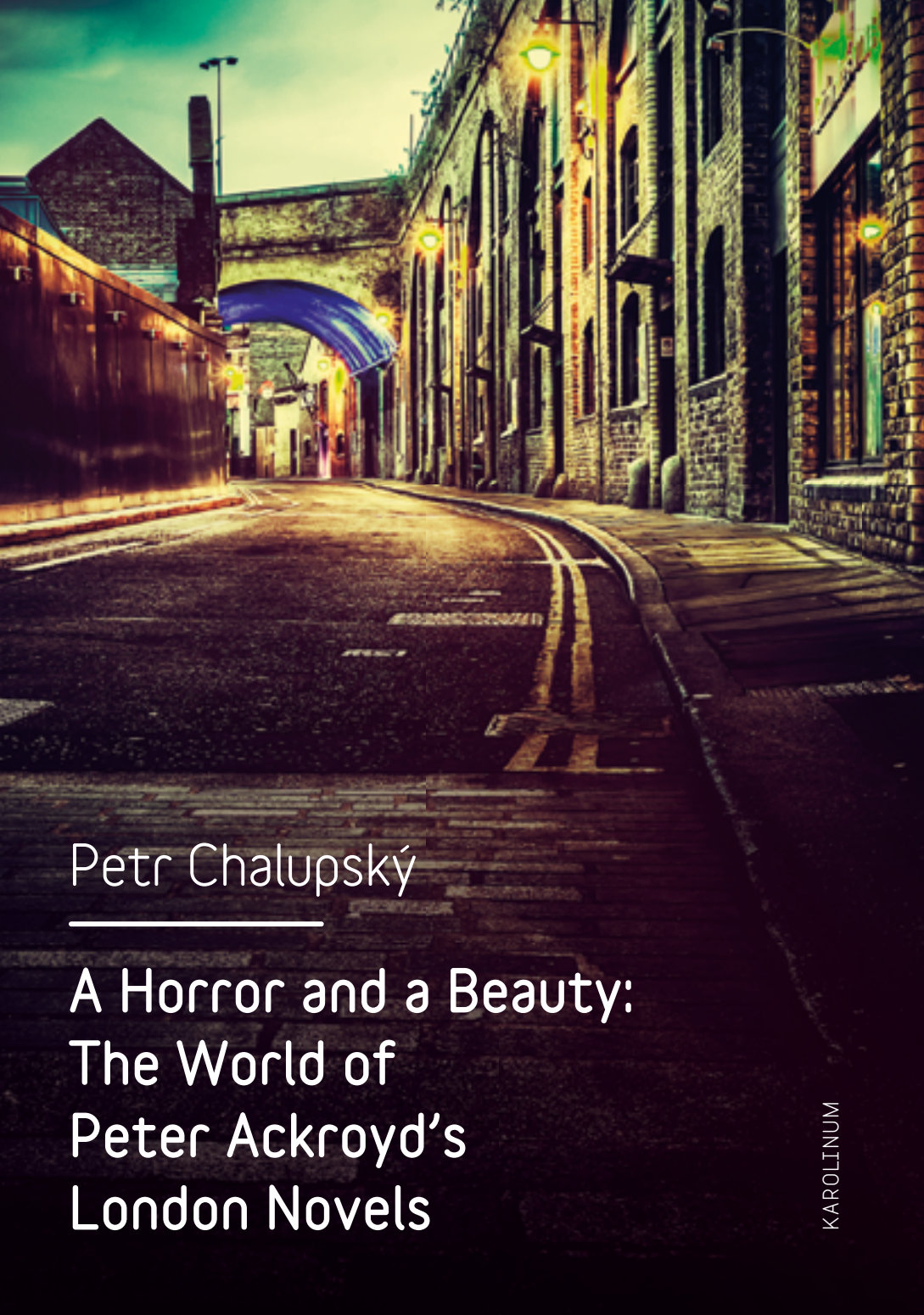

Petr Chalupský

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

KAROLINUM

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The World of Peter Ackroyd's London Novels

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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)

Contents

Cue-Titles

A	*Albion: The Origins of the English Imagination*
ATW	"All the Time in the World"
B	*Blake*
C	*Chatterton*
CT	*The Clerkenwell Tales*
CVF	*The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein*
D	*Dickens*
DLLH	*Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*
FEP	"The Future of English Prisons"
GFL	*The Great Fire of London*
H	*Hawksmoor*
HDD	*The House of Doctor Dee*
EEL	"The Englishness of English Literature"
LB	*London: The Biography*
LL	*The Lambs of London*
LLCV	"London Luminaries and Cockney Visionaries"
LTM	*The Life of Thomas More*
LU	*London Under*
ML	"A Manifesto for London"
N	*Newton*
PP	*The Plato Papers*
TB	*Three Brothers*
TSR	*Thames: Sacred River*
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 time[1]. 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 projects[2]. 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 forms[5], 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 work[8]. 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 city[9], 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.

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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 history[14]. As this spiritual view often prevails over the factual in Ackryoyd'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.