, fell SUICIDE.<sup>40</sup>

Ebenezer Elliott's monster is a maniacal, self-destructive seductress:

A SABLE ANGEL, tearing her own heart  
With dreadful transport, lured him to her arms!<sup>41</sup>

In at least one account it is Chatterton himself who becomes the supernatural figure in his own story. Egerton Brydges describes a transcendent re-metamorphosis at the death:

Rays from the stars descend to light the earth,  
And sometimes the frail human shape inhabit;  
Then tir'd, revolted, burst away again,  
And seek their native skies!<sup>42</sup>

Whilst an anonymous poet writing in 1924 puts the poet with the sainted martyrs:

[Chatterton] stands allied  
To martyred seers whose memories redeem

An age that made their lives a tragic theme.<sup>43</sup>

But if the myth tends to make Chatterton a saint, it also makes him, like poor Freck, a great sinner. He is guilty of forgery and plagiarism, ‘artful mimic theft’ as one early response (rather artfully) puts it.<sup>44</sup> We have already encountered the sins of pride, envy and wrath in various forms. Impiety is often charged, in response to Chatterton’s religious scepticism. In his pocket he carried a secret document entitled ‘The Articles of the Belief of Me Thomas Chatterton’, which concludes with a signed though clearly private heresy: ‘The Church of Rome (some Tricks of Priestcraft excepted) is certainly the true Church’.<sup>45</sup> But his suicide is the sin that caused the greatest consternation and the most moralising among early commentators, and Robert Southey, for example, went to great lengths to ‘prove’ Chatterton was mad, and thus innocent of the sin of suicide.<sup>46</sup> Ebenezer Elliott combines the sins of impiety and suicide, in the valediction at the end of his poem, ‘Inscriptions’:

No more the moon-beam in his dewy eye  
Will glisten; and no more the cloudless night  
Hear from her starry throne his lonely steps!  
O God! forgive him, though he asked thee not!<sup>47</sup>

The common desire to ‘save’ Chatterton in various ways is suggested here, a desire seemingly only enhanced by Chatterton’s apparent indifference towards being so saved. The theme is wonderfully science-fictionalised in Alfred Bester’s novel *Extro* (1975), when ‘Herb’ (H.G. Wells), armed with a gold brick and a time machine, mounts an (unsuccessful) expedition to save him from suicide and recruit him into a brotherhood of immortals:

I followed him into the Chamber of Horrors and sat down in the insane machine which looks like a praying mantis. Herb handed me an ingot. ‘I was just going to give this to Thomas Chatterton. You deliver it for me.’

‘Chatterton? The kid poet?’

‘In the flesh. Committed suicide in 1770, greatly regretted. Arsenic. He was out of bread and out of hope. You’re going back to London. He’s holed up in an attic in Brook Street. Got it?’<sup>48</sup>

Like Chatterton’s Rowley texts, Bester’s novel frees itself from everyday reality not only by finding a way to twist the space-time continuum, but also through the invention of a new hybridised language (‘Spanglish’).

It is appropriately Chattertonian, then, that Freck's creature from between dimensions should read him his sins forever, in a passage reminiscent of the Reverend Jabes Branderham's 'preposterous' 490-part sermon on sin, dreamed by Lockwood in chapter 3 of *Wuthering Heights*.<sup>49</sup> One of the roles, indeed, that Chatterton plays best of all is that of the scapegoat, sacrificed or self-sacrificing to bear away the sins of the world. That science fiction writers like Dick and Bester should be drawn to his story suggests also a powerful sense of 'otherness' about Chatterton, a quality that often goes with scapegoating and perceptions of sinfulness. Like that modern icon of science-fictional 'otherness' David Bowie, Chatterton had strikingly intense eyes, with a particular brightness in one eye (an effect more recently and startlingly achieved with contact lenses by Marilyn Manson). One is also reminded of a sinner-scapegoat from Chatterton's beloved Middle Ages, Chaucer's 'gentil Pardoner': 'Swiche glarynge eyen hadde he as an hare'.<sup>50</sup>

In conclusion, then, Dick's parody of Chattertonian suicide, drawing the 'marvellous boy' into his absurdist science-fictional world, follows in a long tradition of richly creative uses of Chatterton and his story. As Nick Groom has shown, Chatterton's transgressive, anarchic acts of forgery and plagiarism deeply undermined official discourses of scholarship and literary authority.<sup>51</sup> Yet the invented new/old Rowley language could create exhilaration and desire as well as despondency in the literary world. The first wave of creativity Chatterton inspired, in the 1780s, reflected a desire to play with the toys of Rowleyism, translating between standard English and Rowleyese, and inventing brilliantly Rowleyised satirical fantasies around the excesses of the Rowley Controversy, with titles like 'Rowley and Chatterton in the Shades', and 'An Archaeological Epistle'.<sup>52</sup> The second of these examples is addressed to the most pompous and gullible of the antiquarians who fell for Chatterton's Rowley (one whose edition of the poems Coleridge memorably described as 'an owl mangling a poor dead nightingale'). It considers what a commendable employment it would be for poets to translate some of the classics of English literature into the 'Archaeological' language of Chatterton's Rowley, and offers a striking example (and a most interesting one, given the comparison between Chatterton and Hamlet we saw explicitly made by Rossetti and implicitly by Sackville-West):

To blynne or not to blynne the denwere is;  
     Gif ytte bee bette wythinne the spryte to beare  
 The bawsyn floes and tackels of dystresse,  
     Or by forlornynge amenuse them clere.<sup>53</sup>

The parodist also ‘translates’ the opening lines of *Paradise Lost*, whose Satan we noted Rossetti compared to Chatterton.

This phase of exuberant parody foreshadows an ardent annotation offered by Chatterton’s near-contemporary William Blake, who wrote in the margins of his copy of Wordsworth: ‘I believe both Macpherson & Chatterton, that what they say is Ancient Is so’.<sup>54</sup> To embrace Chatterton’s ‘forgeries’ as deeply authentic was to upturn the hierarchies of literary history, and herald a new sort of discourse, one as much postmodern as Romantic.

The hunger of writers and artists for the Rowley fantasy and its trappings was more than matched by a widespread fascination with the short, unhappy life of its youthful creator. Chatterton’s precocity, his innocence, his dreams, his struggles with an uncaring society, and most of all the circumstances of his death on 24 August 1770, were endlessly explored in poetry, prose, drama and the visual arts. Each nugget of biographical information—the poet’s startling eyes, his lack of appetite for food, his diffidence towards those who would help him, the torn up fragments of paper he left strewn around his corpse—finds its place in the rich iconography of Chatterton’s martyrdom. The death itself is a strikingly popular topic in creative responses.

The nineteenth century saw a rash of ‘secondary forgeries’—not just re-runs of Chatterton’s strategies (such as the ‘Shakespeare forgeries’ of the Chatterton-worshipper W.H. Ireland)<sup>55</sup>—but attempts actually to fake various aspects of Chatterton’s life. The most notorious practitioner, John Dix, successfully imposed on an only too grateful world a fake portrait which is still routinely used to illustrate Chatterton, a bogus ‘Inquest Report’, and many other tall stories.<sup>56</sup> These forgeries may serve to remind us that the most challenging creative responses to Chatterton are those which explore the ambiguities of his literary deception and creation as well as his life. The ‘semiotic terrorism’ of plagiarism and forgery combine with the life-story, to offer a powerful model of alienation and identity-crisis to writers and artists, particularly those who have themselves felt alienated from the dominant culture. Among postmodern novelists it is Philip K. Dick who, most intensely and obsessively, explores the question of what is ‘real’ and what is ‘fake’, so it is especially apt that he should place a parody of Chattertonian suicide, the ultimate act of alienated reality-testing, at the heart of one such exploration.

Despite the risks of bathos and embarrassment in Chatterton-inspired creativity—risks from which Dick makes great capital—the marvellous boy has been an irresistible magnet for writers and artists on both sides of the Atlantic. For many he has been a crucial resource, and creative responses to him have often resulted in interesting and important work. From post-Augustan to postmodern culture,

Romanticism to Science Fiction, Chatterton's subversion and sacrifice has been a tale we need to tell ourselves, a barometer of cultural unease, a minor religious cult.

*The Nottingham Trent University*

*john.goodridge@ntu.ac.uk*



## NOTES

1. The ‘electric shepherd’ is Bruce Gillespie’s term for Philip K. Dick, in the title of his book *Philip K. Dick: Electric Shepherd* (Melbourne, Australia: Norstrilia Press, 1975), alluding to Dick’s classic novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968). ‘The marvellous boy’ is Wordsworth’s term for Chatterton, in ‘Resolution and Independence’ (pub. 1807). I follow Dick’s critics and biographers in using the neologism ‘Phildickian’ to evoke the unique flavour of his writings. Versions of this essay were given as seminar papers at Newcastle and Nottingham Trent University, and at Tim Webb’s ‘Romantic Bristol’ conference (Bristol, 1998). I am grateful to Bill Christmas for information about ‘Trader Joe’s’, and to Nick Groom, Catherine Byron and Alison Ramsden for their many helpful suggestions.
2. *The Selected Letters of Philip K. Dick*, Volume Five, 1977-1979, ed. by Don Herron (Novato, CA and Lancaster, PA: Underwood-Miller, 1993), pp. 114-15. I am grateful to Russell Galen and the Philip K. Dick Trust for kindly allowing me to quote from this letter.
3. Lines 143-4, text from Tim Burke (ed), *Eighteenth-Century Labouring-Class Poets: III (1760-1800)* (London: Pickering and Chatto, forthcoming).
4. Nick Groom, Introduction to *Thomas Chatterton and Romantic Culture*, ed. by Nick Groom (London: Macmillan, 1999), p. 3.
5. See John Goodridge, ‘Rowley’s Ghost: a checklist of creative responses to Chatterton’, in *Thomas Chatterton and Romantic Culture*, pp. 262-92; A.D. Harvey, ‘The Cult of Chatterton amongst English Poets c. 1770—c. 1820’, *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 39 (1991), 124-33.
6. Philip K. Dick, *A Scanner Darkly* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1977), chapter 11, reprinted in the Millennium SF Masterworks series (London: Gollancz, 1999), p. 147, hereafter cited in the text by page number. This edition corrects a serious typographic error in the first chapter of some earlier editions which misdates the novel’s action by 50 years from 1994 to 1944.
7. Line 147, in Burke (ed), *Eighteenth-Century Labouring-Class Poets: III*.
8. ‘Genius. A Sonnet’, headed ‘for the ORACLE’ and dated 6 April 1791, from a copy glued into a copy of the *Rowley Poems* (1778), third edition, in the Bodleian Library (Bod. Douce c. 244).
9. ‘Elegy, on Mr. Chatterton’, in her *Poems on Various Subjects* (London: Printed for the author, and sold by G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1787), pp. 145-9.
10. ‘Cecini’, ‘The Death of Chatterton’, *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine* 9 (1839), 585-6.

11. *Chatterton: a drama in one act* (Philadelphia: Globe Printing House [privately printed], 1893); cf. *Macbeth*, II.ii--iii.
12. See Louise J. Kaplan, *The Family Romance of the Impostor-Poet Thomas Chatterton* (New York: Atheneum, 1988), pp. 185-8.
13. As I note later on in the essay, recent scholarship has favoured an ‘accidental’ explanation for Chatterton’s death, rather than suicide. See notes 35-6, below.
14. ‘Thomas Chatterton: A Poem’, in his *Works*, ed. by William M. Rossetti, revised and enlarged edition (London: Ellis, 1911), p. 230.
15. ‘Chatterton: Stanzas on reading the verses entitled “Resignation” written by Chatterton’, in his *The World Before the Flood* (London: Longman, Hurst and others, 1813), pp. 225-7.
16. ‘The Death of Chatterton’, in her *Works* (London: Wilkie and Robinson, 1813), III, pp. 75-6.
17. *The Complete Works of Thomas Chatterton*, ed. by Donald S. Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), I, pp. 501-5 (504-5).
18. ‘Chatterton’ (Royal Academy, 1856), now in the Tate Gallery, London.
19. Quoted in E.H.W. Meyerstein, *A Life of Thomas Chatterton* (London: Ingpen and Grant, 1930), p. 37.
20. ‘Love’, in his *Poetical Works*, ed. by Edwin Elliott, revised edition (London: Henry King, 1876), I, pp. 65-6. This is among Elliott’s juvenilia.
21. *Complete Works*, pp. 340-1 and 986n; John Dix [=George Spencer Phillips (1800?-1865?)], *The Life of Thomas Chatterton* (London: Hamilton, Adams and Co., 1837), p. 102.
22. *The Pursuits of Literature. A Satirical Poem*, seventh edition, revised (London: T. Becket, 1798), p. 144.
23. ‘The Glummonging’, *PN Review* 111 (September-October 1996), p. 67.
24. See John Goodridge, ‘Identity, Authenticity, Class: John Clare and the Mask of Chatterton’, *Angelaki* 1.2 (Winter 1993-4), 131-48; Bridget Keegan, ‘Nostalgic Chatterton: Fictions of Poetic Identity and the Forging of a Self-Taught Tradition’, in *Thomas Chatterton and Romantic Culture*, pp. 210-27 .
25. See Goodridge, ‘Rowley’s Ghost’, items 207-8, 214-15. Virginia Woolf’s influential feminist fable of ‘Shakespeare’s sister’ has Chattertonian resonances: see *A Room of One’s Own* (London: Hogarth Press, 1929), Ch. 3.
26. *Chatterton* (Sevenoaks: privately printed, 1909), act I, scene 4.
27. See Paul Youngquist, ‘Score, scan, schiz: Dick on drugs’, *Cultural Critique* 44 (Winter 2000), 84-110.
28. ‘Thomas Chatterton’, in his *Leicester Lyrics* (Gloucester: privately printed by the author, 1902), p. 54.

29. 'Prologue to Maurice Gerthwohl's Version of Vigny's "Chatterton"', 1914, in his *Poems* (London and Toronto: J.M. Dent and Sons, [1914]), pp. 217-18.
30. 'Genius and Intemperance', in his *Poetical Works*, ed. by W. G. Hird (London: Simpkin Marshall and Co.; Bradford: Thomas Brear, 1876), p. 162 (l. 823 ff).
31. On the significance of Chatterton's 'boyishness' see Bridget Keegan, 'Boys Marvellous Boys: John Clare's Natural Genius' in *John Clare: New Approaches*, ed. by John Goodridge and Simon Kövesi (Helpston: The John Clare Society, 2000), pp. 65-76.
32. *Complete Works*, pp. 686-7.
33. Meyerstein, *Life of Chatterton*, p. 98; Kaplan, *Family Romance*, pp. 154-62.
34. 'Chatterton', in *An Asylum for Fugitive Pieces in Prose and Verse*, new edition (London: J. Debrett, 1793), IV, pp. 235-6.
35. See Donald S. Taylor, 'Chatterton's Suicide', *Philological Quarterly* 31 (1952), 63-9; Richard Holmes, 'Thomas Chatterton: the Case Re-Opened', *Cornhill Magazine* 178 (1970), 200-51, collected in his *Sidetracks: Explorations of a Romantic Biographer* (London: HarperCollins, 2000), pp. 5-50.
36. Nick Groom, 'Thomas Chatterton (1752-1777)', *New Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming, 2004).
37. See Gregg Rickman, *Philip K. Dick: the Last Testament* (Lompoc, CA: Fragments West, 1985); Lawrence Sutin (ed), *In Pursuit of Valis: Selections from the Exegesis of Philip K. Dick* (Novato, CA and Lancaster, PA: Underwood-Miller, 1991).
38. 'The Death of Chatterton': see note 16.
39. See note 8.
40. Lines 150-1, in Burke (ed), *Eighteenth-Century Labouring-Class Poets: III*.
41. 'Inscriptions I', in his *Poetical Works*, ed. by Edwin Elliott, revised edition (London: Henry King, 1876), I, pp. 13-14.
42. *Human Fate: a Poem* (Great Totham: Charles Clark's Private Press, 1850), pp. 5 and 11.
43. 'M. R.', 'Thomas Chatterton', *Bristol Times and Mirror* (20 November 1924).
44. 'On the Poems imputed to Rowley', *Gentleman's Magazine* 52 (1782), p. 590.
45. *Complete Works*, p. 427.
46. *The Works of Thomas Chatterton*, ed. by Robert Southey and Joseph Cottle, three vols (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, 1803).
47. See note 41.
48. Alfred Bester, *Extro* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1975), chapter 1. Another science fictional rescue of doomed eighteenth-century genius occurs in the 1985 story 'Mozart in Mirrorshades', by Bruce Sterling and Lewis Shiner, reprinted in

- Mirrorshades: the Cyberpunk Anthology*, ed. by Bruce Sterling (London: Paladin, 1988), pp. 223-39.
49. See Frank Goodridge, *Emily Brontë: Wuthering Heights* (London: Edward Arnold, 1964), p. 13.
50. ‘General Prologue’ to the *Canterbury Tales*, l. 684.
51. Nick Groom, ‘Forgery or Plagiarism?’, *Angelaki*, 1.2 (1993-4), 41-54, and ‘Thomas Chatterton Was a Forger’, *Yearbook of English Studies*, 28 (1998), 276-91.
52. [?John Baynes or ?William Mason], *An Archaeological Epistle to the Reverend and Worshipful Jeremiah Milles* (London: J. Nichols and others, 1782); George Hardinge, *Rowley and Chatterton in the Shades; or, Nugae antiquae et novae: a new Elysian interlude in prose and verse* (London: T. Becket, 1782), ed. by Joan Pittock (Los Angeles: Augustan Reprint Society, 1979); William Julius Mickle, *The Prophecy of Queen Emma, by Turgottus, Bishop of St Andrew* (London: J. Bew, 1782). See also Goodridge, ‘Rowley’s Ghost’, items 114, 162, 238.
53. From the prefatory letter to *An Archaeological Epistle*, as published in the *Public Advertiser*, 19 March 1782. Coleridge’s *bon mot* is quoted in Meyerstein, *Life of Chatterton*, p. 283.
54. ‘Annotations to “Poems” by William Wordsworth’, *Complete Writings*, ed. by Geoffrey Keynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 783.
55. See W.H. Ireland, *Neglected Genius: a poem* (London: G. Cowie and Co., 1812), pp. 56-98, 121-7, 144-51; *Chalcographimania* (London: R.S. Kirby, 1814); John Mair, *The Fourth Forger: William Ireland and the Shakespeare Papers* (London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1938); Nick Groom, *The Forger’s Shadow: How Forgery Changed the Course of Literature* (London and Oxford: Picador, 2002).
56. Dix, *The Life of Thomas Chatterton* (1837). See also *Notes & Queries*, 4th ser. 9 (1872), 294-6, 365-6, 429-30; 4th ser. 10 (1872), 55, 229-30; *Athenaeum*, 5 December 1857, pp. 1518-19, and 23 January 1858, pp. 114-15.