



Petr Chalupský

A Horror and a Beauty:
The World of
Peter Ackroyd's
London Novels

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The original manuscript was reviewed by Christoph Houswitschka (Department of English Literary Science, University of Bamberg), Milada Franková (Department of English and American Studies, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University in Brno), and Šárka Bubíková (Department of English and American Studies, Faculty of Arts and Philosophy, University of Pardubice).

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All great art is born of the metropolis.
(Ezra Pound)

... fidelity to historical reality is a secondary matter as regards the value of the novel. The novelist is neither historian nor prophet: he is an explorer of existence.
(Milan Kundera)

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Cue-Titles

<i>A</i>	<i>Albion: The Origins of the English Imagination</i>
ATW	“All the Time in the World”
<i>B</i>	<i>Blake</i>
<i>C</i>	<i>Chatterton</i>
<i>CT</i>	<i>The Clerkenwell Tales</i>
<i>CVF</i>	<i>The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein</i>
<i>D</i>	<i>Dickens</i>
<i>DLLH</i>	<i>Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem</i>
FEP	“The Future of English Prisons”
<i>GFL</i>	<i>The Great Fire of London</i>
<i>H</i>	<i>Hawksmoor</i>
<i>HDD</i>	<i>The House of Doctor Dee</i>
EEL	“The Englishness of English Literature”
<i>LB</i>	<i>London: The Biography</i>
<i>LL</i>	<i>The Lambs of London</i>
LLCV	“London Luminaries and Cockney Visionaries”
<i>LTM</i>	<i>The Life of Thomas More</i>
<i>LU</i>	<i>London Under</i>
ML	“A Manifesto for London”
<i>N</i>	<i>Newton</i>
<i>PP</i>	<i>The Plato Papers</i>
<i>TB</i>	<i>Three Brothers</i>
<i>TSR</i>	<i>Thames: Sacred River</i>
WBSR	“William Blake, A Spiritual Radical”

Introduction: Power, Majesty, Darkness, Shadows

With cities, it is as with dreams: everything imaginable can be dreamed, but even the most unexpected dream is a rebus that conceals a desire or, its reverse, a fear. Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else.

Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

Peter Ackroyd is one of the most prolific contemporary British writers, having written more than sixty books, including collections of poetry, essays, novels, biographies, historical and literary non-fiction and books for children. He is also the author of several television documentaries and even of a libretto for an opera based on his favourite William Hogarth engravings. An exceptionally hard-working and diligent author for whom writing has grown from profession and avocation to passion and vital need, he maintains a rigid work discipline, the capacity for which he believes he owes to his energetic and indomitable grandmother, and boasts of never having missed a deadline: almost every day he takes a taxi from his Knightsbridge apartment to his office in Bloomsbury near the British Museum and Charles Dickens's house, an area he considers to be London's holy territory, where he spends eight hours working, mostly on three different books at once, usually a biography, a work of non-fiction and a novel, which he insists is necessary for his sanity since if he did only one thing at a time he would think he was wasting his time¹. His immense productivity, its intellectual, generic and imaginative variety, his erudition and the breadth of his field of interest make Ackroyd one of the most exceptional writers of his generation.

1 Cf. Emily Mann, "Tales of the city." *The Guardian*, 15 September 2007, "Retire? Only if my arms are chopped off first," an interview with Peter Ackroyd. *The Independent*, 12 July 2009, and Jody Rosen, "Peter Ackroyd's London Calling." *The New York Times*, 12 September 2013.

As is often the case with gifted individuals, Ackroyd's is a complicated personality and he has often been judged a controversial, eccentric or even grandiloquent figure. Facts about his life that he has stated in various interviews over time have contributed to the creation of this idiosyncratic persona: that he never met his father and was brought up as an only child by his single mother and maternal grandmother in a strict Roman Catholic household in a council house in working-class East Acton in west London; that he was a driven child whose intellectual tendencies were promoted by his mother and who wrote his first work, a play about Guy Fawkes, aged nine; that as a child he dreamed of being a Pope, a magician or a tap dancer; that he once saw a ghost; that he never wanted to be a novelist; that he never knows how his novels will end, relying on intuition and instinct rather than planning; that he does not read fiction, including that of his contemporaries, since he finds it too untidy; that he is gay, and his relationship with an American dancer, Brian Kuhn, lasted for more than twenty years until Kuhn contracted Aids in 1990 and died of it four years later; that nursing Kuhn was the only occasion which saw him leave London, for a cottage in the West Country; that he is happy and relieved to have led a single, celibate life for years as it allows him to concentrate on his work, which now matters more to him than love because it sustains him; that his workload nearly killed him in 2000, when, after he finished *London: The Biography*, he suffered a heart attack and spent a week in a coma; that he has always been a heavy drinker, dedicating the days to working and nights to drinking; that he leads a solitary life, hates to leave London and dislikes the countryside; that he is not a very outgoing person, he does not go to the theatre, concerts or the opera; that he does not read newspapers, is not interested in reviews, even though he once worked as a reviewer, does not like to discuss his finished books and hates literary festivals; that he is not interested in politics and has an aversion to commenting on the news, claiming that his opinions are of no consequence or value, and is therefore often criticised for his apolitical and aloof attitudes; that he is happiest in his study when reading, writing and doing research, aided by two assistants who fetch him the books and other materials he needs for his projects². These shards of information about Ackroyd's background and life not only reflect his character and explain his reputation for eccentricity, they also help to

2 A complete list of interviews with and articles about Peter Ackroyd where all these facts are mentioned can be found in the Bibliography.

contextualise the intense focus in his work on London, the metropolis in which he was born and in which he has spent his whole life, the city whose culture, history, mythos and spirit are the objects of his intense passion and almost obsessive devotion.

Despite its numerous and openly criticised drawbacks, the metropolis has been one of the most common and popular objects of imaginative representation, celebratory as well as condemnatory, literature being no exception. “[T]o the literary imagination all the great cities are sacred [...], whatever suffering and inequity transpire in them,”³ as in their multi-facetedness and contradictoriness they constitute a bottomless source of inspiration for artistic rendering. What urban literary works have in common is that “they reflect the discursive heteroglossia that resonates in the texture of each city, at the core of which lies an ultimate otherness on the personal, social, cultural and political levels that permeates and determines the modern city dwellers’ everyday experience.”⁴ Their role is more complex than simply providing their readers with amusement and aesthetic enjoyment, for they can prove helpful in making the city more accessible by translating its baffling elusiveness into linguistic, stylistic and narrative devices that readers find familiar and comprehensible. Any city as big and diverse as London is too vast, chaotic, volatile and incoherent for its inhabitants to ever understand and know it in its totality. That is why these inhabitants “never experience the space of the city unmediated,” but always through “symbolised and metaphorised” representational forms⁵, which produce images and patterns that enable them, to some extent at least, to make sense of the city’s innate convolutedness and heterogeneity. Novels and other literary texts may thus serve their readers as crucial psychic, spiritual and creative vehicles through which to approach and appropriate urban space, for they “in their way constitute the cities we live in as much as planners and builders and politicians and users do,” and so they “become frames through which the disorderly, ungraspable material city can be mentally and imaginatively perceived.”⁶ Ackroyd’s London novels do provide such a frame as they depict a distinctive and consistent chronotopic construct based on dramatisations of a set of their author’s beliefs and convictions concerning the nature of the capital.

3 Harold Bloom, “Cities of the Mind,” xi.

4 Petr Chalupský and Anna Grmelová, “Introduction: Urban Spaces in Literature,” 2.

5 James Donald, *Imagining the Modern City*, 17.

6 John Clement Ball, *Imagining London: Postcolonial Fiction and the Transnational Metropolis*, 19.

He claims that each writer should have “a very strong sense of belonging to a possession of a particular territory,”⁷ and his territory, which he transforms into an imaginative urban space in his novels, happens to be London. The fact that he is a Londoner who is well-acquainted with London’s history is the main reason why Ackroyd chose the city to be the setting, theme and even character in most of his novels, being the ultimate landscape of his, and most of his central protagonists’, imagination. He has always been a keen walker of the city streets even though, ironically perhaps, the outcome of these walks has been observation and gathering of experience and research material rather than epiphanic revelations or ideas for his work⁸. His relationship to London is not idealistic, idolising or purely aesthetic; he does not consider it a likeable, appealing or formally elegant city, but one built upon strictly pragmatic imperatives and as such often disrespecting or ignoring the wishes and needs of its citizens. For Ackroyd London is a heterogeneous city of contrasts and contradictions, a motley amalgam of joys and sorrows, a mighty apparatus generating, regulating and equalising positive and negative forces and energies, and he likes it precisely because of its variedness and as a unique historical phenomenon, always an independent, open, and infinite labyrinthine city (ML, 386–387). “Its power, its majesty, its darkness, its shadows,” answers Ackroyd when asked what fascinates him about the city⁹, stressing what he sees as its essential property: it defies an unequivocal, clearly delimited definition or appraisal, as its every dark side has its bright spot, every light its shadow. His London’s charm and power rest in its ability to confront and subsequently reconcile these opposing tendencies and phenomena within the city’s progressing continuum of human imagination, creativity and experience.

London’s heterogeneity is inevitably reflected in the diversity of literary devices – genres, styles and modes of expression – inspired or instigated by the city, which attempt to capture as many of its aspects and metamorphoses as possible. In the same vein, Ackroyd’s writing on and about London includes novels, biographies and non-fiction, mostly lectures, essays and historical books. Despite their formal differences, the relation between these works is complementary; their viewpoint and sub-

7 Anke Schütze, “I think after More I will do Turner and then I will probably do Shakespeare,” an Interview with Peter Ackroyd.

8 “I always used to think I’d be filled with ideas as I walked, but it just doesn’t happen” (Mann, “Tales of the city”).

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

ject matter often correspond and overlap, and Ackroyd considers them equal in terms of their communicative value as well as their capacity for capturing the spirit of the city, seeing them as “single chapters in the book which will only be completed at the time of [his] death.”¹⁰ So he describes what he means by the term “Cockney Visionaries” in his lectures, inquires into the lives of the most significant of them in his biographies, while some others appear as characters in his novels; or, he frequently speaks about London’s inherent inclination to violence and criminality in his non-fiction books, and various forms of crimes feature in all his novels set in the city, to mention just two examples. Although Ackroyd’s biographies also fall into the category of his London works, their in-depth analysis would reach beyond the scope of this volume. However, references are made to the lectures, particularly to “The Englishness of English Literature,” “London Luminaries and Cockney Visionaries,” “William Blake, A Spiritual Radical” and “All the Time in the World,” historical studies, especially *London: The Biography* and *Albion: The Origins of the English Imagination*, and to selected biographies and interviews. The central focus of this book is the portrayal of the city in his London novels, namely in *The Great Fire of London*, *Hawksmoor*, *Chatterton*, *The House of Doctor Dee*, *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*, *The Clerkenwell Tales*, *The Lambs of London*, *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein* and *Three Brothers*. His only novel set in the city but not discussed is *The Plato Papers*, a playful futuristic experiment which, unlike the above titles, does not elaborate much on Ackroyd’s particular London chronotope.

Central to this chronotope is Ackroyd’s concept of perpetual time, one in which the past and the present (and the future in consequence) are not only hard to distinguish, but in which the past can be found, in different forms, in or underneath the present reality. A related aspect of this space-time model is the intrinsic interconnectedness between certain territories of the city and the analogous events and actions that have tended to happen in them repeatedly in different historical periods. As most of these happenings are of obscure and/or violent nature, Ackroyd’s London novels revolve primarily around the city’s dark sides, its shadowy, subversive and vicious displays, its hidden, undercurrent lines of force, and the radical, desperate and defiant human acts that spring from them. This capital’s, especially its East End’s, marginality and liminality “makes it an ideal location for transgressions of all kinds of boundaries: legal (crime), natural (magic) and even temporal (the

10 An interview with Peter Ackroyd. *Bold Type*.

presence of the past).¹¹ It is an internal as well as external subterranean world, mostly concealed from public view and scrutiny, yet which exists within the “official” world, in individuals’ minds, in the privacy of their homes, pulsing beneath the silt of pretence, hypocrisy, play-acting and disguise. However, this cityscape is far from being a damned one, as good and evil exist there side by side, producing effects so diverse as terror, dismay, fascination and grace. It reflects Ackroyd’s conviction that, both physically and metaphorically, “[i]f the underworld can be understood as a place of fear and danger, it can also be regarded as a place of safety [...], a place of fantasy” (*LU*, 3–4), and the idea of its “secret passages, of mysterious entrances and exits, of retreat and concealment, possesses an incurable charm” (*LU*, 7). Therefore, his stories render and dramatise those properties of the city and its life, present and past, as they are considered as one, which have been commonly overlooked and dismissed by its academic histories and other official discourses.

For this purpose, Ackroyd often plays with historiographic accounts by deliberately altering verified facts, inventing characters, events and texts and mixing them up with real historical ones, as well as by making paranormal happenings crucially affect the plots. The result is a peculiar universe in which, within a historically plausible framework, certain things, which lack support in either history or a rational worldview or both, are shown as not only possible, but natural and even inevitable. His is a poetics of the dark and the mysterious, yet one which manages to portray the city’s obscurities as engaging or even enticing, not because it revels in violence or perversity, but through the use of a cleverly playful, inventive and subtly poetic language and imagery which impart to these Gothic elements a feel of ease and naturalness. Ackroyd began his career as a poet and assumes that when he turned from poetry to fiction “the same sensibility simply migrated into a different medium.”¹² He professes what he identifies as the English tradition of not separating history from literary creation and since, after all, the very first historians were poets he strives to return to these roots and “restore the poetry of history.”¹³ His novels can be taken as more imaginative and less restrained exercises in the method which he also employs in his more ambitious projects – the histories of London and England.

11 Aleksejs Taube, “London’s East End in Peter Ackroyd’s *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*,” 93.

12 Lidia Vianu, “The mind is the soul,” an interview with Peter Ackroyd, 5 October 2001.

13 Peter Ackroyd speaking about his six-volume series *The History of England* at the Royal Festival Hall, Part 1, 10 October 2011.

In order to understand the London of Ackroyd's novels it is necessary to be acquainted with the underlying postulates that shape his conception of the city as such. The first chapter introduces his fundamental ideas about London, its history and its position in and relationship with the English literary sensibility as he has presented them in his non-fiction. It also discusses his understanding of history, the historical novel and historical writing in general and compares them with some post-structuralist revisions of history and its textual representations, although he himself is rather sceptical of their legitimacy. Finally, it discusses the theoretical principles of his urban chronotope, which forms the basis of his London novels in terms of their setting, plot and character construction. Ackroyd's infinite, eternal, mystical and labyrinthine London defies any systematic categorisation or taxonomy, yet for the purposes of this study the most defining aspects of its novelistic projection have been identified – the uncanny, the felonious, the psychogeographic and antiquarian, the theatrical and the literary – which are individually examined in the five subsequent chapters. However, these aspects cannot be separated from one another as they are closely interconnected and as such they not only coexist but influence and determine one another. For instance, the uncanny often goes hand in hand with the psychogeographic, the felonious with the theatrical, but all of them, though in varying degrees, can be traced in each of the discussed novels. A specific, prominent role is played by the city's literary character, namely its intertextual, metafictional, palimpsestic and apocryphal manifestations, which accompanies all the other aspects, and this is why it is treated last, in the sixth chapter, since it in fact summarises, generalises and completes what has already been elaborated in the preceding four. Ackroyd believes that for every writer dealing with the past, hard, factual evidence should be only one side of the coin, one which must always be complemented and balanced by "spiritual truth" if he or she aspires to understand the nature of history¹⁴. As this spiritual view often prevails over the factual in Ackroyd's London novels they may not offer versions of the past that can boast historical precision or correctness, but they are ingenious, thought-provoking, evocative and, what he always stresses as paramount, enjoyable, and his fictional world is thus definitely worthy of close exploration.

14 Peter Ackroyd speaking at the Royal Festival Hall, Part 1.

Chapter 1

Ackroyd's London, Past and Present

The city, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightning rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls.

Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

London and the English Literary Sensibility

For Ackroyd London and English literature, or, more precisely, English literary sensibility, are two inseparable concepts which have affected and shaped each other from time immemorial. He explores and exemplifies them in detail in his two comprehensive studies, *London: The Biography* (2000) and *Albion: The Origins of the English Imagination* (2002), but his elemental ideas and theories can be found stated earlier, rather separately and therefore perhaps less coherently, yet all the more aptly and in a more articulate and outspoken manner, in his public lectures delivered during the 1990s, namely “The Englishness of English Literature” (1993), “London Luminaries and Cockney Visionaries” (1993), “William Blake, A Spiritual Radical” (1995) and “All the Time in the World” (1999). In these lectures Ackroyd clearly formulates what he believes defines and constitutes the intrinsic interconnectedness between the English and London’s spirit and creative sensibility. More perceptibly than in his books, he is explicit when touching on more personal or polemical issues, such as the role of Catholicism in the development of English literary sensibility, the importance of spiritual radicalism for the formation of London’s imaginative genius, his defining of himself by assuming a dismissive stance towards the notion of minority literature, or his criticism of the notion of postmodernism

or postmodernist narrative tendencies in English literature. Therefore, these four short texts not only provide the reader with a lucid idea of Ackroyd's (primarily literary) London, but also make him/her familiar with their author's inward convictions and strong beliefs, which formatively determine the very conception of his distinct urban chronotope.

Two related terms prove especially crucial for understanding Ackroyd's vision of the above mentioned concurrent phenomena, i.e. London within the English literary sensibility and the English literary sensibility within London, and these are "patterns of continuity" and "heterogeneity." Following T. S. Eliot's remark that "the more truly native – even parochial – a literature is, the more universal it can become" (qt. in EEL, 329), Ackroyd sees almost no point in trying to establish any canonic, enclosed, invariable and generally valid national literary tradition or hierarchy, arguing that "a literature must be imbued with a powerful local presence before it can aspire to any kind of unique status" (EEL, 329). On the one hand, this need for a powerful local presence makes every literary work deeply rooted in the larger – temporal, spatial, social, spiritual and intellectual – conditions of its origin, in other words, inseparably bound to a certain historical period and its values, beliefs and ideas, both prevailing and undercurrent. Yet, on the other hand, he stresses that something like a characteristic genius can be traced in English literature throughout its development in the form of certain "lines of force which eddy through the language" (EEL, 330–31), and which are naturally imprinted in literary works written in this language. This English genius or spirit thus comprises certain, often diverse, forces, energies, tendencies and stimuli which, with varying intensity and chronological recurrence, (re)emerge in and determine the language and literature of a particular time and place. These patterns of continuity, or patterns of resonance and resemblance as Ackroyd also calls them (EEL, 331, 339), have been at work and persisted in English linguistic and literary traditions for centuries, gradually composing an inheritance that is impossible to avoid if one wishes to become part of this living continuum of human imagination, experience and wisdom. Although rather intangible, elusive or even speculative from a strictly scholarly perspective, for Ackroyd they represent an essential firm point in English, and in consequence London, history, which more often than not appears to him as "one of accident, confusion, chance and unintended consequences."¹

1 Euan Ferguson, "I just want to tell a story," an interview with Peter Ackroyd. *The Observer*, 25 August, 2011.

Ackroyd thus, rather questionably and perhaps in part provocatively, strongly argues against two concepts popular in contemporary literary debates, which either defy or at least displace the idea of historical continuity – international writing and ahistorical categories of writing, such as African-American, gay or feminist writing (EEL, 329), precisely because these disregard any idiosyncrasies of national literary sensibility. At the same time, however, he warns against preserving the national literary tradition intact and inviolable by delineating and venerating a body of outstanding works from the past which, despite their exceptional qualities, have little if any relevance to what is written in the present. He claims that “[t]he Englishness of English literature is not some literary construct, some museum of the past, some enclosed hierarchical order” (EEL, 340), suggesting that such a sensibility is wholly devoid of elitism, exclusivity and impersonality, and that its continuous passage through time has created its own distinct recurrent patterns, flows and energies available for and close to anyone sensitive and sensible enough to let themselves be inspired or guided by this “line of force which is the very life and breath of the sentences we are writing now” (EEL, 340). It is a serious error to think we can learn about ourselves – our present-day culture, society, spirituality, creativity – only by reading modern literature which, in fact, can never be properly understood without examining the living inheritance of the historical tradition from which it stems. The great writers of the past, such as Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton or Blake, Ackroyd insists, may therefore prove more substantial for this process of learning and understanding than their most celebrated and widely read contemporary successors.

Hand in hand with the patterns of continuity in the development of English sensibility goes heterogeneity, the tendency towards employing and combining a diversity of literary devices, such as genres, styles, perspectives and moods, of an often conflicting nature. This heterogeneity, which manifests itself across time as each historical period shows interest in using or adapting the styles and discourses of the past, and which Nikolaus Pevsner called the “‘self-conscious choice of a mode of expression’, the formal or playful use of a historical style” (qt. in EEL, 333), Ackroyd believes “is an intrinsic feature of the English literary inheritance” (EEL, 334). As such, it can be found at the core of the most complex and, simultaneously, inventively playful works, such as Sidney’s *Arcadia*, Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* and Dickens’s novels in the form of pastiche, parody, genre mixture or multiple narrative. While asserting heterogeneity as a recognisable feature of the English literary tradition,

Ackroyd is critical towards contemporary literary studies and histories as they have not only seemed to mostly disregard this tendency, but have often included it under recent cultural phenomena such as postmodernism or deconstruction. To attach these modern and fashionable labels “to such a familiar and ancient tradition,” to “something which has always been close to the heart of the English genius” Ackroyd denotes an act of “cultural blindness or ignorance” (EEL, 333). And so he rejects the labelling of his books as postmodernist and prefers to see his approach as “belonging to a native London or English tradition that might, accidentally, have some things in common with postmodern culture.”² For instance, mixing the high with the low, one of the features typically attributed to postmodernist sensibility, has for long been present in English culture through “the characteristic gift among English artists for the caricature of low or common life” (EEL, 332). Ackroyd therefore calls for a re-evaluation and revision of traditionalist approaches to the construction and interpretation of the history of English literature, which would be based, among others, also on the notions of patterns of chronological resonance and heterogeneity.

One of the crucial features of English literary sensibility that has been largely overlooked by modern literary criticism is an almost obsessive concern with theatrical display and spectacle. According to Ackroyd, the reason behind this is that twentieth century literary criticism has been dominated by a secular, or “dispossessed or displaced Protestantism,” which means that “the themes and beliefs they explored in their reading of literature were largely taken from the values of a Protestant or Dissenting culture” (EEL, 334). The English liking for theatricality, variety and display, however, has its origins in the liturgy of the Catholic Church which makes use of and relishes collectively consumed linguistic ritual, spectacle and symbolism, as opposed to the more individualistic, solitary and unpretentious Protestantism. Ackroyd asserts that the tendency towards theatricality and all its heterogeneous manifestations, such as clownery, grotesque caricatures, pantomime humour and juxtaposition of varied moods and styles – serious and ludicrous, high and low – which is an intrinsic element of the English genius, can be traced back to medieval mystery and miracle plays, and, in consequence, to the Catholic Mass itself. It later infiltrated other literary genres and media of expression, most manifestly the novel, finding vent in the typically English combination of “pathos and comedy, tragedy and farce” (EEL, 335), the

2 Barry Lewis, *My Words Echo Thus: Possessing the Past in Peter Ackroyd*, 181.

“characteristic mixture of forms and styles, [...] in the unwillingness to maintain one mood for very long, in the manipulation of form for theatrical effect” (EEL, 338). English literary sensibility owes yet another of its defining aspects to Catholic tradition, which has been much neglected in the conventional histories of English literature, namely a respect for and drawing inspiration from the previous tradition. Unlike Protestantism, which stresses individual experience, conscience and relationship to God, Catholicism “tends to emphasize the significance of authority and historical tradition” (EEL, 336), which was also reflected in the idea of artistic originality as recreation, reinterpretation or readaptation of already existing works, stories and ideas that was followed until the end of the sixteenth century. And so the unique combination of heterogeneous incongruity with an awareness of being part of a continuous historical tradition has allowed the English sensibility to achieve “the symbolic re-enactment of certain visionary truths” (EEL, 337). Although Ackroyd admits that the Catholic inheritance cannot explain the English literary sensibility as a whole (as some of its aspects have emerged from the pre-Christian or Protestant traditions), he suggests that to ignore it may easily result in a reduced and simplistic, if not biased or tendentious, perspective.

The proposition of patterns of continuity running across and reemerging in different historical periods inevitably requires a reworking or redefinition of traditional chronology in favour of a less sequential and consecutively construed concept, and Ackroyd conceives it on the basis of a parallel between time and language, as the latter can be taken as a simulacrum of the first. Due to chronological resonance the past language and linguistic means of expression form a living inheritance, a line of force which still, at least latently, influences present-day writers: “all the previous structures of our language lie just beneath the one we are presently using, and if you reintroduce them you are able to open the readers’ eyes to other realities and to other times which in similar fashion lie just beneath the one we are currently part of” (ATW, 369). If the patterns of continuity operate in other than a linear and chronological manner, the time within which they operate must be approached accordingly – as labyrinthine, at times circular, at times spiral, at times haphazard, but, most importantly, as a mass or continuum in which the traditional categories of the past and the present are not always easy to distinguish. It is only within this continuum of time that the historical tradition can truly attain its timeless momentousness. Therefore, the relationship between the past and the present is more intricate and one

cannot be properly understood without the other. Ackroyd professes T. S. Eliot's idea that "[t]ime present and time past/ are both perhaps present in time future/ and time future contained in time past,"³ inspired by Henri Bergson's notion of time as a unique "continuous flux" containing "a succession of states, each of which announces that which follows and contains that which precedes it"; this succession can "only be said to form multiple states" which are impossible to determine "where any of them finishe[s] or where another commence[s]. In reality no one of them begins or ends, but all extend into each other,"⁴ resulting in "the perpetual present of the past."⁵ The role of a writer is then to "introduce" time past to time present and vice versa, and possibly to introduce them both to time future, which is what the greatest writers have managed to do – "by the strength of their language, containing within itself all the potential and power of the past, they are able to intimate that time itself is an illusion" (ATW, 371). Their works, Ackroyd believes, "have conquered chronology" (ATW, 371), which is the sole achievement to which he also aspires.

A familiarity with Ackroyd's idea of the English literary tradition is essential for understanding his perception of London as all the aspects of English literary sensibility mentioned so far are also the very cornerstones of Ackroyd's conception of the capital as a literary city of unrelenting imaginary vision. It is primarily London time which strongly defies chronological and sequential linearity as most, if not all, happenings in and of the city are based on recurrence, influences and force patterns that either circulate through history, or run across the individual layers of time while evincing some regularity, or in a largely disordered, labyrinthine manner. As a result, the past and the present in the city cannot be viewed as separate, distinct temporal entities, but rather as overlapping or even interlocked parts of one perpetual continuum:

We must not think of time as some continually flowing stream moving in one direction. Think of it more as a lava flow from some unknown source of fire. Some parts of it move forward, some parts of it branch off and form separate channels, some parts of it slow down and eventually harden. [...] It is as if the past and present were then locked in an embrace, like lovers. (LLCV, 343)

3 T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays*, 171.

4 Henri Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, 11.

5 Anke Schütze, "I think after More I will do Turner and then I will probably do Shakespeare," an Interview with Peter Ackroyd.

What can be detected in the history of London, not only in its literary or cultural history, but also in its social, political and spiritual history, are certain supratemporal or perpetual tendencies, “patterns of habitation, and patterns of inheritance, which seem to emerge from the very streets and alleys of the capital,” and which create the basis of its “sensitivity which has persisted for many centuries” (LLCV, 343). In terms of place and space, the local presence of London’s spirit manifests itself as the power of *genius loci*, the energy certain areas possess which makes particular events, acts or forms of human behaviour repeatedly occur on their territories.

The crucial defining aspect of London’s creative genius is heterogeneity – the richness and diversity of forms, styles, moods and means of expression, both past and present – whose seemingly paradoxical or incongruent combination corresponds with the very nature of the city “where the extremes of the human condition meet, where one emotion or mood is quickly succeeded by another, where comedy and tragedy are to be seen side by side. This is the true London sensibility” (LLCV, 348). It is therefore inevitable that Ackroyd uses the novel as the medium most suitable for capturing and expressing the city’s heterogeneity, contradictoriness and multiformity, as it is a genre which “quotes, parodies and transforms other genres, converting its literary ancestors into mere components of itself,” thus becoming “a mighty melting pot”⁶ whose potential to instigate something new or unexpected seems almost inexhaustible, and which best corresponds with the nature of London as he sees it – the pantomime-like tendency to combine “different strands of imaginative thought.”⁷ This heterogeneity, however, is not only a domain of the greatest works of the literary canon; on the contrary, its roots are to be found outside the official cultural and intellectual spheres, for instance in London’s esoteric and occult traditions or in the sketches and melodies of the music hall.

Ackroyd calls the most outstanding personalities in the history of London, the artists, scholars and thinkers who thought of the city “as their spiritual home,”⁸ “who saw elements of the sacred and the symbolic in their local circumstances,”⁹ and whose work both reflects and projects a living example of these characteristic features because they “have

6 Terry Eagleton, *The English Novel*, 1.

7 Schütze, “I think after More I will do Turner and then I will probably do Shakespeare.”

8 Schütze, “I think after More I will do Turner and then I will probably do Shakespeare.”

9 Lidia Vianu, “The mind is the soul,” an interview with Peter Ackroyd, 5 October 2001.

absorbed London culture and absorbed London's imagination,"¹⁰ "London Luminaries" or, more frequently, "Cockney Visionaries." His list of visionaries includes traditional names, such as Chaucer, More, Newton, Blake, Turner and Dickens, together with those whose position within London's imaginative and spiritual traditions is perhaps more disputable and less widely acknowledged, such as John Dee, Nicholas Hawksmoor, Thomas Chatterton, Dan Leno and Charlie Chaplin, as what connects all these often dissimilar personalities is that

[t]hey understood the energy of London, they understood its variety, and they also understood its darkness. But they are visionaries because they represented the symbolic dimension of existence in what Blake called 'Infinite London' – in this vast concourse of people they understood the pity and mystery of existence just as surely as they understood its noise and its bustle. (LLCV, 346–47)

The decisive criterion for obtaining this label is the person's boldness in compounding the city's contradictory aspects in forming their own creative vision; Ackroyd's visionaries successfully attempted to juxtapose and reconcile these aspects in their professional and personal lives. Their creative vision thus arises from their rejection of traditional categorisation and their capacity to transcend the clear-cut borderline between such opposites or extremes as the tragic and the farcical, the serious and the ludicrous, the serene and the spectacular, the dignified and the pathetic, the realistic and the grotesque, the sacred and the pagan, and make equal use of both polarities. Although for these individuals "visionary reality is much more real than the physical reality of life-in-time,"¹¹ such a vision by no means derives solely from unrestrained imagination, originality and defiance of conventions as it must be complemented with an awareness of historical tradition and one's position within it. Their greatness lies in their ability to embed their unique visions in this continuum of ideas and experience by drawing from, rather than ignoring or repudiating, the inheritance of the past. "There is an irrepressible energy and exuberance here which seems to me characteristic of great London artists, as if they always knew that they were part of something much larger than their own selves" (LLCV, 350), Ackroyd notes, believing this energy has been generated by the momentum of the patterns of resonance.

10 Daisy Banks, "Peter Ackroyd on London," *The Browser*.

11 Susana Onega, *Metafiction and myth in the novels of Peter Ackroyd*, 191.

A significant consequence follows from the fact that these visionaries have to face the task of depicting and rendering London's immense complexity – their work mostly lacks any deliberate and articulate moral stance or message. This is yet another reason why they have been largely overlooked by academic circles; it is also a tradition to which Ackroyd claims allegiance¹², as all he is trying to communicate to his readers is “a mood, an aspiration, a susceptibility to the past, but no message.”¹³ Because these Londoners need to incorporate and embrace in their vision as many of the city's opposites, contradictions and extremities as possible, there is not much space left to them for profound exploration and examination of the ethical side of their and their protagonists' values and beliefs, or the subtle and convoluted workings of the human psyche. Instead, they favour devices which tend to rather flatten their characters or impersonations, but which enable them to compose a panoramic yet dynamic image of London, such as caricature, spectacle and farce. “As city writers and artists they are more concerned with the external life, with the movement of crowds, with the great general drama of the human spirit. They have a sense of energy and splendour, of ritual and display, which may have very little to do with ethical judgement or the exercise of moral consciousness” (LLCV, 350). This does not mean that they would have absolutely no conscience or ethical sense, or that their work would be devoid of any moral anchorage; it is simply not their primary concern, and so if they are to comment on these issues they do so indirectly, using irony, satire, allegory, parable, allusion, or, for a more powerful effect, a combination of these. Ackroyd identifies himself with this tendency to evade psychological delving into characters' emotions, preferring rather to “explore them through the way in which they relate to their surroundings,”¹⁴ especially to those within London.

All the stylistic, narrative, generic and linguistic heterogeneity of English literature that shows itself through such distinct yet intrinsically related phenomena as grotesque caricatures, clowneries, the mixing up and experimental use of past styles, theatricality, spectacle, heteroglos-

12 “... that morality idea comes from the desire of the literary critic to find moral lessons in literature. [...] A deep fear of pleasure, of course, lies at the heart of the academic study of literature. Whereas all I want to do is give people a bit of pleasure, a bit of slap and tickle. It's true! You don't learn anything from a novel, your ethical response aren't sharpened, your moral relations with the world aren't purified.” Patrick McGrath, “Peter Ackroyd: Interview.”

13 “Each book is a different reason to exist,” Lidia Vianu's students' videoconference interview with Peter Ackroyd, 9 May 2006.

14 John Preston, “My work matters more to me than love,” an interview with Peter Ackroyd. *The Telegraph*, 20 August 2006.

sia and Gothic excess, and in which the English sensibility truly resides, appears rather minor, if at all recognisable, to many, and as such is rarely mentioned in scholarly critical studies. The reason for this is that the heterogeneous combination of and oscillation between opposites, or even extremes, has its roots, to a considerable extent, in the lower and popular rather than the official cultural forms, those mostly ignored and dismissed by the intellectual elites. Nowhere is this tendency more obvious, he claims, than in London and its cultural tradition, no matter how strongly the city which, “within its very texture and structure [...] incorporates a diversity of human moods and actions, events and responses” (LLCV, 349) calls for diversity and variety of cultural forms and means of artistic expression in order to capture all its possible manifestations and metamorphoses. Yet, the very artistic forms and means of expression most corresponding with the city’s multifaceted and polyphonic nature are precisely those which fall into the category of second-rate cultural and entertainment production, and so many manifestations of the true London creative sensibility have remained widely unacknowledged. Therefore, Ackroyd often concentrates on London’s nineteenth-century popular culture, as the origins of many forms of popular fiction can be found in the printing technology, literacy and distribution centred on London in this period¹⁵. “Even the fears and obsessions and imaginative world of the Victorians continued to play on the minds and imaginations of Londoners throughout the twentieth century,” and so “[a]ll the major genres of twentieth-century imaginative writing had at least some roots in Victorian London.”¹⁶ As a related example, Ackroyd uses the music hall tradition with its excessive theatricality based on folk humour, hyperbolic caricature, social satire, farcical scenes, impersonations and vocal imitations, spectacular cross-dressing and mock-dancing, improvisation, deliberate overacting, sudden switching between different moods and dramatic modes in or between acts and sketches, and frolicsome and skittish songs and ditties, which he believes so aptly catches the spirit of the city’s ordinary life. He considers Dan Leno, the famous monopolylinguist and most popular music hall comedian of the late nineteenth century, one of the most outstanding Cockney Visionaries, and insists that to get to know the city’s “real pathos and diversity, the scholar or critic should turn to the tunes of the London halls” as they are “charged with the real presence of place,” and so “only a very blinkered culture can afford to ignore them”

15 Lawrence Phillips, “Introduction.” In Lawrence Phillips (ed.), *The Swarming Streets: The Twentieth-Century Literary Representations of London*, 2.

16 Jerry White, *London in the Twentieth Century: A City and Its People*, 6.

(LLCV, 344, 345), and so every person sincerely in search of the essence of London's genius must avoid this mistaken narrow-mindedness.

There is one more feature that connects most of the Cockney Visionaries: because their visionary ideas were often misunderstood and unappreciated by their contemporaries, but largely also because they sought to understand their city through means other than those of the official cultural tradition, established reviewers and newspaper commentators criticised or even spurned them for their distance from reality, while, as Ackroyd notes, these critics simply disliked or found uncomfortable the essential heterogeneous qualities of London's vision, such as variety and energetic display (LLCV, 347). Therefore, there has been a unique, sometimes perhaps peculiar, yet always strong and significant, tradition in London reflecting those properties and tendencies of the city's life which resist taming, moralising and presentation by means prescribed by the official cultural establishment. This fundamentally London tradition

is that of the energetic, individualistic, unfashionable artists who, more often than not, turn out to be native Londoners. They may be right-wing reactionaries or apolitical anarchists, but they always reject the values of the standard intellectual culture and, as a result, they are discounted, or attacked, or marginalised. It happened to Turner, it happened to Blake, it happened to Dickens in the second half of his literary career – which of course is enough to say that these establishment attacks are not only foolish but ultimately unsuccessful. (LLCV, 347)

Ackroyd's keynote is that the real artistic and literary tradition of London, with all its underlying patterns of resonance and continuity, has been persistently, if not indeed systematically, dismissed and overlooked, as it often developed alongside, and sometimes literally in opposition to, the standard, centralised and generally promoted one. This quality makes it democratic rather than elitist, inclusive rather than exclusive, open to new impulses, experience, themes and ideas as long as they resonate with the city's spirit and character, but also, very importantly, as long as they respect and revere the spiritual legacy of the past. The roots and sources of London's sensibility are thus a particular blend of the secret and the sacred, the underground and the manifest, and the pagan and the religious, which infuses it with its characteristic heterogeneity and variety. The crucial thing is, Ackroyd stresses, that this is an active, living inheritance that still operates below the surface of the present-day sensibility, affecting the language, imagination and behaviour not only

of those who aspire to become truly London artists, but also all those who strive to understand what it means to be part of the city: “if we lose sight of our city – if we lose sight of our inheritance – then we lose sight of our own selves as well” (LLCV, 351).

As the continuous process of the shaping and employment of a London sensibility contains a strong element of radicalism, though spiritual and creative rather than political or social, Ackroyd considers William Blake the most emblematic representative of the visionary tradition. Blake’s ideas, both in life and art, were in most cases radical, alternately subversive, reactionary and revolutionary, but he differed from the organised, typical London radicals of his time as he distrusted and despised rationalism, materialism and belief in future progress based on a denial of the past tradition, which means the principles that stood at the heart of their conception of a better England. Although Blake’s visions looked into the future, it is difficult to label him as wholly modern and forward-looking because, apart from imagination and divine inspiration, he believed “in the paramount importance of historical and cultural inheritance” (WBSR, 357), as a result of which his radicalism “was an amalgam of various sources and ideas” (WBSR, 358), which, among the products of his resourceful genius, included such diverse sources of influence as literature, the Bible, folk and popular cultural forms, life experience, pagan and Christian cults and rituals, ancient wisdom, magic, occultism and sexual mysticism. Therefore, even in his radicalism, Blake was an individualistic solitary criticised, ignored or even mocked by most of his contemporaries, an artisan and artist whose work was ahead of its time as it surpassed its conventional thinking, but which was in large part derived from his historical and cultural inheritance and showed respect for the past and age-old values such as a belief in the spiritual and divine form, love and reverence. Rather than being a progressive, internationalist revolutionary agitator Blake is a split, seemingly internally inconsistent, personality, yet this ambivalence is at the same time the very constituent of the city’s sensibility: he is a bardic figure, deeply rooted in the tradition of his nation, yet, at the same time, a prophetic visionary whose ideas and art appeal to people regardless of their time and cultural background. This kind of spiritual radicalism or dissent, Ackroyd argues, embodies a timeless, distinctly London tradition, it is “an emanation of the city we live in now” (WBSR, 363), one of the ways “of finding alternative sources of power” (WBSR, 364), which may not be successful, activated or visible immediately, but which crucially determines the city’s genius in the long term.

Ackroyd, History and the Historical Novel

Although most of Ackroyd's works, at least in part, deal with the past it would be inaccurate to call him a purely historical writer. If nothing else, some of his novels, like *The Great Fire of London* (1982), *First Light* (1989), *English Music* (1992) and *Three Brothers* (2013), take place in the present or a very recent past and bear no features of a historical narrative whatsoever, nor is the rest of his fiction homogeneous in terms of its treatment of history. Leaving aside the conceit-novel *The Plato Papers* (1999), which mocks any period's preposterous attempts to restore the past as it really was, demonstrating that "[w]e are astounded by our ancestors and their misconception, but we may seem equally foolish to our successors" (PP, 126), Ackroyd's remaining novels can be loosely subdivided into two categories: those whose story is set wholly 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), *The Fall of Troy* (2006) and *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein* (2008), and can be understood as examples of the genre of the historical novel, with a special subcategory created by *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983), conceived as a quasi-document, a fictional diary allegedly written by Oscar Wilde and recounting the last months of his life; and those with multiple plotlines, one of which takes place in the present and the rest in the past, namely *Hawksmoor* (1985), *Chatterton* (1987) and *The House of Doctor Dee* (1993), which fall into the category only partially. What connects all these works, however, is the author's quest for the nature of the past, its representation in the form of mostly written history, the processes of obtaining our knowledge of what happened at times beyond our memory and life experience, and the intricate relationship between the past and the present. The past in his novels thus operates as a double agent – an object of inquiry and subsequent re-presentation as well as a crucial means of casting light on the present and on the human condition in general.

A London writer or chronicler is a more appropriate label for Ackroyd as novels that are both set in London and thematically deal with the metropolis represent a substantial part of his fiction and non-fiction. Therefore, it is prevalingly London's history, or, more precisely, the correlation between the past and the present within, but also beyond, the city that can be found at the heart of his London novels. This theme goes hand in hand with an exploration of how the history of and in the city is "made," how it works, how it gets recorded, preserved and passed on, but also how easily it gets distorted, obscured or completely lost. Ackroyd

does not consider himself a scholar, not even a historian, but a writer for whom “history is not an academic discipline” but “a living presence which is on some occasions palpable,” and whose task, in fiction and non-fiction alike, is to “dramatise and reinvent” this living presence for the audience¹⁷. It is precisely the often impalpable nature of the patterns behind the city’s life in time, “the invisible agencies and the unseen powers that are not detectable by conventional history,”¹⁸ that interest him far more than the concrete events and happenings which may be useful in terms of creating an attractive and gripping story, but which prove insufficient in terms of understanding the larger course of historical development. The result is a fictitious construct of alternative, or “heightened” as he prefers to call it, reality “in which the sacred forces of the world are as plain as any more familiar elements.”¹⁹

The greatest strength of his London works results from the combination of their author’s two crucial persuasions or premises. First, overtly or in a more subtle manner, they exceed the past by reaching into the present: they strive to demonstrate how the past is literally interwoven with, embedded in the present, that the past and the present are not separate, distinct periods but complexly interconnected moments of one continuum that transcends the prevalent historical concept of linear chronology. The present is thus shown as impossible to know or understand without a sensitive insight into the mechanisms and patterns of preceding events and developments. Second, they always strive to offer an unconventional, alternative or speculative re-presentation and interpretation of the past, to reveal the marginal, overlooked, unknown, disreputable histories that often problematise, contradict or disprove official records and versions. Such history is then subversive in both its form and content which, in effect, become inseparable and mutually determining. Although Ackroyd often speaks negatively and dismissively about his supposed involvement with recent theoretical and critical approaches, claiming that there is “no theoretical purpose behind [his] writing,”²⁰ his view of the past and history is not that far from their fundamental poststructuralist and postmodernist revisions.

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

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

19 Vianu, “The mind is the soul.”

20 Half-ironically, Ackroyd admits that the notion of postmodernism may apply to his writing because it is so vague and broad that “it must apply to all writers after a certain date,” but that it impinges neither upon his writing, nor upon his life. “Each book is a different reason to exist,” Lidia Vianu’s students’ videoconference interview with Peter Ackroyd.