

PETER ACKROYD'S LONDON AS THE BACKDROP TO ESOTERIC
CORNERS OF THE PAST AND PRESENT

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ABSTRACT

This article concerns Peter Ackroyd's depiction of London as an arcane labyrinth within which demarcation of the borderline between what is rationally, historically acknowledgeable and what is not is not only highly problematic but in fact undesirable. London, with its echoes of the past, with its people and mysteries, is envisaged as *metapolis* which exposes, through both its architecture and textual topography, hidden tropes leading to knowledge which spills beyond the knowable. Listening intently to the voices of various rationalists and scientists, as well as occultists and visionaries, the author removes layer after layer of the city's substance in order to define its spirit and "consolidate its origins" (Ackroyd 2000a: 229). The paradox is that Ackroyd, though a literary historian, defies the use of mechanical rationality placing the occluded knowledge in the foreground so as to allow that cultural and intellectual tradition which sank into oblivion to resurface. It is the past, often complex and mysterious, which foreshadows the present, he seems to be saying, hence his acknowledgement of London's ignored and forgotten forefathers who, in the eyes of the author, must be rescued from oblivion otherwise the vision of London and Londoners is to remain incomplete.

Among the various categories by means of which Peter Ackroyd happens to be labeled, there is one which defines him as a historical writer. The historical approach inflicts a researcher, almost by default, with an insistence on demonstrable knowledge; yet, Ackroyd's rationale for going deep into the past is not tantamount to giving an account of historical events in order to objectivize history in the eyes of the modern reader. His writing has a more subjective, even personal character. The juxtaposition of the past and present, as the author claims (Ackroyd interviewed by Gibson 2000a: 229), serves the purpose of "... consolidat[ion] of one's origins", origins which have been set by him against a [historical] background of the city of London. Moreover, his verification of London's

historical topography does not take place solely alongside the factual, but more esoteric, thus secret/obscure, lines. Consequently, the aim of this paper is to show, with reference to such novels as *The house of Doctor Dee* and *Hawksmoor*, Ackroyd's personal response to London's past and present; to the creation and recreation of its substance and spirit; finally to the numerous voices of "occultists, mystics, visionaries" as well as rationalists, all being Londoners. According to the writer, they all "create" the city making it "amorphous" and "endlessly imaginable" (Ackroyd interviewed by Wolfreys 2000b: 251), and their narratives combine the material condition of the city with its enigmatic otherness which Ackroyd strongly identifies with through literary excavations.

It is believed that the phenomenon of the city may be examined in two different dimensions. The first one, understood as *polis*, belongs to and is molded by urbanists who bear the responsibility for the rational planning out of streets. Its framework is merely physical. The second dimension, defined as *metapolis*, has a more elusive character and is usually thematized by "sociologists, psychologists ... historians of fine arts" (Rewers 2005: 299)¹, or for that matter, writers of fiction. The latter are not inclined to see urban areas in terms of sequential architectural connections. In their perception, the city as marked by "... multiplicity of meaning" is seen "... as a compound of succeeding layers of ... 'writing', wherein previous strata of cultural coding underline the present surfaces [waiting] to be uncovered" (Smuda 1992: 11). Precisely such is Ackroyd's intention, namely to depict London as a palimpsest whose buildings, places, passages and people constitute surfaces upon which numerous inscriptions are to be found. Yet the mapping of Ackroyd's London has a somewhat cryptic character due to the fact that he aims, when writing fiction, at "... hidden topographies, forgotten pathways", and more importantly at "the secret and occluded knowledge" (Baker 2003). Describing London, the author spreads out a veil of secrecy, not to curtain London off but rather to reveal its potential.

In *London. The biography* (2001) Ackroyd poses a question: "What is ... this spirit of London place?", and provides an immediate answer: "It brings with it suggestions of excess" (2001: 580). The city's excessiveness manifests itself in "visions of alternative Londons", in tropes and traces which resonate, as Gibson put it, with the "mystical ... threatening ... but ultimately unknowable" (2000: 172). And since rationalization of the city appears insufficient to Ackroyd; therefore, he appeals to visionaries who by crossing the line of the rational enable one to comprehend more thoroughly the spirit of London. This is the case with Iain Sinclair, the addressee of the acknowledgements in *Hawskmoor*, but also the au-

¹ Translations of the subsequent quotations taken from Ewa Rewers (2005) are mine.

thor of *Lud heat*², in which he presents past figures, myths, imaginary places perceived as capable of transfiguring the contemporary city. Sinclair turns out to be an exponent of "... faith in writing as alchemy"; in other words, in "literature's miraculous ability to transform the present" (Cunningham 2002). Following his reasoning, Ackroyd, in order to defamiliarize the present, shatters our current expectations towards the familiar reality of London, making use of the seven emblematic local churches designed and built by Nicholas Hawksmoor, the eighteenth-century architect, Sinclair was so much fascinated with. Both Sinclair and Ackroyd are interested in the specificity of the above locations. They are perceived as repositories of living practices, "... interlinked memories, [secrets and energies] which may break through into present experience" (Cunningham 2002) making one more open to narratives of cryptic otherness.

The author's experience of London is definitely modified by the intense sense of place as well as by the city's inhabitants. And this is the reason for his identification with such Londoners as Nicholas Hawksmoor, or John Dee. They both, according to Ackroyd, represent people "... who stand out against orthodoxies of the period", people who do not rely whole-heartedly and exclusively on empirical "science as a form of knowledge", finally people "... who believe this is no abiding city and there is something beyond" (2000a: 245-7). Ackroyd however, even though his pursuit of interests is connected with the history of occultism, should by no means be considered a contemporary alchemist like the other two. Simply his own identification with London and London visionaries such as Hawksmoor and Dee makes him acknowledge some shadowy residue of the living practices to be found, as Certeau asserts, "... below the thresholds at which visibility begins" (1993: 128). Speaking of the genius of the city, the writer asserts most explicitly that "... in London it is impossible to distinguish magic from other versions of intellectual and mechanical aptitude" (Ackroyd 2001: 508). This conviction results in an overwhelming sense of fusion of the comprehensible and mysterious the reader finds in both novels.

In *Hawksmoor* Nicholas Dyer, an equivalent of Nicholas Hawksmoor – the eighteenth-century architect, is portrayed more as an occultist than an architect. Familiar with such works as *De occultia philosophia* by Cornelius Agrippa and *De magia* by Giordano Bruno, thus texts regarded as "... the indispensable handbooks of ... 'Magia' and 'Cabala'" (Yates 1999: 37), Dyer turns into an occultist/cabalist who "... in each of [his] Churches ... put[s] a Signe so that he who sees the Fabrick may see also the Shaddowe of Reality" (Ackroyd 1993: 45). It is not, however, any details of magical practices that Ackroyd goes on at length about but rather the substantiality of esoteric knowledge so much under-

² For further notes and commentary on *Lud heat* in the context of Ackroyd's writing see Gibson and Wolfreys (2000).

mined by the empirical world. The conflict between the two competing viewpoints is well exemplified by the presence of two architects, that is Dyer and Sir Christopher Wren. Reproaching the latter for too a rationalist approach to reality, Dyer indicates how “shaddy [the] world of Mankind” is:

[t]here are those like Sir Chris who speak only of what is Rational and what is Demonstrated. ... Men that are fixed upon *matter, experiment, secondary causes* and the like have forgot there is such a thing in the World which they cannot see nor touch nor measure ... There are those who say further that these are meer Dreames and no true Relations, but I say back to them: look upon my Churches in the Spittle-fields, in Limehouse, and now in the Parish of Wapping Stepney, and do you not wonder why they lead you into a darker World which on Reflection you know to be your own?

(1993: 101-2).

Each reference to edifices erected by Dyer, or rather Hawksmoor, is concurrently also a reference to locations understood as “centers of [secret] power”, in other words to “the cultur[al] [realm which] went into retreat” (Glinert 2004: 286), and as such needs revivification. Hence Dyer’s stance becomes a counterpoint to opinions expressed by Christopher Wren, the genuine seventeenth-century architect. In his speech given to the Royal Society, Wren clarifies that:

the Experimental Philosophy is an Instrument for Mankind’s domination of ... Superstition ... and through the Sciences of Mechanicks, Opticks, Hydrostatics ... as well as Chymistry, Anatomy and the Mathematical Arts we have begun to understand the works of Nature

(Ackroyd 1993: 140).

The paradox is, as Ackroyd rightly notices, that members of the Royal society, considered later to be forerunners of modern empirical research, “... were in fact part of the ‘Invisible College’ of adepts who practiced alchemy as well as mechanical philosophy” (2001: 509). The author’s intention here is evident; namely, to bring to light the kind of knowledge that the abovementioned society, along with its followers, defied. The churches then and their stones containing echoes of the past stand for “... the tables of esoterick knowledge” (Ackroyd 1993: 56). It is apparent that Ackroyd highlights the architecture of the mysterious to argue against “... instrumental rationality and the rationalization of society that has created a fearful ‘iron cage’ ... which incorporates its own logic of repression” (Owen after Weber 2004: 241), and a product of which is the twentieth-century detective Hawksmoor.

Hereby, Ackroyd reinvents the actual Nicholas Hawksmoor as a twentieth-century rationalist whose predecessors are to be found amongst the cofounders of the Royal Society. The detective’s investigation concerns murders committed

in the immediate vicinity of the churches. His methods of investigation, being purely logical, allow him to regard himself as

a scientist, or even as a scholar, since it was from close observation and rational deduction that he came to a proper understanding of each case; he prided himself on his acquaintance with chemistry, anatomy and even mathematics since it was these disciplines which helped him to resolve situations at which others trembled

(1993: 153).

However rational and practical his enquiries are, Hawksmoor is confirmed in his suspicions that the aura of mystery about the churches hinders any progress which could lead to reasonable conclusions as to the case. Driven by rationality he cannot see any connection between the eighteenth-century and twentieth-century crimes committed directly or indirectly by Dyer. Yet it is not the ultimate solution of the crime-riddle which matters in the end, but rather Hawksmoor's trust towards the rationality of the world which eventually must recede. The detective, a product of secular and rationalist culture has been included within the text, as Gibson suggests (2000: 3), "... to subvert, albeit tentatively, a logocentric cultural system". His presence is of symbolic importance, since it shows a crevice that, as Jaffé claims (1978: 275), "arose between man's traditional [spirituality] and his ... intellectual mind", and with "... man's growing insight into nature and its [physical] laws, it has gradually grown wider".

Hawksmoor, crossing the thresholds of the temples, is sensing echoes of the past reverberating through the stones of the churches. This comes as no surprise, though, since it was Dyer's idea to see his architecture as "Vestures of ... active Powers", as "Buildings ... filled with Secresy" leading to "unseen Doors" (Ackroyd 1993: 180). Thus, already inside the shrine, the detective is to hear out the following words of a priest directed towards the congregation:

So you may say how complicated and perilous modern life is ... and how distant our ancestors. But I will tell you this ... that each age has found itself perilous, and each age has feared for its future, and each age has lost its forefathers

(1993: 213).

In the aisles, next to him, Hawksmoor feels a presence, "his own Image" that disturbs him. Confounded, the detective, pondering over what is happening, concludes: "when there was a shape there was a reflection, and when there was a light there was a shadow ... and who could say where one had ended and the other had begun?" (1993: 217). At this moment of uncertainty, Hawksmoor proves to himself that the predominant concept of materialistic reasoning needs to undergo reformulation. With his new assumptions, he resembles the occultists who, by Owen's reckoning, "claimed reason in its knowledge-producing mode as the necessary counterpart to a spiritual experience" (2004: 248).

Though intent on solving the case by the power of his intellect, the detective must admit defeat. In doing so, he starts to believe, the way Ackroyd does, that “[t]here is that within London which compels recognition as *not of this earth*” (2001: 581).

Throughout the discussion of what I call the recovery of London’s past secrecy Ackroyd, this time in *The house of Doctor Dee*, creates yet another character, named Matthew Palmer, who somewhat resembles Nicholas Hawksmoor. Palmer defines himself as “a professional researcher”, however “at odds with the rest of the world”. “[T]ravelling backwards” in time, he “find[s] ... the immediate world around [him] ... more distant” (Ackroyd 1994: 13). The distance begins to increase the moment Matthew inherits a house, located in the Clerkenwell area. As Palmer learns in the course of time, the property belonged to John Dee, an occultist who, according to Yates (1999: 37), is to be acknowledged as “... a figure of great historical importance [that] disappeared in clouds of nineteenth-century ridicule, from which the scholarship of the twentieth century has begun to rescue him”. Matthew is like the contemporary scholar whose objective is to confirm John Dee’s significance. Though skeptical and distanced towards [hi]stories about the Beheminites, “disturbed and even dangerous Londoners” conjuring up in the past “visions and dreams”, Matthew finally realizes, due to his staying in the house, that “there [is] some presence within [him] which has always existed in this soil, this air, this stone” (Ackroyd 1994: 42). It is nothing other than London area, with its air and stone, which may symbolize, as Franz defines it (1978: 226), “something that can never be lost or dissolved, something eternal that some alchemists compared to the mystical experience”. Hence Dee’s words, referring to the esoteric wisdom of Hermes Trismegistus, “... to be myself is to be the world, to look into myself is to look into the world” (Ackroyd 1994: 68) are to be adopted soon by Palmer himself.

Looking into the world means self-understanding, self-identification; looking into the city of London means reading it like a palimpsest upon which, as Rewers indicates, “everyone has left his/her stamp” (2005: 303). The eradication of such traces is impossible, and in fact undesirable, therefore both Ackroyd and his character do not perceive London the way Roy Porter does, namely as a city which has ended, as a city which had “had its hour upon the stage” (2000: 1). The author’s disagreement with such an opinion derives from his conviction that “... when writing about London ... [one] is mimicking the activities of the city”, activities marked by constant renewal and reinvention. This perspective enables Ackroyd to regard London as the eternal city which “merg[es] both the real and the unreal”; therefore, in order to be comprehended, London must be looked into with the help of “London visionaries” (Ackroyd 2000b: 252). The inheritance of the house, owned in the past by one such visionary, changes Matthew Palmer’s viewpoint. Roaming around the

city, he "... turn[s] towards the winding streets of London ... [since they] reveal its true nature to [him]", so as to realize that "... the past is restored around us all the time, in the bodies we inhabit or the words we speak. And there are certain scenes or situations which ... seem to continue for eternity" (Ackroyd 1994: 39). Palmer is reading the city like a palimpsest, and that, according to Rewers (2005: 303), diverts his attention away from the center, and thus the fully explicable and well-ordered world, to its corners, and thus a secretive and mysterious reality.

Similar to *Hawksmoor*, *The house of Doctor Dee* is more concerned with "significant narratives ... significant histories" that show the Clerkenwell area, if not London in its entirety, as "... filled with inexplicable occurrences, [or] the fleeting glimpse[s] of another reality" (Gibson 2000: 189). Dee, who emerges from such narratives, "... sees no necessary disparity between the various forms of occult and experimental understanding" (Ackroyd 2001: 509). As a result, Matthew perceives him both as preoccupied with the spiritual and mechanical world. Consequently, he accepts "the alchemy in which John Dee placed his faith"; namely, a belief in "the world ... imbued with spiritual properties – with 'signatures' and 'correspondences' that reveal its true nature" (Ackroyd 1994: 133). Ackroyd, as may be deduced from the above fragments, tends to return to the point where occultism parted company with empiricism. Occultists, as Owen points out (2004: 239), argued for "the partnership of intuition and reason, acknowledging the role of imagination ... and pushing the boundaries of the real beyond anything that might be empirically verified". The veil of everyday life must be lifted, Ackroyd appears to be saying, in order to see not just the practical genius that built the city, but also the spirit which pervades it still.

To see spiritual otherness within the material texture of London is likely on condition that the reader, similarly to the author, embraces the phenomenon of the *homunculus*. Traditionally a *homunculus* could "grow without the help of any womb", just "within a sealed glass" out of "the spagyricus seed", buried for forty days under the ground (Ackroyd 1994: 123). Yet this bizarre alchemical concept does not stand the test of time. Nor is it of any interest to Ackroyd. Unlike the old one, his *homunculus* has more to do with "Infinite London". Should the city be understood as a sort of the time-space continuum that determines its inhabitants, then Matthew Palmer, a fictional character, and Ackroyd, a declared Londoner, may be considered to be indirect products, *homunculuses*, of such visionaries as John Dee. By the same token, Ackroyd looks on Doctor Dee as if he "has been born again", reinvented by the writer. It all resembles a circle that stands for the spirit inscribed within "the square, [which is] a symbol of earthbound matter ... and of reality" (Jaffé 1978: 284). Figures, either real or fictitious are interwoven with both material and spiritual London. Hence, the writer himself entering the picture says:

And as I walked through the city, I saw many houses and streets ... [t]here were citizens standing in doorways, and when their doors opened they were flooded in light ... It was believed by Doctor Dee that light descended into matter, and that in the very constitution of the material world would be discovered the great mysteries of the spirit hitherto covered by cloud... Here also were walking beside me the forgotten inhabitants of London, the light upon their faces for the first time – the Moravians of Arrow Lane... the followers of Jakob Boehme... Nathaniel Cadman ... Edward Kelly ... and so many others, all of them still living within the city

(Ackroyd 1994: 276).

In conclusion, Ackroyd's writing cannot be limited to mere textual playfulness. The solemnity with which he treats his subject matter, that is London with its tropes, traditions and people, makes us believe that the urban labyrinth Ackroyd has created in his texts spills beyond the knowable, and as such reflects, in Gibson's opinion (2000: 10), "... epistemological uncertainty in the face of competing theories of knowledge". Reinventing the city, the author reinvents himself allowing the rational to blend with the mysterious. As he put it in one of the interviews one can unmistakably draw a parallel between him, his characters and the city which they all inhabit. In this "fluid city", in the *metapolis*, nothing is solid and everything is elusive. Therefore, rational knowledge, being insufficient, must team up with esoteric knowledge.

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