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Mystic London

The Occult and the Esoteric in Peter Ackroyd's Work

This article focuses on how the occult and esoteric is employed and explored in selected works of Peter Ackroyd, both as a theme and as a determining factor of their narrative structure. It aims to discuss the basic constituents of the writer's mythology of London, namely a cyclic understanding of time, and a focus on the power of the genius loci and the city's outstanding visionaries. It also shows how the occult aspects of these works undermine the traditional narrative principles of the historical novel and by means of pluralisation and hybridisation attempt to invigorate the genre. In order to illustrate the ways in which Ackroyd incorporates elements of the occult and esoteric in his works five novels have been chosen, *Hawksmoor* (1985), *The House of Doctor Dee* (1993), *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994), *The Clerkenwell Tales* (2003) and *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein* (2008), along with the non-fiction *London: The Biography* (2000).

“Hearing voices, experiencing hauntings, slipping between reality and imagination, and dislocating in time and space, characters and their authors are in different ways projecting a new model of subjectivity,”¹ writes Marina Warner in her rare and in its field unique study of the diverse forms of the spiritual and their modern materialised manifestations, *Phantasmagoria* (2006). She further claims that “[i]n some unprecedented way, the various operating dynamics of magic stories – time shifts, ubiquity, hypnosis, possession, metamorphosis itself – now charge the currents of popular culture more densely than at any time since the first high wave of the Gothic in the late eighteenth century.”² Ours indeed is an age that is highly suspicious of the myth of the ultimate rational explicability of the world, and the esoteric has gained larger recognition by becoming a frequent subject of philosophy and art, as an active agent in finding answers to numerous questions concerning who we are and why. Artistic creation, above all, represents a natural vent through which the uncanny aspects of human existence can be expressed, and postmodernist literature abounds with works that attempt to institute “a metaphysical and poetic dimension

1. Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 378.

2. Warner, p. 379.

of reality, and help re-position us as we confront our selves and our identities.”³ The British literary scene of the past four decades has been no exception to this rule – writers like John Fowles, Angela Carter, Salman Rushdie, Jeanette Winterson and the already mentioned Marina Warner have been drawn by this tendency to challenge rationality as the absolute governing principle of human life by placing the spiritual alongside or above the material.

A specific example of a contemporary British writer who often explores the esoteric in his work is Peter Ackroyd. His novels exemplify a recent tendency of historical fiction that “has delved deeper into the cultural genealogies and ‘psycho-geographies’ that intimately connect our presents/presence with the past.”⁴ He focuses on the literariness of history, especially that of London, which is best captured in his seminal *London: The Biography* (2000). The idea that the history of the capital is inseparable from the texts produced by its inhabitants also forms the basis of all his London novels, in which the big historical events always take place off-stage, forming a mere background for the author’s “private mythology of London.”⁵ Ackroyd’s idiosyncrasy is his foregrounding of the city’s “unofficial” history, its enigmatic, obscure or otherwise irrational aspects and phenomena. His historiographic novels always revolve around some mystery through which the city’s underside manifests its lines of force and, therefore, the theme and discourse of the irrational plays a significant role in them: the combination of occultism and serial murders; mysticism, communication with spirits and alchemical experiments; mysterious identities related to the motif of forgery; or the myth of the homunculus, the everlasting, artificial, human-like creature combined with the theme of the doppelganger.

In order to illustrate how Ackroyd integrates the theme and discourse of the esoteric into his works, this article will predominantly address his most ambitious project so far, *London: The Biography* (2000), together with his most occult and mystical novels, *Hawksmoor* (1985), *The House of Doctor Dee* (1993) and *The Clerkenwell Tales* (2003). In order to demonstrate how Ackroyd’s works constitute a compact thematic and discursive intertextual network, references will also be made to the role of the occult in *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994) and his latest novel, *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein* (2008). All these works reflect their author’s insistence that the irrational has always been deeply embedded in the city’s texture and thus has inevitably affected the course of its development, its inhabitants’ acts and their desire to transform those acts into autonomous narratives.

3. Warner, p. 379.

4. Nick Bentley, ed., *British Fiction of the 1990s* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 13.

5. Barry Lewis, *My Words Echo Thus: Possessing the Past in Peter Ackroyd* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007), p. 75.

As this is a recurrent process, during which new stories appear while past events are reshaped from fresh perspectives or in the light of newly discovered facts, these phenomena become immortalised in London's palimpsestic mythology.

Ackroyd's London is founded on the perpetual encountering of the rational and irrational principles, to neither of which is attributed any truth value. All his books exemplify his conviction that in order to approach and comprehend the city, it is necessary to reconcile them in a, seemingly paradoxical, symbiosis, and thus adopt a "parodic or irreverently playful attitude to history over an ostensibly normative mimesis."⁶ Apart from demonstrating the ways in which Ackroyd explores esotericism and mysticism in his works, this article will attempt to illustrate how the author incorporates the theme and discourse of the uncanny into his narrative technique in order not only to make it more elaborate, but also to challenge the readers' most taken-for-granted assumptions about the world by offering alternative modes for its interpretation. The article will also argue that Ackroyd's employment of the esoteric makes his novels more attractive to read and, by hybridising and pluralising them, revivifies the genre of the (post)modern historical novel.

Wandering and Wondering in Eternity: Mythical Time

The elaborate combination of his deep historical and literary erudition and impressive imagination allows Ackroyd to explore a great variety of the city's faces, among which the arcane and the obscure are the most prominent. Ackroyd's mythological London is based on three interconnected fundamental principles that define the city's very essence: the first is a circular, or mythical, conception of time that denies chronological linearity and "rather works forwards and backwards at the same time,"⁷ resulting in a mystical timelessness in which the past and the present are no longer distinguishable; the second is an emphasis on the influence of the genius loci, the inexorable energy of certain areas that have retained a power that determines the recurrent pattern of events happening in them; the third is the significance of various individuals who are ahead or out of their time, or "London visionaries" as Ackroyd prefers to term them, who, in different historical periods, inhabit the city and affect its life through a genius and foresight that enable them to embrace the mystical and occult forces embedded in the city's texture.

In the preface to his *London: The Biography*, Ackroyd plainly puts forward his theory of the circularity of mythical time that best captures the city's development, though, as he himself admits, the whole sense of time in London is complicated as it

6. Suzanne Keen, "The Historical Turn in British Fiction," in *Contemporary British Fiction*, ed. James F. English (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), p. 171.

7. Susana Onega, *Peter Ackroyd* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1998), p. 45.

primarily reflects the workings of the imagination.⁸ For him, the city “defies chronology,” which is the reason why “this book moves quixotically through time, itself forming a labyrinth.”⁹ From this perspective, London history is not a seamless, sequential account but a “search of those heights and depths of urban experience that know no history and are rarely susceptible to rational analysis.”¹⁰ In order to approach, and possibly in part comprehend, the city in its organic wholeness, Ackroyd invites his readers to make a picaresque journey through time, in the course of which they “must wander and wonder ... they may experience moments of uncertainty, and on occasions strange fantasies or theories may bewilder them,” but the patient and the sensitive will also experience “moments of revelations, when the city will be seen to harbour the secrets of the human world.”¹¹ Instead of following history year by year, Ackroyd probes various iterative, periodic patterns of events, acts and sensibilities across time that are related to one another thematically rather than causally, and that have been repeatedly incited by operations evading rational grasp. Thus, the traditional linear understanding of time, though not rejected altogether, proves ultimately insufficient in capturing the complexity of the city’s past. While in *London: The Biography* the secrets of the human world emerge within the network of the book’s larger historical and cultural theoretical framework, Ackroyd’s novels provide concrete quasi-historical renderings by foregrounding the mystical in order to, ironically, cast light on the “factual” background.

Hawksmoor probes this mythical conception of time and the reader of the novel soon understands that occultism and black magic play a crucial role in the story as Nicholas Dyer confesses that he is a secret Satanist and adherent of an occult science. He is obsessed with the idea that his soul is condemned to reincarnate from one body to another until in one of them it manages to accomplish a work, the greatness of which would be comparable to the act of God’s creation of the universe, and that acquiring power over earthly matters automatically ensures the ability to affect the acts of God. Therefore, he arranges his churches in a pattern corresponding to the position of key stars in the sky, the result of which should be a power-concentrating, magical structure through which he hopes “to submit to his will the seven planetary daemons who control them and prevent his transcendental ascesis,” with the aim of “establishing a current of sympathetic magic between heaven and earth that would function as a

8. See “Interview between Peter Ackroyd and Julian Wolfreys” (21 December 1997) in Jeremy Gibson and Julian Wolfreys, *Peter Ackroyd: The Ludic and Labyrinthine Text* (London: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 249–63.

9. Peter Ackroyd, *London: The Biography* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), p. 2.

10. Ackroyd, *London*, p. 2.

11. Ackroyd, *London*, p. 3.

magical ladder to heaven”¹² which his soul could safely climb to an eternal harmony of the Self. Dyer believes human sacrifices at the sites of the individual churches are also necessary and he provides these himself by killing several innocent people.

All these murders, as well as almost any other event in the narrative, are echoed in the same places two and a half centuries later, when once again, children and vagrants fall victim to a serial killer. As detective Nicholas Hawksmoor follows the traces and reads Dyer’s secret diary, he begins to understand the significance of the occult scheme of the “loci delicti” and focuses his attention on finding the mysterious vagrant who calls himself the Architect. As the novel progresses to its end and the time and space that separate Dyer and Hawksmoor collapse, the magical and the mysterious prevail over the rational and the coherent. This culminates in the Architect, Dyer, and Hawksmoor rushing through the streets of the city towards the place of their spiritual union, where they are reborn as one being, a child “begging on the threshold of eternity.”¹³ Although the plot revolves around Hawksmoor’s investigation into a series of murders committed in the vicinities of the churches built by Dyer in modern London of the early 1980s, the final twist demonstrates that the novel’s key theme is to explore the mystical and occult patterns of the city: in the only invented church in the story, Little St Hugh, Dyer’s and Hawksmoor’s voices merge into a single mystical voice belonging to neither of them but to some super-temporal reincarnation inhabiting the city’s mythical timelessness. As a result, the orthodox conception of history disintegrates, “the past and the present begin to become unnervingly similar and our notion of the present as a secure and, by implication, superior perspective is undermined.”¹⁴

A similar parallelism can be found in *The House of Doctor Dee*, Ackroyd’s most overtly spiritualist novel. When Matthew Palmer inherits an old house in Clerkenwell that once belonged to the eponymous Elizabethan mathematician and astrologer who secretly engaged in alchemy and occultism, he immediately gets drawn into its eerie history. He gradually learns that the house stands as if outside time as it repeatedly echoes certain behaviour patterns, ideas or utterances from the past. Haunted by the spirits and voices of the house, Matthew is compelled to experience life situations analogous to those of John Dee four centuries before. As in *Hawksmoor*, Ackroyd draws several parallels between the two main protagonists, of which the most notable is their understanding of time as an eternal process comprising cyclically recurrent events, which in effect become coincident or simultane-

12. Onega, p. 46.

13. Peter Ackroyd, *Hawksmoor* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), p. 217.

14. Richard Bradford, *The Novel Now: Contemporary British Fiction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), p. 83.

ous in some mystical, timeless fifth dimension. When carrying out his research, Matthew feels he has “become part of the continuing historical process, as mysterious and unapproachable as any other period,” viewing “the past as [his] present, so in turn the present moment became part of the past.”¹⁵ John Dee, likewise, sees himself involved in greater patterns of history – assuming that “the past is restored around us all the time, in the bodies we inhabit or the words we speak,” he believes that “there are certain scenes or situations which, once glimpsed, seem to continue for eternity” and that a really strong personality endowed with profound mental energy can incarnate into “the true spiritual body”¹⁶ that stretches over all times.

Ackroyd’s persuasion that John Dee was such an exceptional individual permeates almost every page of the novel and his spirit affects the lives of all the characters that find themselves under the spell of the house. In the final chapter, symptomatically entitled *The Vision*, the two voices of Dee and Matthew coalesce in the universal mythical voice of the city, only to be subsequently accompanied by the narrative voice of Ackroyd himself. Once again, what has long seemed to be an imaginative ghost story turns out to be another confirmation of the author’s mythical conception of a London in which the past, the present and the future coexist, intertwined through the eternal power of the human imagination. To bridge the past in a manner that would reflect and celebrate this essential property of the city is what Ackroyd strives to accomplish in his fiction. And so the novel ends with its author’s assumption of the prophetic voice of the city, which invites readers to wander/wonder with him: “Come closer, come towards me so that we may become one. Then will London be redeemed, now and for ever, and all those with whom we dwell – living or dead – will become the mystical city universal.”¹⁷

Where Suffering Seems to Linger: Genius Loci

Another essential of Ackroyd’s London is the existence of areas within the city that are subject to peculiar temporal and special conditions as a result of which their genius loci has crucial influence on both the events happening in them and their inhabitants’ lives, making the city “a place of echoes and shadows.”¹⁸ It is as if these areas were spellbound by some half-forgotten, atavistic forces, the power of which, according to Ackroyd, should never be underestimated. In *London: The Biography*, Ackroyd describes numerous such areas, many of them associated with the esoteric and mystical, such as Bloomsbury, which for centuries has been a place of congregation for contro-

15. Peter Ackroyd, *The House of Doctor Dee* (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 13.

16. Ackroyd, *The House*, pp. 26, 39, 68.

17. Ackroyd, *The House*, p. 277.

18. Ackroyd, *London*, p. 655.

versial occult orders and secret sects, because of what Ackroyd denotes as “a congregation of aligned forces, by coincidence or design”¹⁹ still remaining at work up to the present day. This theory forms the basis of all his London novels and is also what best demonstrates the complementariness of his fiction and non-fiction works.²⁰

As Ackroyd always concentrates on the obscure side of the city, the settings of his novels are places that “emanate misery” and where “suffering seems to linger.”²¹ In the plot of *Hawksmoor* the disastrous consequences of the operation of these sinister forces are followed over two and a half centuries. Ackroyd mentions two of Nicholas Hawksmoor’s churches, St. George’s-in-the-East and Christ Church, in *London: The Biography*, because they have always attracted the city’s vagrants and other outcasts. The fictitious architect, Nicholas Dyer, is well aware of this when he offers his commentary on one of the miserable parishes in which his new church should be erected.²² Similarly, the fact that it is not the first time that murders have been committed on the sites of the churches does not surprise Hawksmoor since he has already grown “to understand that most criminals tend to remain in the same districts, continuing with their activities until they were arrested, and he sometimes speculated that these same areas had been used with similar intent for centuries past” because “certain streets or patches of ground provoked a malevolence which generally seemed to be quite without motive.”²³ The mystical parallelism of the murders, which includes identical physical locations as well as similar types of victims, together with the significance of the occult diagram formed by the sites of the murders, gradually force Hawksmoor to abandon the purely rational deduction he has been so proud of and assume an intuitive approach that allows him to disclose the larger patterns behind the homicidal acts and to identify the true “culprit.”

A similar pattern is seen in *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* with the replication of the Ratcliffe Highway murders. Once again, Ackroyd’s insistence on the power of the genius loci and his rejection of a chronologically linear understanding of time operate concordantly. It is the spirit of “the same power-concentrating places”²⁴ that magnetises certain people and events rather than any rationally explicable causes. The Limehouse of the novel is a poverty-stricken, shadowy area and its negative energy recurrently materialises in various violent acts, culminating in a series of ritual murders in and around the Ratcliffe Highway. This area, as Dyer notes in

19. Ackroyd, *London*, p. 463.

20. The recurrent parts of London in Ackroyd’s (and other London writers’) works are explored in Ian Cunningham’s *A Reader’s Guide to Writers’ London* (London: Prion, 2001).

21. Ackroyd, *London*, pp. 498, 496.

22. Ackroyd, *Hawksmoor*, p. 94.

23. Ackroyd, *Hawksmoor*, pp. 115–16.

24. Onega, p. 68.

Hawksmoor, was already notorious for barbarous killings in the early eighteenth century,²⁵ but it became infamous because of the slaughter of the Marr family in 1811. In *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* the dark spirit of the area comes to life in 1880 when several representatives of the margins of Victorian London society become victims of a homicidal force, the mysterious invisibility of which causes the newspapers to label it the Limehouse Golem. Yet there is one more place that has a crucial, and mainly beneficial, impact upon most of the characters' lives – the Reading Room of the British Museum – where the fates of its frequenters, real and fictional, encounter one another, be it physically or otherwise. Ackroyd presents the Reading Room as a milieu disposing of some almost occult power, which, for example, manages to befriend such different persons as the materialist atheist Marx and the cabbalistic spiritualist Weil. It is therefore not surprising that the mystery of the Limehouse Golem draws many people there who believe it is “the spiritual centre of London where many secrets might finally be revealed.”²⁶ The Reading Room thus becomes an emblem of the mutual inseparability of intellect and spirituality, a true source of the city's geist.

In *The House of Doctor Dee*, Matthew Palmer comes to understand the significance of genius loci when he moves in to the ancient house and starts to investigate its history, a process during which he discovers certain mysterious “subterranean layers” of London that still assert themselves through various eerie manifestations upon the city's “official” face. Consequently, he becomes aware of his being part of the house/city's eternal spiritual body:

The sense of peace, even in the middle of the city, was so strong that I presume it came from some powerful event in the past. . . . There was a sense of continuing power, of living force here. It was beyond death; it was the condition of the world. . . . It occurred to me then that this was really a city under the ground. It was the eternal city for those who are trapped in time. I was still kneeling beside the memorial in Red Lion Square, but now I seemed to be entering the stone wall of the basement in Cloak Lane. I was becoming part of the old house.²⁷

Ackroyd thus exploits the motif of the fictitious house once inhabited by the famous Renaissance scholar and mystic as a metaphor for the occult side of London, perpetuated and deeply embedded in the city's texture as well as in its dwellers' lives.

The area of Ackroyd's specific interest is Clerkenwell, a peculiar place which from the medieval period “became known, and identified, through its sacred and spiritual

25. Ackroyd, *Hawksmoor*, p. 93.

26. Peter Ackroyd, *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 269.

27. Ackroyd, *Hawksmoor*, pp. 43–44.

affiliations.”²⁸ Because of this it has witnessed diverse, incessant, often concurring, forms of occult and radical activities, and thus attracted an incredible variety of eccentric and visionary individuals, from the outcast and insane to writers and philosophers. Clerkenwell’s irresistible genius loci explains why Ackroyd decided to locate the house once supposedly belonging to John Dee there, though he in fact lived in Mortlake. The house still contains the concentrated power of its past events and inhabitants so that, as Susana Onega suggests, it functions as “a huge transdimensional door”²⁹ in which the black, white, green and red doors stand for the alchemic colours of the *quaternarvis*, that is, for the four constitutive elements of earth, air, water and fire, and its three storeys – underground, at ground level and above ground – may replicate the cosmic levels of *ternarvis*, as well as their human equivalents, body, soul and spirit. With his exceptional eye for detail, in *The Clerkenwell Tales* Ackroyd brings to life medieval Clerkenwell in the unsettled year of 1399 with all its idiosyncrasies: tremendous energy, religious extremism, political radicalism and enigmatic events. Through a network of interrelated metafictional historiographic sketches rather than a continuous narrative, the reader is exposed to the operations of multiple undercurrent forces of the city – occult sectarians, heretics, secret plotters and spies alongside aberrant clerics and lunatics. Against the historical background of the time, the reader follows a clandestine fellowship of respected city officials who seem to be conspiring with an apocalyptic heretical sect, the predestined men, as both the groups, though for different reasons, are eager to get rid of the king. All this is foreseen by Sister Clarice and the story gradually unfolds another mystery – that of the relationship between the mad nun and the city authorities. As Ackroyd believes that the genius loci never ceases to operate in such an area, in the concluding paragraphs of the chapter “London’s Radicals” in *London: The Biography* he poses the prophetic rhetorical question of whether it was wise of property developers and speculators to choose this “shadowland” for their modernising designs.³⁰

Variety, Energy and Darkness: London Visionaries

Ackroyd’s mystical “city of vision and prophecy”³¹ is populated by numerous personalities, both factual and fictitious, who find themselves “living outside London time”³² and who, as a result, stand apart from their contemporaries. These “London visionaries” thus occupy the greater cyclical processes of history as they are endowed with a

28. Ackroyd, *London*, p. 457.

29. Onega, p. 59.

30. Ackroyd, *London*, p. 469.

31. Ackroyd, *London*, p. 752.

32. Ackroyd, *London*, p. 465.

certain unearthly capacity that enables them to glimpse, or at least anticipate, eternity. Ackroyd's visionaries can be classified into three categories: the first group is represented by outstanding London artists, mostly writers, who "were preoccupied with light and darkness, in a city that is built in the shadows of money and power" and "understood the energy of London . . . its variety."³³ Ackroyd has already written separate biographies of most of them, namely *T.S. Eliot: A Life* (1984), *Dickens* (1990), *Blake* (1996), *Chaucer* (2005), and *Turner* (2006).³⁴ The second group are visionary scientists and philosophers, the subjects of Ackroyd's works *The Life of Thomas More* (1998) and *Newton* (2007); and the third are diverse, often peculiar and eccentric, individuals, "the dreamers and the antiquarians,"³⁵ whose acts and thoughts elude purely rational explanation. London's eternity ensures that it contains them all simultaneously, making them into a single yet polyphonic voice of the city where "the dead seem to be pursuing at the heels of the living."³⁶

Representatives of all three groups of visionaries are scattered throughout Ackroyd's work, from dubious sorcerers, conjurers and prophets to writers and thinkers. What connects these sometimes very distinct personalities is their potential to devote themselves to challenging visions that somehow transcend the historical time in which they emerge. In his Postscript to *Dickens*, Ackroyd notes that the writer's exceptionality consists in his life-long "struggle to maintain a vision of the coherence of the world" resulting in "his energetic pursuit of some complete vision of the world" motivated by "so great a concern for the central human progress of the world, yet such a longing for transcendence also."³⁷ This applies to all Ackroyd's visionaries: they possess the capacity to see and foresee their occupation as part of a supra-temporal continuum across individual time layers. Their conation, on the one hand, caters for and is fueled by the rationalist idea of limitless progress and development but, on the other hand, always contains some transcendental, spiritual momentum essential to elevate it to perpetuity. Two related yet dissimilar examples of such individuals can be found in the protagonists of *The House of Doctor Dee* and *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein*.

Ackroyd's Dee and Frankenstein share an insatiable hunger for knowledge. They are both Faustian characters eager to learn ceaselessly in order to disclose all the secrets and mysteries of the world, even at the cost of their own happiness as

33. Ackroyd, *London*, p. 754.

34. A more detailed treatment of this theme can also be found in the chapter entitled "Cockney Visionaries: London Calling" of Ackroyd's *Albion: The Origins of the English Imagination* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2002), pp. 319–30.

35. Ackroyd, *London*, p. 757.

36. Ackroyd, *London*, p. 756.

37. Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens* (London: Vintage, 2002), pp. 576, 577.

such pursuits can easily be turned into an all-absorbing obsession. Dr. Dee is an embodiment of what Ackroyd defines as a visionary because of his ability to combine rational principles with a belief in the power of the esoteric, which he perceives to be essential if complex knowledge and understanding are to be achieved, one who “belonged to every time.”³⁸ Only a scholar who perceives scientific research and experimentation within a larger scope composed of various alternative, non-rational perspectives can enter the vast, timeless tradition that sees “no necessary disparity between the various forms of occult and experimental understanding.”³⁹ Ackroyd repeatedly points out that the “pursuit of knowledge has always been one of the city’s defining characteristics, even though it may take unfamiliar forms” and that “in London it is impossible to distinguish magic from other versions of intellectual and mechanical aptitude.”⁴⁰ Therefore, Ackroyd’s Renaissance thinker is not only a respectable mathematician, astronomer, engineer and geographer, but also a person who believes that he can speak with spirits and angels through a magic crystal, that he can discover the original, ancient city of London preserved intact deep below the existing one, or that he can create the homunculus, the everlasting creature that would serve as both divine illumination and guardian spirit to those whose efforts deserve it. “He believed the world to be imbued with spiritual properties ... Each material thing is the visible home of a universal power, or congregation of powers, and it was the task of the enlightened philosopher and alchemist to see these true constituents.”⁴¹ This, however, is an immensely complicated quest that might lead a zealous devotee like Dee astray, leaving him “infatuated with the poetry of power and darkness.”⁴²

Symptomatically, what almost ruins Dee restores him back to life eventually – the belief in otherworldly powers makes him rediscover the humanistic belief in the paramount importance of getting to know oneself. It is his willingness to engage in activities reaching beyond physical existence that allows Dee, and his modern double Palmer, to realise that in order to understand the mystery of the universe it is first necessary to come to terms with private fears and secrets buried deep inside oneself, that “God is within man ... and he who understands himself understands the universe.”⁴³ However, Ackroyd goes further than that in his toying with the reader – having explained the mystical lore of the creation of the homunculus he implies that Matthew might be the latest avatar of this perpetually recurrent, super-

38. Ackroyd, *The House*, p. 132.

39. Ackroyd, *London*, pp. 502–3.

40. Ackroyd, *London*, p. 501.

41. Ackroyd, *The House*, p. 133.

42. Ackroyd, *The House*, p. 133.

43. Ackroyd, *The House*, p. 133.

temporal being. The novel's central conceit of the modern characters, including the narrator/writer himself, as reincarnations of the Renaissance occult practitioners or even of their occult creations adds up to the specific dynamism of both its mystical subject matter and the corresponding symbolism and parallel narrative structure.

At the beginning of *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein*, the central character, with his urgent yearning for ultimate knowledge, appears to be Dee's mythical disciple. An experienced Ackroyd reader is not in the least surprised that the semi-derelict, deserted pottery factory which Frankenstein transforms into a secret laboratory for his ill-fated project, is located in Limehouse. Moreover, in London he finds himself in an intellectually and spiritually inspiring atmosphere of Romantic turmoil as his company consists of notable champions of radical political ideas and outstanding thinkers and poets such as the Shelleys, Byron, Coleridge and Godwin. However, what distinguishes Frankenstein from Dee is his reluctance to acknowledge that other than scientifically rational processes might be at work in his experiments, as he dismisses Shelley's claim that "the great poets of the past were philosophers or alchemists. Or magicians. They cast off the vesture of the body, and in their pursuits, became pure spirit."⁴⁴ Having rejected the spiritual principle, Frankenstein falls prey not to the monster created in his laboratory but to the monsters in his unconscious: on his nighttime ramblings between Smithfield and Limehouse he becomes haunted by nightmarish shadows and fearsome murders and the reader gradually understands that "the dark agent of desolation"⁴⁵ he pursues is not in fact a dead man restored to life but "[his] double, [his] shadow, without which [he] would not exist."⁴⁶ Only after his disputes with Byron's personal doctor, John Polidori, whom Ackroyd, for the sake of the plot, transforms into a Jewish cabbalist believing in the ancient legend of the Golem, does Frankenstein admit the significance of the spiritual aspects of human existence. Although the novel starts as a variation on Mary Shelley's celebrated novel, it turns out to be an absorbing psychological thriller exploring the Jekyll-and-Hyde theme of doubles, doppelgangers and split personality. Frankenstein's progressive madness can be understood as an effect of the strenuous suppression of his irrational self, which dooms him to end up as a tragically deluded idealist rather than a mystical visionary.

44. Peter Ackroyd, *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein* (London: Vintage, 2009), p. 9.

45. Ackroyd, *The Casebook*, p. 253.

46. Ackroyd, *The Casebook*, p. 259.

Making the Dead Speak: The Divine Magic of the Imagination

In their speculative reinventions of history Ackroyd's novels exemplify what Linda Hutcheon describes as "historiographic metafiction,"⁴⁷ what Marguerite Alexander includes in the category of the "writerly novels,"⁴⁸ and what Jeremy Gibson and Julian Wolfreys term "ludicrous texts," achieving "their effect through a deliberate display and deployment of artifice, role-playing, pantomimickry, palimpsest, parody, pastiche, intertextual referentiality."⁴⁹ The playfulness of Ackroyd's novels consists not only in their author's altering of received historical facts and data in favour of his "could-have-been" renderings, but also in his purposeful employment of the uncanny and irrational elements within the novels' narrative framework. On the one hand, Ackroyd is a postmodernist writer, though he himself rejects such labelling, seeing himself as "belonging to a native London or English tradition ... that has existed for such a long time and is part of a very different sensibility."⁵⁰ Yet, on the other hand, his imaginative and erudite narratives avoid the trap of becoming self-consciously about themselves as they always explore certain aspects of the world they mediate. The central one of these aspects is the proposing of an alternative conception of reality based on an emphasis on an esoteric and mystical interpretation of events. Such an approach to writing might be considered disruptive and subversive, "but it is difficult to be subversive in a society that refuses to listen"⁵¹ – and the number of devoted Ackroyd readers proves that the perspective he offers is hardly one to be dismissed as irrelevant.

The esoteric concern also determines the formal structuring of Ackroyd's narratives by making it more elaborate and thus open to interpretation. This is especially apparent in *Hawksmoor* and *The House of Doctor Dee*, which are built around an archetypal mythical conception: both Dyer and Dee believe in a cosmological vision that could remove them from the world of matter to a transcendental level and thus ensure their transmutation from the mortal physical body into the eternal spiritual one. The mythical pattern manifests itself in an all-pervading duality and complementarity of characters, names, events, and utterances that perpetually reduplicate in the circularity of time. In addition, the duality is reflected by the structural organisation of the novels in which chapters depicting the contemporary world alternate with those

47. See the chapter entitled "Historiographic metafiction: 'The pastime of past time'" of Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 105–23.

48. Marguerite Alexander, *Flights from Realism: Themes and Strategies in Postmodernist British and American Fiction* (London: Edward Arnold, 1990), p. 167.

49. Gibson and Wolfreys, p. 2.

50. Lewis, p. 181.

51. Alexander, p. 202.

taking place in the early eighteenth and late sixteenth centuries respectively, while in the final chapter the protagonists and their narrative voices, together with that of the author, leak into one another in an unearthly reincarnation inhabiting the realm of the city's mythology. As both the novels feature mystical patterns, for attentive readers their structure also invites occult symbolic interpretation. Onega, for instance, shows how the chapter division of *The House of Doctor Dee* corresponds to the arrangement of the four elements in the hieroglyphic monad,⁵² an esoteric symbol invented by John Dee to signify the unity of the universe. However, no matter how alluring these interpretations are, Ackroyd is far from forcing them on the reader – they are simply inherent in his novels for those who wish to discover them.

Ackroyd's use of the esoteric and occult is not motivated by his desire to shock readers or to reject rationality altogether, but primarily to variegate his narratives and the historical novel in general. The theme and the discourses it produces challenge most readers' assumptions about the world and, in effect, help to both pluralise and hybridise the genre. The spiritual and the rational are always depicted as inseparable and complementary, as two sides of one coin whose simultaneous interference proves necessary in order to approach the basic questions concerning human identity. As Barry Lewis claims, Ackroyd's obsession with occult matters is rather a plot device subsidiary to the author's true concerns – resurrections of the past through "the necromancy of words and language."⁵³ What all his protagonists have in common, whether his beloved London or its visionaries, is the immense power of their imagination, "the divine spark leaping across chaos."⁵⁴ It is the imagination in its endless poetic, scientific and philosophical varieties, the unceasing creative spirit that truly transcends materiality and allows an individual to perceive life from a different, alternative and possibly enriching perspective.⁵⁵ Although Ackroyd's novels feature diverse forms of the uncanny, their supreme magic rests in the multiplicity of histories and destinies brought to life thanks to the power of his imagination. The rich tradition of what he calls the English imagination is the spiritual force Ackroyd espouses above all: "So who in this world can make the dead speak? Who can see them in vision? That would be a form of magic – to bring the dead to life again, if only in the pages of a book."⁵⁶

52. For Onega's more complex scrutiny of the two novels' occult formal structure see the chapter entitled "A Dream of Wholeness and of Beauty" of *Peter Ackroyd*, pp. 43–65.

53. Lewis, p. 80.

54. Ackroyd, *The Casebook*, p. 46.

55. In "The Eye of the Imagination" chapter of *Phantasmagoria*, Marina Warner draws a similar parallel between the deep strata of the spiritual and the logic of the imaginary.

56. Ackroyd, *The House*, p. 258.