# The Living Presence of Invisible Agencies and Unseen Powers – The Dramatised and Reinvented History of Peter Ackroyd's Novels

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Abstract

*The voluminous body of work of Peter Ackroyd, one of the most versatile contemporary British writers, comprises chiefly of non-fiction and fiction. The first is dominated by his books on English history, English literature, the history and development of London, and a series of biographies of outstanding personalities he labels "Cockney Visionaries", the latter by his novels. Taking some of the recent tendencies in historical fiction as a frame of reference and focusing on Ackroyd's novels set solely in the past and both in the past and the present, this article examines how the various sides of his professional self – an historian, literary historian, biographer and writer – combine and intersect in his rendering and re-enacting history as a lively material and inheritance that can still be palpable in and illuminating for our present experience.*

Keywords

Peter Ackroyd, heterogeneity, historiographic metafiction, pastiche, palimpsest, alternate history

Peter Ackroyd is one of the most prolific and versatile personalities on the contemporary British literary scene. Being simultaneously an historian, literary historian, biographer and writer, the body of his work is truly interdisciplinary and, consequently, considerably heterogeneous and multi-layered. Although he began his literary career writing poetry, which he in fact resumed in 2013 when he wrote a libretto for an opera *The Harlot's Progress*, based on his favourite William Hogarth engravings,[1] for the last almost four decades he has been most renowned for his non-fiction and fiction. His non-fiction is very miscellaneous in terms of genres as it is comprised of essays, lectures, book reviews, biographies, books on English history and the history of English literature, historical books for children and scripts for television documentaries; his fiction then consists of his novels and a small number of short stories. Ackroyd's writing stems from his three major areas of interest – English history, the history and development of English literature and London, its history and the textual production the city has generated, enabled and inspired – which to varying degrees combine in all his acclaimed works. From non-fiction, apart from his most recent and yet unfinished six-volume *History of England*,[2] it can be found primarily in *London: The Biography* (2000), a monumental textual and intertextual history of London, *Albion: The Origins of the English Imagination* (2002), his outline of the historical development of an English literary sensibility, and the series of biographies of outstanding, in the sense of exceptionally imaginative

1 Ackroyd agreed to author the libretto although he has repeatedly insisted that he has no interest in seeing dramatic works, never going to the opera, concerts, theatre and cinema. Written by a rising British composer Iain Bell, the opera premiered at the Theater an der Wien in Vienna on 13 October 2013. It was generally very well received by critics, though George Loomis in *The New York Times* noted that despite its "trenchantly witty tone" those who appreciate the roguish humour in Hogarth's engravings "may be disappointed by the pervasive bleakness of the new opera."

2 He has so far completed four volumes – *Foundation* (2011), *Tudors* (2012), *Civil War* (2014) and *Revolution* (2016).

and foresightful, personalities whom Ackroyd calls "Cockney Visionaries" or "London Luminaries," and whose life and work was fundamentally connected with and affected by the capital. These include not only writers, such as Blake, Dickens, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Eliot and Pound, but also other artists (Turner, Chaplin) and scholars (More, Newton).

An interconnection of the three areas of interest also lies at the core of most of Ackroyd's novels. His fiction is difficult to categorise because as a whole it defies traditional generic delineation, same as it defies traditional conception of literary time and space. Although it is always concerned with the past or the relationship between the past and the present, he cannot be labelled a purely historical writer since several of his novels, like *The Great Fire of London* (1982), *First Light* (1989), *English Music* (1992), *The Fall of Troy* (2006) and *Three Brothers* (2013), are set in the present or a very recent past. Two other novels can each stand as a separate category: *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983), written as a fictional diary of the eponymous writer during the last days of his life, and the experimental futuristic conceit-novel *The Plato Papers* (1999). Even the remaining novels can be further subdivided into those with multiple, parallel plotlines, one of which takes place in the present and the others in the past, such as *Hawksmoor* (1985), *Chatterton* (1987) and *The House of Doctor Dee* (1993), and those whose story is set solely in the past, such as *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994), *Milton in America* (1996), *The Clerkenwell Tales* (2003), *The Lambs of London* (2004) and *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein* (2008). It is especially in these novels set in the past and in both the past and the present that his fields of expertise and his rich imagination most forcefully complement, resulting in a distinctive fictional world. Using various tendencies in recent and contemporary historical fiction as a frame of reference, particularly historiographic metafiction, pastiche, palimpsest and the so called alternate approach to history, the aim of this paper is to explore how the two main sides of Ackroyd's professional self – the historian/biographer and the writer – intersect in these novels and how, within his creative license, he dramatically renders and re-fabricates history in order to achieve the intended effect on the reader.

## London as meta-chronotope, history as dramatic reinvention

All the novels in question but *Milton in America* are set in London and this city represents a very particular chronotope in Ackroyd's writing, a highly idiosyncratic fictional universe with specific temporal and spatial properties which are intrinsically interconnected and as such impact and condition one another. Paramount to them are Ackroyd's notion of non-linearity of time and his conviction about the power of the *genius loci*, or more precisely the *genii locorum*, of the city. The time of his fictional London defies a chronological temporality in favour of repetitive cyclical and spiral patterns due to which certain occurrences happen again and again over time, perhaps in varying forms and with varying intensity, yet analogous in principle, and incessantly intersect and violate the notional linear time-line. As a result, the traditional distinction between the present and the past blurs if not collapses as past and present events reduplicate, echo and parallel one another. This is further strengthened by the fact that some places in the city are endowed with potent mystical energies that magnetise certain kinds of people to occupy them and thus cause that certain kinds of events and activities tend to recur in these places. Yet even all these recurrences in

fact lack any manifest regularity and take place in a rather haphazard, random manner, resulting in what may be labelled a labyrinthine organisation of perpetual time.[3]

It is important to note that this concept of London is by no means devoid of or independent of people, on the contrary, human element plays a determining role in its construction. First of all, there are the "Cockney Visionaries," the prophetic personalities whose imagination, insightfulness and courage to pursue their visions even against the prejudices and conventions of the mainstream currents of thought and official establishments placed them ahead of their time, and who Ackroyd believes have significantly shaped the history and development of the city. Yet these individualities, no matter how prominent their role is, are not the only ones who contribute to the making of the London spirit as anyone can potentially do so as well, thus making oneself part of the supra-temporal continuum of human imagination and creativity that actually fuels and perpetuates the convoluted mechanism of the metropolis. Such London inevitably transcends the limits of a mere chronotope as apart from the setting it assumes the role of theme, but also that of a character, in the sense of a determining principle that surpasses and exercises command over the existence of its inhabitants. We can therefore speak about a meta-chronotope which simultaneously anchors the literary work's artistic unity to the actual rendered reality of the city,[4] generates an autonomous universe capable of producing meanings independently on this reality, as well as reflects on itself and its character. However, this space-time model, no matter how complex and engulfing, by no means strives to provide a finite, totalising and explanatory image of London. On the contrary, Ackroyd always stresses its elusiveness and heterogeneity that make any such attempt impossible.

Ackroyd's erudition in English and London history is indisputable, he is known for his thorough and voluminous research and reading before he sets himself for writing, yet he does not see himself a scholar but a writer gathering and processing necessary materials which allow him to authentically bring the past back to life in his works, fiction and non-fiction alike. Indeed, he does not make much difference between writing history and fiction, he does not consider history an academic discipline but "a living presence," and the task of both is to "dramatise and reinvent" this living presence for the readers.[5] Moreover, Ackroyd focuses on those histories which were not always palpable, which were not approved of or acknowledged by those in power and therefore were excluded from the public discourse and textual representation of their time. He is interested in the hidden patterns and secret forces behind grand historical events, "the invisible agencies and the unseen powers that are not detectable by conventional history,"[6] without which the larger historical development proves difficult, if not impossible, to comprehend. His novels then revolve around much smaller, in terms of customary historical significance, events and actions, whose renderings are often based on some obscure, speculative, unverified or made-up interpretations and assumptions. These unofficial aspects of the past, Ackroyd believes, are far more exciting to delve into as by doing so one can "come upon luminous and illuminating details which tend to

3 David Charnick proposed the term "perpetual time" in his article "Out of time: Peter Ackroyd's perpetual London."

4 Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 243.

5 Peter Ackroyd speaking at the Royal Festival Hall, Part 1, 10 October 2011.

6 Five Minutes With: Peter Ackroyd, interviewed by Matthew Stadlen, BBC News website, 10 November 2013.

be neglected by more academic historians or more professional historians."[7] His novels set at least in part in the past thus offer parallel, altered and sometimes alternative versions of history, ones that may not be wholly credible and substantiated, but which attract readers by their playful yet knowledgeable imaginativeness.

## Historiographic metafiction vs. English literary sensibility

Ackroyd is known to have been a confirmed and emphatic critic and rejecter of contemporary literary, cultural and historical theories and approaches included under the umbrella terms of postmodernism and poststructuralism. He claims that most of the phenomena they embrace, such as mixing of genres and styles, revelling in heterogeneity, employing textual interplay and various self-reflective narrative strategies, have been present in the English literary sensibility for centuries, and ascribing them solely to these recent modes of thought is for him an act of "cultural blindness or ignorance."[8] Accordingly, he disapproves of having his novels classified as postmodernist and insists they instead belong to the native English tradition "that might, accidentally, have some things in common with postmodern culture."[9]

Be it as it may, it is hard to deny that his view of the affinity between historiography and fiction in textual representation of the past is in fact much in line with what Linda Hutcheon terms postmodern historiographic metafiction[10] which "shows fiction to be historically conditioned and history to be discursively structured," drawing on "the ideological implications of the Foucauldian conjunction of power and knowledge," examining "*whose* history survives."[11] And so rather than aspiring to tell the truth, it seeks to disclose whose truth gets told and how.[12] It does not doubt the existence of the past and external reality but questions "our ability to (unproblematically) *know* that reality, and therefore to be able to represent it in language,"[13] stressing the inescapable textuality of all modes of historical writing as the past can be only known through its textual traces. At the heart of historiographic metafiction thus lies a paradox: it installs material reality, imposes a totalising order on it, yet only to subvert its autonomy and permanency by employing destabilising narrative strategies such as intertextuality and parody.

Espousing the postmodern maxim of plurality and diversity, historiographic metafiction strives to prevent its representation, or re-presentation, of history from being conclusive, in which it consistently works upon the above mentioned paradox of establishing and then blurring a borderline between history and fiction: to open the past to the present, to affirm the connection with the past,

7 Andy McSmith, "Rioting has been a London tradition for centuries," an interview with Peter Ackroyd. *The Independent*, 22 August 2011.

8 Peter Ackroyd, "The Englishness of English Literature," in *Peter Ackroyd: The Collection (Journalism, Reviews, Essays, Short Stories, Lectures)*, ed. Thomas Wright (London: Vintage, 2002), 333.

9 Barry Lewis, *My Words Echo Thus: Possessing the Past in Peter Ackroyd* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007), 181.z

10 Ackroyd is even one of the writers Hutcheon names as most prominent representatives of this tendency in contemporary historical fiction.

11 Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 120, emphasis original.

12 Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 123.

13 Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 119, emphasis original.

yet, at the same time, to keep a gap and difference from the past by rewriting it in a new context and from a new perspective. This is also reflected in its protagonists: instead of being proper types of the realistic tradition they tend to be "the ex-centrics, the marginalized, the peripheral figures of fictional history,"[14] which applies not only to made-up characters but also, within some limits of course, to real historical personages. Problematising the very possibility of our knowledge of the past, historiographic metafiction (re)presents history that is often contradictory, fragmentary, narrated from a previously marginal, dismissed or overlooked perspective, ironically playful and consciously self-reflexive. Still, it does not mean that it is not explicitly historical – it does not deny that the past did happen, but calls for a fundamental revision of our presumptions concerning its legitimate textual representation.

Opening the past to the present and affirming a connection between the past and the reader's present experience lies at the core of Ackroyd's novels with multiple plotlines. In the present-day plotline of *Hawksmoor*, the CID detective Nicholas Hawksmoor investigates a series of murders committed on the sites of churches projected in the early eighteenth century by his namesake, a pupil of and later an assistant to the famous architect Sir Christopher Wren. The detective gradually finds out that these churches are somehow spelled and emanate dark energies that attract violent acts to occur in them. This is also caused by the locations where they were built which, if connected by lines, seem to form some mystical pattern. In *Chatterton*, an unrecognised poet Charles Wychwood chances on a portrait of a middle-aged man who strongly resembles the famous forger-poet, Thomas Chatterton, who is believed to have killed himself aged seventeen. Suspecting a sensational discovery, Charles starts a search for pieces of evidence that Chatterton in reality only faked his death and continued writing poetry under different names, thus shaping the whole English Romantic movement. In *The House of Doctor Dee*, Matthew Palmer inherits an old house which once supposedly belonged to the Renaissance scholar John Dee. As Matthew is carrying out his research into Dee's alchemistic and occult activities and projects, he starts to feel that the house is inhabited by spirits and forces beyond the understanding of rational reason.

At the same time, however, Ackroyd always keeps an ironic distance from the past by rewriting it with deliberate historically unverified alterations. And so the architect in *Hawksmoor*, named Nicholas Dyer, is a secret Satanist and murderer who believes human sacrifices to the sites of his churches may strengthen the dark magic powers of the occult pattern of their topographic arrangement. The young forger in *Chatterton* who arrives in London with the ambition of becoming a famous poet loves the city and all the opportunities it offers and so by no means intends suicide but accidentally overdoses himself with arsenic when trying to cure a venereal disease. And John Dee gets deceived by the dishonest con-mystic Edward Kelly and his alleged "scrying" abilities, who insinuates into Dee's favour and household, and who even poisons his wife when she starts being suspicious about their oddly behaving lodger.

Ackroyd likes to explore the close relationship between history and discourse, especially in the form of textual production. Most of his novels are therefore heavily intertextual and the relationships between individual texts but also between these texts and certain events,

14 Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 114.

both past and present, often form the axis of his stories. Probably the most complex example in this regard is *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*, where the central text proves to be Thomas De Quincey's essay "On Murder Considered as one of the Fine Arts" (1827). Not only does the text inspires Elizabeth Cree in planning her homicides, but it is also read by other people, made up as well as real, for far less deplorable reasons, such as her husband John Cree and George Gissing who try to find in it stimulus for their own writing. And there are more texts, for instance Dicken's novels, Charles Babbage's treatises on his Analytical Engine, and more readers, such as H.G Wells, Dan Leno and Karl Marx. All these people meet, though unaware of one another, in the Reading Room of the British Museum, which is presented as a mystical spiritual centre of London. That Ackroyd often uses the intertextuality ironically can be illustrated with his obsession with unoriginal texts – various forgeries, fakes, plagiarisms and apocrypha – most considerably in *Chatterton* and *The Lambs of London*. All these writings, like Chatterton's Rowley poems, the plagiarised novels of Harriet Scrope or William Ireland's Shakespeare papers, are not only playful instances of significance and impact inauthentic texts can have, but also Ackroyd's contribution to the discussion concerning the (im)possibility of ever being original in literature.

Another typical feature of Ackroyd's novels is a great number of peculiar or even bizarre individuals who, though mostly minor in terms of their significance for the main plotline, add humorous and even absurd spice to the cast of his London characters. As examples we can name the Lenos, Harriet Scrope and Mr. Joynson in *Chatterton*, the Uncle in *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*, or Hamo Fulberd in *The Clerkenwell Tales*. Occasionally they may play a more major part, like Charles Wychwood in *Chatterton* and William Exmewe in *The Clerkenwell Tales*, or a more serious one, like Solomon Weil in *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*. Even the real historical personages in his novels have attributes that give them an air of certain eccentricity or at least oddity, as in the cases of Nicolas Hawksmoor alias Nicholas Dyer, John Dee, George Gissing, Mary Lamb and William Ireland. Also, as he likes to change the real personages' basic biographical data, such as the age, familial and marital relations and years of the events in question,[15] he suggests that whose story gets told and how is for him far more important that its truthfulness and credibility. All this not only allows Ackroyd to perceive and render history from an unusual, peripheral perspective of those who are omitted or reduced to a footnote in conventional historical narratives, but also contributes to subverting the material historical reality of the novel and further blurring the boundary between fact and fiction. Moreover, the variety of voices and perspectives make the rendered history fragmentary, sometimes incoherent, leaving "empty spots" of disconnection, incongruity and incompleteness. That is why his novels mostly defy narrative conclusiveness, those with parallel plotlines go in their final pages as far as to move away from the earthly world to the supra-temporal continuum, and even those with a more traditionally conceived endings are far from providing a comprehensive and teleological answer to the numerous queries they may have provoked.

15 Though he openly admits it only in the acknowledgement in *The Lambs of London* and the endnotes in *The Clerkenwell Tales*.

## History as pastiche and palimpsest

Ackroyd's conviction about the unique role of imitative texts may at least in part account for two of his favourite approaches to rendering the past: the use of pastiche and the conception of history as a palimpsest. Literary pastiche has two primary meanings: a text made up of elements or material from other texts or artefacts, or an imitation of a work, or some of its aspects, of one or more other writers. In the first, original, sense it was traditionally considered a "disparaging term" for a work of a deficient, derivative character. In the latter sense, it "has assumed a more respectable status" within the postmodernist theory and aesthetics as it is "seen, along with parody, as an acknowledgement of intertextuality."[16] It is a more respectful approach than parody, more serious in tone as it does not ridicule or satirise the imitated work(s). It is in this latter sense of pastiche as creative or aesthetic imitation – generic, stylistic, period and/or thematic – that Ackroyd likes to employ it in his novels.

A crucial property of textual pastiche is that unlike with other kinds of imitation, such as a duplicate and forgery, the reader is expected to know or recognise it to be an imitation. Richard Dyer offers five specifying supplementary comments that help define pastiche as an autonomous and distinctive literary device: pastiche is an imitation of art; the term "art" does not carry any evaluative weight with regards to the quality or status of the imitated artefact, it means all art; an entire work may be a pastiche, just as it is an aspect of a work, something contained inside a wider whole that is not itself pastiche; it may imitate a specific work or a more general type of work; it is an artistic imitation of another art, not of life or reality itself.[17] It follows that pastiche for him is not a superficial practice sponging on the original and disconnected from reality, but a knowing form of imitation which "enables us to make a sense of the real."[18] This notion of pastiche attacks Frederick Jameson's insistence that it is a dead language speech that lacks any linguistic norm and thus leaves nothing but stylistic diversity and heterogeneity.[19] However, unlike Hutcheon who sees postmodernist imitative techniques as an effective tool "for those excluded by dominant cultural ideology,"[20] Dyer argues that pastiche recognises no social, political or cultural restrictions and can be targeted at all brows and used in all social groupings. This is not to say that any pastiche is understood by any reader since it always requires particular competences on the part of the receiver, and the fact that the reader is aware that he or she is reading an imitation "is a defining part of how the work works, of its meaning and affect."[21]

Elements of pastiche as Dyer delineates it can be found in Ackroyd's novels from the very beginning: *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* is a pastiche of the writer's idiosyncratic language and narrative style, *The Great Fire of London* can be read as a present-day pastiche on Dickens's *Little Dorrit*, the passages of *Hawksmoor* taking place in the early eighteenth century are written

16 Edward Quinn, *A Dictionary of Literary and Thematic Terms* (New York: Checkmark Books, 2000), 240.

17 Richard Dyer, *Pastiche* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2007), 1–2.

18 Dyer, *Pastiche*, 2.

19 Frederick Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *Movies and Mass Culture*, ed. John Belton (London: Athlone, 1996), 188.

20 Jerome de Groot, *The Historical Novel* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 116.

21 Dyer, *Pastiche*, 3.

in a pastiche of that time spoken English, same as the eponymous poet's diction in *Milton in America*. Various forms of pastiche are for him a means of bringing the past to the present reader by casting a new light on it which, alongside, imparts meaning to his own works. Of course, such device presupposes a certain kind of informed reader, familiar, for instance, with Wilde's style and *Little Dorrit*'s story, who is more likely to enjoy the text's meta-commentary. Being stylistically and linguistically vivid and resourceful, the language and discourse of Ackroyd's pastiche is far from dead, making the past a living presence and the present an animated echo of the past.

His most complex novel in terms of the employment of pastiche is *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* where it operates on several levels at once. The book as a whole is a pastiche on the popular Victorian murder mystery novel, but it also contains "partial" elements of pastiche, on low as well as middle or even high-brow materials, such as the transcripts of interrogations during the trial with Elizabeth Cree, the counterfeited diary supposedly kept by her husband, the period's literary journals, and the peculiar language and style of the Music Hall culture, both on and offstage. Although the result is an ingenious polyphony of voices and discourses from diverse social and cultural realms, the fact that it does not imitate a specific work or author makes it more accessible to mainstream readers as it provides them with an authentically appearing insight into that period's everyday life reality. *The Clerkenwell Tales* and *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein*, by contrast, may be taken as examples of pastiche on a specific work. What the two books have in common is that it is not difficult for the reader to recognise the imitated original, that the reader's familiarity with these originals open for him or her new layers of meaning in the new versions, and that they mix up the made-up with the real, otherwise they are quite dissimilar.

*The Clerkenwell Tales* has the form of a loose sequel to Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, depicting the pilgrims' daily life in and around London. What remains identical with the original is roughly the time in which the story is set and the occupations and social statuses of the characters. The rest is completely new as these have different names and they are all somehow part of a sensational, speculative story behind the deposition of Richard II by Henry Bolingbroke in 1399. *The Clerkenwell Tales* thus crucially reverses the original: thematically, instead of a light-hearted, apolitical and generally conceived tale-telling contest he makes the characters participate in events of treachery, violence, murder, terrorism, and the plotting of clandestine political and religious groups, moreover embedded in a realistic historical background. Formally, Ackroyd as the author makes himself present in the book, but not as one of the cast and only after the story has been ended. Instead of a Chaucerian prologue, the last chapter entitled "The Author's Tale" has the function of an epilogue and consists of endnotes which comment on the historical realities of the story and whether they are of factual or fictitious nature. *The Canterbury Tales* thus serves as a mere framework story, a stepping stone for his story to take off from in a new direction.

The idea behind *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein* is different – to rewrite or correct history, specifically the circumstances around the creation of Mary Shelley's classic. For this purpose, Ackroyd makes Victor Frankenstein a real-life character and befriends him with the personages from the group that stayed at the Villa Diodati by Lake Geneva during the rainy summer of 1816, namely Percy Bysshe Shelley, his wife Mary, Lord Byron and his personal physician John Polidori. And so the life of doctor Frankenstein who, like in the original, creates life from dead flesh by galvanisation, yet in a less complicated manner since he brings back to life the corpse of

a recently deceased person,[22] gets intertwined with those of the prominent Romanticist literary representatives. The fact that Frankenstein is even present at the ghost story telling contest at Lake Geneva distorts the historical reality irreversibly as the borderline between fact and fiction collapses totally. Ackroyd thus combines two stories – that of Shelley's *Frankenstein* and that of how the novel came into being, which itself has over time evolved into a semi-fictional myth of a kind – and builds upon them yet another one of how they once may have been related. Such an altered story logically necessitates a different ending, which is also reflected by the formal structure of the text: Ackroyd's version does not need the fictional character of Captain Walton and lacks epistolary passages; instead, narrated solely in the first person by Victor Frankenstein, the story is moving forcefully to its playful yet inevitable resolution.

Another principle of (inter)textual representation of history Ackroyd adopts is that of the palimpsest. The original meaning of palimpsest is an old written document whose original has been effaced and replaced by a new one. The later, extended meaning is of any text with many layers as a result of its having been repeatedly reused and altered, yet with apparent traces of its earlier form(s) beneath its surface.[23] An important milestone in the development of *the palimpsest* as a concept was the 1845 essay "The Palimpsest" written by Thomas De Quincey and published in *Blackwood's Magazine*, which introduced it and inaugurated its possible use, marking "the beginning of a consistent process of metaphorization from the mid-nineteenth century to the present day."[24] In this imaginary meaning, i.e. as a meta-text consisting of individual texts metaphorically "layered" on one another by dealing with the same subject yet different in focus, bias and expertise, the nature of palimpsest is miscellaneous and interdisciplinary for it invites diverse perspectives to be written on its body. The character of this structure, that is the relationship between the texts that inhabit it, is expressed by the term "involutedness," or its near synonymic neologism "palimpsestuousness," designating an "involuted phenomenon where otherwise unrelated texts are involved and entangled, intricately interwoven, interrupting and inhabiting each other,"[25] yet in which, at the same time, the underlying text keeps re-emerging.

Ackroyd makes use of the concept of the palimpsest mainly for two purposes: to render and dramatise the effect of the power of the *genius loci* and for his fondness for rewriting the past in an altered, mostly speculative and unorthodox, manner. The first is most strongly connected with various obscure acts and activities of Londoners, namely criminality and occult practices.[26] In *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*, the territory in question is Limehouse and the event that

22 This person is a former young hospital attendant named Jack Keat, a character loosely based on John Keats.

23 For a long time, palimpsest was considered an object of interest for a narrow circle of palaeographic specialists as a practical solution to the problem of expensive parchment and other materials for writing manuscripts.

24 Sarah Dillon, *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2007), 1.

25 Dillon, *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory*, 4.

26 In the chapters "A Rogues Gallery" and "Horrible Murder" of *London: The Biography* Ackroyd outlines how the most famous London crimes have been reflected in a number of texts of different genres and purposes, insisting that "real criminality could be found in many specific areas" (257). In the section "Black Magic, White Magic," he notes that certain streets and neighbourhoods of the city "seem woeful or haunted" (496) and "carry with them a particular atmosphere over many generations" (497) before he proceeds to list the places associated for centuries with various forms of occultism and spiritualism.

inspires a palimpsestic layering of textual representations are the Ratcliffe Highway murders.[27] Such a dreadful deed logically drew the attention of media, articles to newspapers and magazines were contributed not only by journalists but also specialists like medical doctors as well as prominent figures of the city's public life. Literary representations were scarce yet all the more influential, especially De Quincey's "On Murder Considered as one of the Fine Arts," which Ackroyd shows to have inspired other versions of the event, such as George Gissing's article "Romanticism and Crime." It is also discussed by other characters, such as Karl Marx, Solomon Weil, Dan Leno and Elizabeth Cree, the latter of which decides to "write her own version" by brutal serial killings that win her a medial nickname of the "Limehouse Golem."[28] In *The House of Doctor Dee* it is Clerkenwell, which the main protagonist discovers to have always been an area of mysticism and spiritual and political radicalism, and where he inherits an ancient house once owned and inhabited by John Dee,[29] due to which he finds himself exposed to the place's potent spirit, a "sense of continuing power, of living force."[30] The life of the Elizabethan mathematician, astronomer, philosopher but also alchemist has always attracted textual rendering by writers, biographers, historians as well as occult enthusiasts and Ackroyd adds more layers to this palimpsest by the two parallel yet interconnected plotlines of his novel, one set in the late sixteenth century and dealing with Dee's occult enterprises, the other a present-day variation on a ghost story and an unexpected revelation about the latest reincarnation of the homunculus created by the famous scholar.

The idea of palimpsestic history as being repeatedly rewritten can be found behind other Ackroyd's novels as well. *The Lambs of London*, for instance, can be read as a fictitious, or perhaps semi-fictitious, re-enactment of the shocking incident in September 1796 when Mary Lamb killed her mother and, at the same time, of the unfortunate life-story of William Henry Ireland, the teenage forger of Shakespearean documents including the bard's "lost" early play *Vortigern and Rowena*.[31] Another telling example is *Hawksmoor*, which offers a sensational story of the English architect as a vicious Satanist and merciless murderer. It is true that Nicolas Hawksmoor was not a conventional representative of his guild, an individualist solitary in his architectural designs, whose eclectic style based on combining what was then thought to be incompatible or contradictory mostly met with critical disapproval and public dismissal,[32] but there is absolutely no evidence of his interest in mysticism or black magic, not to speak of his homicidal tendencies. Ackroyd's interpretation is by no means new, he was inspired by Iain Sinclair's 1975 book *Lud Heat*,[33] a collection of essays, treatises and poems in which, in the spirit of psychogeography, he suggests that the sites of Hawksmoor's six

27 These were particularly atrocious attacks on two separate families committed by John Williams in December 1811 and resulting altogether in seven homicides.

28 Apart from Ackroyd's novel, these murders are also referenced in Alan Moore's graphic novel *From Hell* (1989–96), and dramatized in Lloyd Shepherd's novel *The English Monster* (2012) or David Morrell's thriller *Murder as a Fine Art* (2013).

29 Once again, Ackroyd "adjusts" history here as John Dee's real house was not in reality situated in Clerkenwell but in Mortlake.

30 Peter Ackroyd, *The House of Doctor Dee* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), 44.

31 For a more in-depth analysis of this theme see chapter "When William Met Mary: London as a Palimpsest in *The Lambs of London*" of *A Horror and a Beauty: The World of Peter Ackroyd's London Novels*.

32 Vaughan Hart, *Nicholas Hawksmoor: Rebuilding Ancient Wonders* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), xi.

33 Ackroyd's novel, on the other hand, inspired one of the plotlines of Alan Moore's *From Hell*.

London churches form mystical geometric patterns of lines of force which can have a disastrous impact on those who happen to occupy the areas where they intersect. Yet even Sinclair's view of the city is not wholly original as it draws on Alfred Watkins's theory of ley lines.[34] By developing Sinclair's idea into a story, Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor* aptly illustrates the palimpsestuousness between the individual layers of this meta-text, be it Watkins's studies, Sinclair's theory, biographies of Nicholas Hawksmoor or architectural monographs: no matter how diverse and often unrelated these texts are, they gradually become entangled through mutual influence and interference, thus inviting other versions and interpretations to be layered upon them.

## "What if" (hi)stories

Another recently widespread[35] and fertile branch of creative representation of history relevant to Ackroyd's novels is that of alternate, What if?, or counterfactual history.[36] Its underlying principle is to imagine what would have followed if certain past events had happened differently, thus undermining the conventional history's deterministic belief that such events were the only possible, and therefore inevitable, consequences within the given socio-historical circumstances. This does not mean that alternate history offers its writers limitless freedom with regard to what twists of events such works imagine as they always have to present theoretically possible alternatives which do not deny historical data. In other words, alternate history should consider only those alternatives which really could have happened under certain plausible conditions, "which we can show on the basis of contemporary evidence that contemporaries actually considered."[37] One of the crucial terms of alternate history is the "point of divergence," that is the moment in which the imagined history takes a different course compared to the actual past, such as grand military victories and defeats, deaths of monarchs, presidents and other important public figures, and rises or downfalls of political, religious and cultural movements. Alternate history as a genre invites an interdisciplinary approach as well as multiple modes of expression, both serious and popular.[38]

In its challenging particular chains of historical phenomena such an approach is, to some extent, iconoclastic. Yet although it reflects some of the postmodernist queries, such as the tension between fiction and reality, artificiality and authenticity, alternate history should not be included in historiographic metafiction for it does not really "call into question our ability to know the past through narrative," it rather "conservatively support[s] the normalized narrative of the real

34 In his two books, *Early British Trackways* (1922) and *The Old Straight Track* (1925), Watkins proposes that the landscape of Britain is covered by a vast prehistoric "network of straight tracks, aligned through the hills, mounds and other landmarks," and he also touches upon the existence of a London ley system illustrated by some of the city's churches (Merlin Coverley, *Psychogeography*, 52–53).

35 Although as a form of narrative representation of the past the roots of alternate history go back to some Ancient Greek and Roman historians, and the genre was revived throughout the nineteenth century, it has gained particular popularity and respectability with the end of WWII, especially since the 1960s.

36 These terms are more or less synonymic, only counterfactual histories are not works of fiction as they are practiced by historians and other scholars.

37 Niall Ferguson, "Introduction," in *Virtual History*, ed. Niall Ferguson (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 86.

38 Gavriel Rosenfeld, *The World Hitler Never Made* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 4. There are also numerous websites for alternate history enthusiasts, especially www.uchronia.net and www.alternatehistory.com, where they can find and discuss their favourite stories and scenarios.

past."[39] Its premise is deceptively simple: by imagining and examining the accounts of what never happened and why we can better understand what did happen and why. However, by speculating about things that did not happen and their potential consequences we are also addressing both individual and collective feelings about the present, both positive and negative. "Alternate history is inherently presentist. It explores the past less for its own sake than to utilize it instrumentally to comment upon the present."[40] Alternate history demands some extra-textual historical knowledge on the side of the reader so that the two versions, the alternate and the actual, may be compared. Naturally, then, also due to the need for plausibility and historical evidence, alternate histories tend to focus on famous and well-known events that not only meant a pivotal turning point in the past, but whose significance is still palpable in the present, such as the Nazi Germany winning World War II, the American Revolution not occurring, the South winning the Civil War, and the Cold War being avoided.

As Ackroyd revels in various speculative versions of the past most of his novels at least in part revolve around some "what if" question: What if Oscar Wilde, under the pseudonym Sebastian Melmoth, kept a diary during the last days of his life? What if Thomas Chatterton did not commit suicide at an early age but continued to write poetry under different pen names? What if Nicholas Hawksmoor was a secret Satanist and a heartless, coldblooded psychopath? What if George Gissing, Dan Leno and Karl Marx were interrogated as suspects or witnesses in a case of serial killings in the night streets of London East End? What if the deposition of Richard II was hastened by the conspiracies and partisan activities of a clandestine radical group known as Dominus who were serving the interests of Henry Bolingbroke? What if Mary Lamb became fond of William Ireland and the distress and unease she fell in after she found out he had been deceiving her were the real cause why she killed her mother? However, neither of these novels represents the genre of alternate history in the true sense for several reasons: they do not depict any famous or historically decisive events but rather minor ones or those from the realm of English literary history, thus largely unknown to uninformed readership; they violate the principle of plausibility; they lack any true point of divergence; and even if they feature a plausible version of the past and some point of divergence, like in *Chatterton*, they do not develop a coherent and comprehensive narrative account of what followed and surmise further outcomes and consequences.

Ackroyd's novel that most complies with the genre of alternate history is *Milton in America*. The story is based on the idea what if John Milton, after the end of the Republican Commonwealth and the Restoration of the English monarchy, decided not to stay in England and left for America. Although it does not stem from a distinct point of divergence, the novel does present a consistent alternative narrative version of possible ensuing events. Milton's secretary manages to arrange passage for the blind former Cromwell's secretary to flee from his home country for the New World in order to avoid the new king's wreath and his subsequent punishment. As a result, Milton never

39 In *Alternete History: Playing with Contingency and Necessity*, Kathleen Singles argues that apart from the attractiveness of their stories on the thematic level, alternate histories are made vivacious and viable by the central paradox on which they rest: while the point of divergence relies on the principle of contingency, the rest of the narrative on the principle of necessity (9). In other words, with the point of divergence the "radical" part of the text ends and what follows is technically a normalised narrative of (imaginary) past events.

40 Gavriel Rosenfeld, "Why do we ask 'What If?': Reflections on the function of alternate history," *History and Theory*. 41.4 (2002): 93.

composes his poetic masterpiece, *Paradise Lost*. Instead, after crossing the ocean and dramatically shipwrecking on the American coast, he joins his fellow Puritans in their recently founded settlement in New England where he devotes all his vigour and energy to transforming it into a utopian society in his image, a Puritanical paradise called, symptomatically, "New Milton." The depiction of the poet is to a large extent iconoclastic: on the one hand, Ackroyd's Milton is an educated, graceful man with a cultivated sense of humour, a sincere and ardent believer in the faith he professes and the strict morality he advocates; on the other hand , he can be very stern and almost inhumanly uncompromising in dealing with others' weaknesses and faltering, obstinate and tyrannical in pursuing what he perceives as the only right path to godliness. Moreover, he is at first shown as rather intolerant and hypocritical in his attitude to his native "fellowmen," and later as bigoted and hateful towards his Catholic neighbours, while the "Papists" are portrayed as more open-minded and agreeable to all the inhabitants of the land where they have found their new home.[41]

## In and outside the frame – conclusion

In his view of history and its textual representation Ackroyd strongly espouses the principle of heterogeneity, which is, therefore, the cornerstone of his novels. This is no doubt also caused by his "interdisciplinary" personality of a historian, literary scholar, biographer and writer, but also by his employment of a variety of approaches to and conceptions of transforming the past into an engaging fictional narrative. The dispute over whether Ackroyd is a representative of literary postmodernism or whether he merely follows the native English tradition appears to be rather a matter of terminology and historical perspective as regardless of how he refutes being labelled a postmodernist writer, his novels do evince most of the defining aspects of historiographic metafiction: blurring and transgressing the line between reality and writing, history and fiction; problematising the relationship between the past and the present which are shown as intersecting and overlapping rather than consequential; keeping an ironic distance from both the rendered present and past, the first by making it echo and parallel the latter, the latter by altering it playfully, or even gleefully, and arbitrarily; introducing into his novels' cast numerous eccentric and ex-centric characters, marginal and shadowy figures of conventional history; being densely intertextual while also questioning the notion of textual originality and, accordingly, using imitative texts as modes for re-enacting the past. Yet not all Ackroyd's narrative devices can be subsumed within historiographic metafiction. Equally interesting, for instance, is his flirting with the genre of alternate history, which allows him to further hover on the edge between the popular, sensational and speculative on the one hand, and the serious and profound on the other.

In spite of the sometimes unorthodox approaches Ackroyd favours, his aim is not to radically subvert or dismantle history but by shifting the paradigm of its functioning (re)present or reinvent it in a new light, from a new angle so as to make his readers "see the world slightly

41 Such portrayal of Catholicism is only partially motivated by Ackroyd's need to provoke. Himself brought up in a strict Roman Catholic household, he has always stressed the largely overlooked or dismissed role of Catholicism in the English history and in the development of English literary sensibility.

differently."[42] He attempts to achieve this through the heterogeneous character of his fiction, that is by employing a plurality and diversity of voices, perspectives, discourses, styles and modes of expression, and the consequent inconclusiveness of such stories. Importantly, though, these are always subordinated to his idea or vision of history as a mighty and dynamic flux of experience and (hi)stories which are, broadly speaking, rather conservative in essence. What he does contest, however, are the interior mechanisms of this continuum, especially the relations and hierarchies between its constituting elements. His narratives thus simultaneously operate in and outside the frame of the genre of historical novel as they undermine the historical reality only to reaffirm it by other means, open the past to the present only to modify it with no historical basis, and take history away from the academia only to make its most subtle meaning levels inaccessible to uninformed readership. What they all have in common, however, is that they do not take history as a complete, invariable construct, but a living, vigorous material which, if moulded properly, has much to say and show about us and the world we live in.

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42 Anke Schütze, "I think after More I will do Turner and then I will probably do Shakespeare." An Interview with Peter Ackroyd, 1995, accessed 15 September 2016, http://webdoc.sub.gwdg.de/edoc/ia/eese/articles/schuetze/8_95.html

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