London Re-experienced – Peter Ackroyd's Historiographic Revisioning of the City

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Abstract

This paper focuses on arguably the best contemporary British chronicler of historical and literary London, Peter Ackroyd. As its theoretical point of departure it deals with his seminal work on the city's intertextual and discursive nature over the course of its development, London: The Biography *(2000). In order to illustrate Ackroyd's fictional historiographic treatment of different historical periods of London, two of his novels have been chosen –* Hawksmoor *(1985) and* Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem *(1994), while three others,* Chatterton *(1987),* The Clerkenwell Tales *(2003) and* The Lambs of London *(2004), are also referred to. All these texts are discussed from the point of view of textual and thematic interconnectedness, the mixing of the factual and fictitious in creating London's topography, and the influences of the city's milieu on the characters' psyches.*

Introduction

The British novelist Peter Ackroyd (1949) is undoubtedly one of the major contemporary London chroniclers, and is arguably the best focusing on the inevitable, yet often ambiguous, relationship between the city's historical and literary representations. Ackroyd is truly a London writer as most of his major works, both non-fictional historical books and fictional narratives, are closely connected with the city, which appears in them as an object of study, a theme, a setting, or at least as a significant socio-topographical background. All Ackroyd's London works attempt to explore the city's intertextual and discoursive nature over the course of its development. Consequently, his historical and literary London comes into existence in the concurrence of the individual texts and voices within the otherwise incoherent polyphony of its discoursive disposition.

Ackroyd as a London chronicler follows the Dickensian tradition of depicting the city in its diversity, represented, among others, namely by George Gissing, H.G. Wells, Angela Carter, Justin Cartwright and Iain Sinclair[1]. Ackroyd's London works can be divided into three groups – the

first includes a series of biographies of the city's most famous visionaries *T.S. Eliot* (1984), *Dickens* (1990) and *Blake* (1996), the second is formed by his seminal London study *London: The Biography* (2000) and *Thames: Secret River* (2007), and the third consists of the individual London novels, such as *Hawksmoor* (1985), *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994), *The Clerkenwell Tales* (2003) and *The Lambs of London* (2005). This paper concentrates on the second and third groups in order to illustrate how Ackroyd creates his particular representation of this illimitable, infinite city which "goes beyond any boundary or convention" (*London: The Biography* 2003, 760).

The City Lives in Its Details – *London: The Biography*

For a better understanding of the way Ackroyd perceives and simultaneously revives and recreates his London, it is best to look at his most ambitious work so far – *London: The Biography*, which traces and records the city's spirit and literary reflections of it from the very first moments of its existence up to the present day. Ackroyd perceives London as the Eternal City, an ever-fascinating object of interest as well as his own life-long love and artistic project. The author is deeply fascinated by the city and explores several metaphors for it in order to analyse its most characteristic phenomena. He develops, above all, the metaphor of London as a body, both human and mystical, the metaphor of a swollen giant monster who kills and devours more than he could ever breed, and also assumes Shakespeare's idea of the world as a stage and attributes to the city an inimitable theatrical nature.

Ackroyd's postmodernist narrative permanently balances between imaginary stories and reality or, more precisely, between fiction and historically proven facts, since his understanding of history is that of an immense intertextual web and as such it can be traced and partly restored through its miscellaneous written records. As Bradbury puts it, "Ackroyd is a playful user of fiction, well aware of the contemporary devices in the postmodern novelist's repertory: pastiche, parody, punning, intertextuality" (Bradbury 1994, 436). In *London: The Biography* Ackroyd's narrative strategy remains similar to that of his novels, only the imaginary, fictitious elements have been replaced by a great number of various quotations from and references to authentic texts and other materials – chronicles, historical records, descriptions of paintings, engravings and photographs, and numerous quotations of and references to more, and less, famous writers and scholars concerning what they wrote about the city.

The author thus manages to combine his readable, light narrative style with a serious academic approach supported by extensive scholarly research.

Ackroyd is also well aware that any attempt to write an exhaustive, continuous chronological history of the city would be a preposterous, if not ridiculous idea. Therefore, his biography of London is deliberately prone to fragmentation – it is organised around various themes and phenomena typical of the city and its life rather than following a chronological order, which is reduced to a mere overall framework within which the book's inner structure can be looser, diversified, and sometimes even speculative, yet always aptly interconnected. In the preface Ackroyd explains that "the biography of London also defies chronology. […] That is why this book moves quixotically through time, itself forming a labyrinth. If the history of London poverty is beside a history of London madness, then the connections may provide more significant information than any orthodox historiographical survey" (*London: The Biography* 2003, 2). The themes are not perceived statically but over the course of time, across different time layers, which emphasises the enormous diversity and incomprehensibility of the real city. What counts most are not the actual analyses of the themes but the process of looking for and finding possible connections between them, no matter how unrealistic, speculative or peculiar they may at first appear. The story of the city is thus like a fantastic, colourful collage, an absorbing jigsaw composed of an indefinite number of pieces that can never be fully put together.

Ackroyd's image of the history of London corresponds with the ambivalent view of the metropolis shared by its many current inhabitants – it seems fragmentary, discontinuous, unpredictable, often chaotic and therefore difficult to grasp or control. Yet, at the same time, one finds it beautiful in its vicissitudes, seductive in its mysteriousness, and exciting in its potential to surprise and offer new stimuli. And because Ackroyd always tries to discover the positive behind all the city's aspects, his *London: The Biography* is more than just history and biography; it is also the author's homage or paean to the city, an extraordinarily successful attempt at composing London's many-sided yet ultimately fascinating literary image.

London the Obscure

What is typical of Ackroyd's view of the development of London is the fact that he sees the aspects of its 'unofficial' history as being as, or even more, important than the 'official' ones. Therefore, in *London: The Biography*,

Ackroyd always tries to discover and look into the hidden, obscure, enigmatic or otherwise irrational forces, elements and mechanisms and, consequently, find their impact on the city's more apparent manifestations. "The city itself remains magical; it is a mysterious, chaotic and irrational place which can be organised and controlled only by means of private ritual or public superstition" (*London: The Biography* 2003, 207). In accordance with this persuasion, Ackroyd regards London from the perspective of such themes and phenomena as the city's murders and other violent crimes, its smells, its voraciousness, the poor and the outcast, or visionaries, for which he does not hesitate to use miscellaneous textual sources, many of which, for instance *The Murder Guide to London*, *The Rookeries of London*, *Memoirs of Extraordinary Popular Delusions*, or *London Vanished and Vanishing*, might appear rather curious at first sight.

Moreover, Ackroyd believes that it is always crucial to give voice to various visionaries, mystics, or other such urban individuals universally considered to be unreliable, confused or even mad. As a result, certain discourses which are not grounded in rational reasoning become an inseparable part of his London's texture. In the preface he admits that he "will sometimes stray from the narrow path in search of those heights and depths of urban experience that know no history and are rarely susceptible to rational analysis" (*London: The Biography* 2003, 2). An example Ackroyd offers is the process of London's rebuilding after the Great Fire of 1666; at first many mathematical plans and schemes were proposed to complete the new city's structure. However, none of these plans worked as the city itself seemed to resist them. This happened because "London is not a civilised nor a graceful city, despite the testimony of the maps. It is tortuous, inexact and oppressive" and so its original layout emerged again and "the essential topography of the neighbourhood was revived" (*London: The Biography* 2003, 107-8). This perception of the city is what connects Ackroyd with another excellent contemporary chronicler and topographer of the less-known, forgotten London, Iain Sinclair.

Ackroyd employs a similar point of view in his novels which "often combine historical re-enactment with an exploration of the occult, and offer a twofold perspective of the city through the conflict between rational and irrational forces" (Coverley 2005, 59) in order to explore the lives of both historically-recognised as well as ordinary people inhabiting the underside of the city. His novels are thus peopled with murderers, cabaret and music hall performers, forgers, occultists, secret plotters and a wide range of picturesque urban eccentrics created in the best Dickensian tradition. Such a choice of characters is by no means exceptional in postmodernist variants of historical narratives since, as Linda Hutcheon claims, their protagonists

"are anything but proper types: they are ex-centrics, the marginalized, the peripheral figures of fictional history […] Even the historical personages take on different, particularized, and ultimately ex-centric status" (Hutcheon 1992, 114).

The theme of the city's rational/irrational duality is most apparent in his novel *Hawksmoor*. Its plot revolves around two seemingly different story lines set some two hundred and fifty years apart: the first is a first person narration supposedly written between 1711 and 1715 by the architect Nicholas Dyer, a fictional device taking on Nicholas Hawksmoor's historical role, who is to fulfill a commission to build seven new churches across the city of London in the aftermath of the Great Fire; the second is a third person narration describing the detective Nicholas Hawksmoor's investigation into a series of mysterious murders committed in the vicinities of the churches built by Dyer in modern London of the early 1980s. However, the function of these circumstances is to form a necessary background for the novel's final twist, for as these two narratives alternate throughout the book, new parallels are revealed and similarities echoed, in the process of which the historical time gap between them is rendered irrelevant and the otherness of the two main protagonists' lives diminishes, so that eventually they merge into a single voice of some kind of supertemporal reincarnation who is neither Dyer nor Hawksmoor.

The reader of the novel soon understands that occultism and black magic play a crucial role in the story as Nicholas Dyer confesses that he is a secret Satanist and adherent of an occult science which claims that Satan has authority over the world and human life is thus fallen from grace. Dyer is obsessed with the idea that his soul is condemned to reincarnate from one body to another until in one of them it manages to accomplish a work, the greatness of which would be comparable to the act of God's creation of the universe. He also believes that what is happening on earth mirrors in parallel the doings in heaven and vice versa, and that acquiring power over earthly matters automatically ensures the ability to affect the acts of God. Therefore, Dyer arranges his churches in a certain pattern corresponding to that of the key stars in the sky, the result of which should be a power-concentrating magical structure through which he would be able to control the planetary system. In doing so he hopes "to submit to his will the seven planetary daemons who control them and prevent his transcendental ascesis", with the aim of "establishing a current of sympathetic magic between heaven and earth that would function as a magical ladder to heaven" (Onega 1998, 46) which his soul could safely climb to an eternal harmony of the Self.

The other pole is personified by Dyer's teacher and master, Sir Christopher Wren, who, together with the members of the Royal Society, embodies the prevalent eighteenth century scientific approach and emergent empiricism. Dyer's first person narration means that the reader tends to sympathise with his defiance to this dry rationalism and take interest in his subterranean magic practices, yet only until he/she learns that these involve human sacrifices to the sites of the individual churches which Dyer, unless some coincidence helps him, provides himself by killing several innocent people. All these murders, as well as almost any other event in the narrative, are echoed in the same places two and a half centuries later, when once again, children and vagrants fall victim to a serial killer. As Nicholas Hawksmoor follows the traces and reads Dyer's secret diary, he begins to understand the significance of the occult scheme of the loci delicti and focuses his attention on finding the mysterious vagrant who calls himself the Architect and who appears to be responsible for the killings. As the novel progresses to its end and the time and space that separate Dyer and Hawksmoor collapse, the magic and the mysterious take over the rational and the coherent. This culminates in the Architect, Dyer, and Hawksmoor rushing through the streets of the city towards the place of their spiritual union, where they are reborn as one being, a child "begging on the threshold of eternity" (*Hawksmoor* 1993, 217).

Other Ackroyd novels also capture the obscure, shadowy aspects of London. In *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*, for instance, the East End milieu appears in several distinct microcosms which are interconnected through the motif of a series of ritual murders. Several representatives of the margins of Victorian London society – prostitutes, a Jewish scholar, and a second-hand clothes shop owner and his family, become victims of a homicidal force, the mysterious invisibility of which causes the newspapers to label it the Limehouse Golem. The first of these microcosms is the seemingly ideal domestic world of Elizabeth Cree, achieved through her progress from bullied child of the poverty-stricken Lambeth slums, via her career as a music-hall comedian, to life as a respectable middle-class wife. Yet gradually the reader realises that not only is she the killing monster, but that she is also willing to destroy anyone who might threaten her dreamt-of idyllic self-projection, be it her father-in-law, her unborn infant, or her own husband. One possible reason for her monstrous acts can be found in her hatred of the world she came from, and so by killing some of its members she symbolically erases this world from her life. Elizabeth can thus be considered "as a living emblem of the monsters bred by Utilitarian mercantilism and Methodist repression in the slums of London" (Onega 1998, 70). What really brought a stop to Elizabeth's endeavour to escape her

origins was not her imprisonment, but her stage failure in her new role as playwright. Humiliated by the lack of understanding from her former social peers in the audience, she gives in and is forced to accept being trapped in the snares of her social roots, walking out of the music hall "quite calmly through the filthiest lanes and byways of Limehouse without any sense of direction" (*Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* 1994, 242). On a more general level the Golem may be described as the materialized evil spirit of the dismal consequences the Industrial Revolution had on the city's weak.

The other pole of the novel's setting is represented by the free-spirited, frivolous and carefree atmosphere of the theatrical world of the East End music halls, variety shows and cabarets, which manages, though only for the short duration of the performance, to provide a distraction from pitiful, everyday reality with its merry illusions of impersonation, cross-dressing, songs and melodramas. These productions, during which the interaction with the audience is an indicator of the performance's potential success, are the emanation of the carnivalised aspect of life, which is substantially important for the participants' ability to recharge the strength necessary for struggling on with their fates. The poor Londoners' lives thus oscillate in circles marked by misery, fear and hysterical festivity. Therefore, when Dan Leno appears in front of the bewildered audience after the fatal incident during the performance of a theatrical version of Elizabeth Cree's life story with his "here we are *again*!" (*Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* 1994, 282), the horror of the Golem is forgotten and life can begin its new circle.

There is one more place that has a crucial impact upon most of the characters' lives – the Reading Room of the British Museum. It is a place where the fates of its frequenters, such as Karl Marx, George Gissing, Dan Leno and Oscar Wilde, or fictional characters like Solomon Weil and the Crees, encounter one another, be it physically or not. Ackroyd presents the Reading Room as a milieu disposing of some almost occult power which, for example, manages to befriend such different persons as the materialist atheist Marx and the cabbalistic spiritualist Weil. It is not surprising, then, that the mystery of the Limehouse Golem brings there many people who believe it is "the spiritual centre of London where many secrets might finally be revealed" (*Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* 1994, 269). The Reading Room thus becomes an emblem of the mutual inseparability of intellect and spirituality, a true source of the city's geist, the sounds of which "set up a whispering echo like that of the voices in the fog of London" (*Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* 1994, 47).

The Clerkenwell Tales offers a similar perspective; only the historical background of the story differs since this time it is set in London in 1399. The whole novel might be taken as some jigsaw mystery built up like a mosaic through the individual tales, which echo those narrated in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. The novel is another example of Ackroyd's love of the arcane city as the plot develops around the mad visions of Sister Clarice, an illegitimately born nun of the Clerkenwell convent, which prophesy the downfall of the king as well as doom for the sinning and superstitious public, and stir up hatred and fear. However, while Henry Bolingbroke leads his revolutionary army against Richard II, the reader follows a fellowship of respected city officials who seem to be conspiring with a secret, apocalyptic heretical sect, the predestined men, as both the groups, though for different reasons, are eager to get rid of the king. This sect of 'foreknown' ones, considered the most dangerous of their ilk at that time, see themselves as "Christ's true followers […] absolved from all sin. Each one of them partook of the glory of the Saviour, and their actions were prompted wholly by the spirit of God. They could lie, commit adultery or kill, without remorse" (*The Clerkenwell Tales* 2003, 37). The powerful men thus use the simple-minded young fanatics as pawns to kill inconvenient people and set fires in a circle of five London churches, symbolising the five wounds of Christ, to invoke the last judgement and the day of apocalypse. All this is foreseen by Sister Clarice and so the author gradually puts forth another mystery – that of the relationship between the mad nun and the city authorities. Ackroyd's late fourteenth century London is a world dominated, to a large extent, by various dubious forces such as religious visionariness and fanaticism, clandestine conspiratorial societies, court intrigues and the omnipresent rampant superstition, a world which is impossible to get to know unless one removes the veil from its 'official' surface.

Obscure London inevitably features obscure characters and in each of Ackroyd's London novels at least one of them appears. While in *Hawksmoor,* Nicholas Dyer, the most grotesque of the characters, is simultaneously one of the story's main protagonists, in other Ackroyd novels these eccentrics and perverts are more marginal and serve to add colour to the narratives. In *Chatterton*, Charles in his search for the evidence of the famous forger's faked suicide comes across the elderly, affectedly feminine gay Joynson "wearing a leopard-skin leotard with the top of a red track-suit hanging over it" (*Chatterton* 1987, 50); in *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* the kind-hearted Uncle turns out to be a secret masochist who desires regular whipping from his protégé Elizabeth; in *The Clerkenwell Tales* William Swinderby, the famous London preacher of his

day, secretly practices sodomy with his servant, working themselves up to the act through the exchange of dirty talk; and in *The Lambs of London* two respectable divines, Doctor Parr and Doctor Warburton, take turns in the sexual abuse of their 'Negro' boy-servant. Ackroyd never seems to cease reminding the reader that, beside the official, public one, there is always an unofficial, private, concealed side of the city's life.

London Re-written – the City as Palimpsest

Ackroyd finds the city's most attractive aspect in its variability and versatility; his London is always inseparable from its dwellers, its fractional nature is caused by the fact that it has been formed by the sum of an endless number of human fates.

> It is in fact the very universality of London that establishes these contrasts and separations, it contains every aspect of human life within itself, and is thus perpetually renewed. Yet do the rich and the poor inhabit the same city? It may be that each citizen has created a London of his or her own head, so that at the same moment there may exist seven million different cities. (*London: The Biography*, 753)

Ackroyd has thus undertaken a task impossible to complete – that of a scholar-antiquarian attempting to revive the human history of the city through the texts its inhabitants have produced.

Such an approach reveals not only that one of the many possible Londons can be discovered through reading and juxtaposing a great variety of its texts, but, in particular, that the city itself can be understood and therefore read as a text, one in which both factual and fictitious narratives are interwoven, the polarity between them blurred. Yet, it is apparently no ordinary text but one that is constantly being written and re-written again and again. London as a text thus represents a complex, multi-layered, topographic palimpsest "within which all the most magnificent or monstrous cities of the world can be discerned" (*London: The Biography* 2003, 752). It is therefore highly unstable as it is being perpetually inscribed on, as new textual layers are laid upon previous ones.

Probably the best example to illustrate this is the theme of London's criminality, namely the city's fascination with murder. In the chapters 'A Rogues Gallery' and 'Horrible Murder' of *London: The Biography* Ackroyd mentions several texts which often tried both to record and vitalize the

city's greatest crimes, such as *The London Hanged*, *Jack the Ripper: On the Crimes of London*, *The Murder Guide to London*, and especially Thomas de Quincey's memorable essay *On Murder Considered as one of the Fine Arts* (1827) which begins its account of a series of killings with an allusion to the Ratcliffe Highway murders of 1812, when an entire family was brutally slaughtered in a hosier's shop beside the highway. Ackroyd claims that all these texts contributed to the crimes' mythologising as they lived on immortalized in the narratives. For many writers and other men of letters these murders became a challenge to re-write the city of their fascination from its darkest side.

Ackroyd takes advantage of this fact in his novels as well. While in *The Lambs of London* young de Quincey, astonished at London from the very first moment he arrives there, is writing his first literary contributions and striving "yet to find a publisher […] waiting to be born" (*The Lambs of London* 2005, 155), and having close experience of Mary Lamb's murder of her mother in 1796, in *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* his essay becomes a central text that inspires or otherwise influences most of its protagonists' fates. First, there is young George Gissing in the Reading Room of the British Museum reading de Quincey's work as an inspiration for his own essay entitled 'Romanticism and Crime' in which he admires de Quincey's narrative ability to transform the killing monster into some kind of a "wonderful Romantic hero" (*Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* 1994, 37), and, sitting next to him, we can find John Cree studying de Quincey while musing on his own work, a social drama on the misery of the London poor, entitled *Misery Junction*. Then there are the various newspaper interpretations of the murderer and his acts, creating a new myth that the mythical Hebrew creature was killing innocent people in the London streets at night, which in fact form an independent, fictitious narrative of the mystery. Elizabeth Cree, the novel's brutal murderer, is not only inspired by the account of the Ratcliffe Highway murders in the plotting of her own homicidal schemes, she further develops the idea of the killer as artist and forges her husband's diary in order to fasten the blame on him, in which she often quotes de Quincey's words and sees herself as the city's greatest performer, "the model of the age" (*Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* 1994, 84). This faked diary in fact becomes an artistic enterprise of its own kind, since it combines psychological probes into the murderer's mind with elements of an exciting detective thriller as its first entry reads "It was a fine bright morning, and I could feel a murder coming on" (*Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* 1994, 24). The murders in Limehouse later inspired the dark atmosphere of cheap theatres and opium dens in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. And finally, there is Ackroyd and his contribution to

the process of re-writing the famous London murders in the form of the novel *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*, in which he takes up de Quincey's tradition of making horrible factual events into fine art.

Ackroyd applies this understanding of the city's texture not only to the actual texts but also to some of its typical inhabitants, such as the various Leno characters. The first two of these appear in *Chatterton* as some kind of parodic, quasi-Dickensian London eccentrics. Moreover, their name, Leno, suggests a connection with the famous late Victorian music-hall comic and impersonator Dan Leno, known in his time as 'the funniest man on earth', who is one of the central characters of another of the author's novels, *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*. Susana Onega suggests the cumulative effect of the influences between these music-hall performers and London writers: Charles Matthews, Leno's comedic predecessor, impressed Charles Dickens, they both influenced Dan Leno and all of them together shaped the way Ackroyd constructs his characters. Therefore, at the temporal end of this lineage we find the Leno couple, the half-crazed owners of an antique shop in which the story of *Chatterton* begins, who in fact "are two living palimpsests of accumulated echoes, embodying the essence of what Ackroyd believes to be a specific London sensibility" (Onega 1998, 35).

Between History and Fiction – Hypothetical London

Peter Ackroyd is a representative of the postmodernist innovation of the traditional genre of historical novel, which Hutcheon identifies as historiographic metafiction, and which is characterised by the use of experimental styles, the telling of stories in order to point to multiple truths and undermine any totalising knowledge, the mixing of various genres, and the blurring of the polarity between history and fiction. As a result, it predominantly adopts a parodic tone and an ostentatiously playful attitude to the officially acknowledged historical facts and events which "problematizes the very possibility of historical knowledge", "attempts to demarginalize the literary through confrontation with the historical, […] both thematically and formally", by doing which it attempts to "question *whose* truth gets hold" (Hutcheon 1992, 107-8, 123). Therefore, what a writer can do is to give a voice and a place to the formerly silenced or ignored narrators and discourses in order to contribute to the never fully completed mosaic of a pluralistically understood history.

Each postmodernist author of historical novels thus has to come to terms with the fact that there are no neutral representations of some

obviously true history, but that the potential success of such a narrative lies in its capacity to apply our modern experience and knowledge to the perception of past events. As P.N. Furbank suggests, "the historical novelist can hardly hope to illuminate the past. What he or she can do, on the other hand, is use the past to cast light on the present – to highlight those parts of our way of thinking that were not known to a past period" (as quoted in English 2006, 182). Hutcheon holds a similar view when she says that "to re-write or to re-present the past in fiction and in history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and theological" (Hutcheon 1992, 110). And this is exactly what Ackroyd's historiographical metafictions succeed in doing. He offers the reader his 'might-have-beens' in the form of imaginative yet profoundly erudite re-creations of past events. He does this not in order to clarify them once and for ever, but to view them from a contemporary perspective – not as something given, taken for granted, but as something prone to the process of reinterpretation through rewriting.

Since intertextuality represents Ackroyd's crucial narrative and structural device, his own works are no exceptions to the rule: real historical figures from his non-fiction works become characters in his fictional narratives, facts about their lives are mingled with thought-up actions; while in one novel these figures appear physically, in another their role transforms into an influence, through some texts they wrote; many historical parts of the city come back to life, first in the author's *London: The Biography* and then as settings for the often gloomy and enigmatic events of his historical novels. As a result, the gap between past and present is made closer and the past is re-written in a new context. Ackroyd's narratives thus 'talk one to another' and together form yet another partial-intertextual network applicable to the city within the tissue of an overall never-ending one.

A crucial aspect of Ackroyd's London is his conviction that there are areas within the city that are subject to peculiar temporal and special conditions as a result of which they retain a particular genius loci which perpetually influences both the events happening in them and their inhabitants' lives. Therefore, throughout the centuries, these areas have been the sites of similar activities and events and have witnessed the repeated process of history being replayed. It is as if these areas were spell-bound by some half-forgotten, atavistic forces, the power of which, nonetheless, should never be underestimated. Ackroyd explains his theory in *London: The Biography*:

> Londoners seem instinctively aware that certain areas retained characteristics or powers. Continuity itself may represent the greatest power of all. […] There is no other city on earth which manifests such […] continuity; its uniqueness is one of the tangible and physical factors that render London a place of echoes and shadows.
>
> (*London: The Biography*, 655)

This theory forms the basis of the plot of *Hawksmoor* in which such parallelism is followed over two and a half centuries. Ackroyd mentions two of Hawksmoor's churches, St. George's-in-the-East and Christ Church, in *London: The Biography*, because for years the first has attracted "the lonely and the unhappy," while the latter has been "a resting place for the vagrant and the deranged […]" and "was known as 'Itchy Park'" (*London: The Biography* 2003, 496). The architect Nicholas Dyer is well aware of this when he offers his commentary on one of the miserable areas in which his new church should be erected:

> …this good and savoury Parish is the home of Hectors, Trapanners, Biters who all go under the general appelation of Rooks […] There are other such wretched objects about these ruined Lanes, all of them lamentable Instances of Vengeance. And it is not strange (as some think) how they will haunt the same Districts and will not leave off their Crimes until they are apprehended, for these Streets are their Theatre (*Hawksmoor* 1993, 94).

Similarly, the fact that murders have not been committed on the sites of the churches for the first time does not at all surprise detective Hawksmoor since he has already grown "to understand that most criminals tend to remain in the same districts, continuing with their activities until they were arrested, and he sometimes speculated that these same areas had been used with similar intent for centuries past" because "certain streets or patches of ground provoked a malevolence which generally seemed to be quite without motive" (*Hawksmoor* 1993, 115-6). A similar view is used again in *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* for the replication of the Ratcliffe Highway murders. This repetitive parallelism of events supports Ackroyd's insistence that the present is merely the past revisited and his consequent rejection of the traditional, chronologically linear, conception of historical time in favour of a circular or mythical one. If it is the spirit of the place that magnetises certain people and events

rather than some rationally explicable consequences, then "the question of chronology is immaterial, for time is cyclical and human actions are endlessly accumulated and repeated around the same power-concentrating places" (Onega 1998, 68).

Another of Ackroyd's idiosyncrasies lies in his emphasis on the theatrical nature of the city. Urban life as a theatre is one of the key metaphors in his conception of London in *London: The Biography*, and so both his factual and fictional Londons show various features of a theatre performance. It is not only the numerous fairs and other festivals, which in fact represent a kind of condensed, small-scale simulacrum of city life, but also the everyday events and doings through which the city becomes "a stage upon which were presented spectacles for the delight and terror of the urban audience" (*London: The Biography* 2003, 275) and so, for most Londoners, "whether by birth or adoption, the theatricality of London is its single most important characteristic" (*London: The Biography* 2003, 142). The theme or motif of the theatre is also frequently found in Ackroyd's novels. In *Chatterton*, young George Meredith wanders along Oxford Street observing the city's life and noticing that it is a part of a greater theatrum mundi over which he has only negligible control: "the city had become one vast theatre – not the theatre of his imagination, either, but that of Astley's or the Hippodrome, tawdry, garish, stifling, real" (*Chatterton* 1987, 135); in *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* Ackroyd mentions Gissing's novel *Workers in the Dawn* within which the author "had bathed the city in an iridescent glow and turned its inhabitants into stage heroes or stage crowds on the model of the sensation plays in the penny gaffs" (*Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* 1994, 137); in *The Clerkenwell Tales* the annual mystery plays are organised as "the great mummings and interludes that celebrated the cycle of the city's year" (*The Clerkenwell Tales* 2003, 81), and, at the end of the story, the bishop and the mad nun raise their cups of wine in an act of "congratulating one another on a drama well staged" (*The Clerkenwell Tales* 2003, 163); in *The Lambs of London* Charles and Mary Lamb rehearse a private performance of the mechanicals' play-within-a-play from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* while Richard Brinsley Sheridan stages the 'newly discovered' Shakespeare play *Vortigen* forged by William Ireland, in a sold-out Drury Lane theatre.

The city life disposes of many sub-stages on which various languages, intelligible to certain groups of city dwellers, are spoken. Ackroyd shows the most vivid example of this phenomenon in the nineteenth century Cockney area that found its "specific focus in the language of the music hall" where "the true songs of London" (*London: The Biography* 2003, 154) were produced. This environment forms one of

the crucial settings of *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* and its spirit is personified in the character of Dan Leno, "the Quintessence of Cockney Comedians" (*Leno and the Limehouse Golem* 1994, 23) who, with his ability to imitate and impersonate an endless variety of people and thus transform any kind of evil into a humorous and harmful music-hall drag show, is a charismatic part of the long London tradition that Ackroyd calls "monopolylinguist", that is "comedians or actors who play a number of quick-change parts in the course of one performance" (as quoted in Onega 1998, 34). It is exactly this ability to assume a number of different roles and identities that best catches the requirements and sensibility of life in the metropolis. It is therefore not surprising that at the end of the novel all its protagonists, with the logical exception of the Crees, meet in a music hall to see the first night of *The Crees of Misery Junction*, a dramatic version of the real life performance the East End streets have recently been staging. The theatricality of the city is also presented as a significant device that helps to efface differences between its dwellers. And so, as the audience is filing out into the night after the performance, the city swallows them all up, "the young and the old, the rich and the poor, the famous and the infamous, the charitable and the mean […], all of them returning to the uproar of the eternal city" (*Leno and the Limehouse Golem* 1994, 282).

The London of Ackroyd's historical novels is an exciting amalgam of the realistic and the fictitious. A telling example can be seen in the churches that become the sites of the murders in *Hawksmoor*. In the novel there are seven churches built by Dyer instead of the historical six completed by Hawksmoor. Symptomatically, the final mysterious twist in the story takes place at Little St Hugh, the church invented by the author. Ackroyd's fictional East End becomes even less genuine when we realise that the appearance of the novel's churches does not always match that of the real ones – at the fictional Christ Church we can find the mysterious pyramid marking the entrance to an underground labyrinth while in reality it can be seen in the churchyard of St Anne's[2]. Moreover, what holds for the churches can also be applied to their architect for not even the years of Dyer's and Hawksmoor's lives are identical. A similar strategy can be traced in Ackroyd's treatment of the characters inhabiting the city. He takes historical personages and some known facts about their lives and builds up an imaginary story around them, as he does for instance in *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* – Dan Leno was the most famous Cockney comedian of his time, Karl Marx did indeed live in London and visited the Reading Room and so did Gissing and Wilde. The tragic stories of Gissing's married life and Babbage's Analytical Engine are also true, yet all these facts are combined with those connected with completely fictional

characters, such as Elizabeth and John Cree, Aveline Mortimer and Solomon Weil. In *The Lambs of London* Ackroyd uses yet another strategy when he takes two real life stories, that of Charles and Mary Lamb and that of William Ireland, a forger of would-be Shakespearean documents and plays, and puts them together in order to create a potential connection between them, without having any historically based evidence for it. Ackroyd's fictional London is therefore more hypothetical and alternative than historically exact, though this does not inevitably mean that it should automatically be rejected as less convincing. If, in accordance with the postmodernist belief, each history is partly a fiction, then Ackroyd's version is an immensely enticing and readable one.

Notes

1. See Bradbury 1996, chapter 'Dickens's London'
2. For more about the areas of London connected with particular writers see Cunningham 2001.

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