

A HORROR AND A BEAUTY, THE WORLD OF PETER ACKROYD'S LONDON NOVELS

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Prague: Karolinum, 2016.

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Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge.

T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*

The terms “country” and “city” are more than just a simple opposition. At the very beginning of his seminal study, Raymond Williams points out what these two words “stand for in the experience of human communities” (1975: 1). The city, the capital, Williams argues, is one of the achievements of human society, an achievement issuing from the long and complicated relationships between a people and the land it inhabits.

The romantic outlook on human affairs has traditionally preferred the country. It is seen as a place of refuge from the “din of the cities” (Wordsworth) or, more generally, as the preserver of true national values and authenticity, whatever these terms may mean. Country is a place of the pastoral, which has a surprisingly firm grip on our imagination. It represents cosiness and safety of childhood, while the city is often grim, alienated and hostile.

In an opposite perspective, the one that has come to the fore only recently, the city is cosmopolitan –open, liberal and prejudice-free– while the country is backward,

narrow-minded, stuck in prejudices and stereotypes. Novels such as Philip Hensher's *King of the Badgers* show contemporary Britain deeply divided between cosmopolitan London and xenophobic country.

Peter Ackroyd's vision of London, however, is yet different. A self-professed hater of the country, Ackroyd sees London as a place that predates the country in the construction of the national identity. Ackroyd seems to share Iain Sinclair's vision that there is something mythical about London. While Sinclair believes that the city is –on the mythical level– related to ancient Egypt and the element of fire, Ackroyd links it to England's past –historical, pre-historical but also a-historical.

Petr Chalupský's fine new book *A Horror and a Beauty: The World of Peter Ackroyd's London Novels* does a fine job indeed in providing a comprehensive picture of Ackroyd's vision of London, as the author's novels are analysed and interpreted in the context of his other texts, namely biographies of major London luminaries and essays on the character of London and English national identity.

Crucially, Chalupský opens his discussion of Ackroyd with the writer's conception of history. Chalupský points out that for Ackroyd "history is not an academic discipline" but "a living presence", the task of which is to "dramatize and reinvent". Ackroyd's approach is one of a storyteller, Chalupský argues: 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" that interest him far more than the concrete events; and happenings which may be useful in terms of creating an attractive 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 element" (30).

Ackroyd's concept of history (and of historiography) is of essential importance, as in his view the past is intrinsically woven into the present. In order to describe such present, however, he needs a kind of historical writing that defies a clear distinction between fiction and fact. Chalupský aptly suggests that Ackroyd seems to have found such a conception in English literary history. Robert Mayer (2004) has shown that for a long time in English history, the border between fiction and fact was rather blurred. For nearly two centuries the criterion was not an "objective" truth or a fact confirmed by evidence and sources, but rather the power of narrative. The first scholars who examined written evidence were even ridiculed as mere antiquarians, while the real history was driven by other aspects and goals, be it usefulness (Bacon), national interest (Churchill and other defenders of Geoffrey of Monmouth) or maintenance of the *status quo* in the community (as an example of this Mayer quotes Richard Gough's *History of Myddle*).

It is this concept of history that opens up limitless possibilities for Ackroyd. He sees history as something alive, something that is being kept alive by new and new interpretations. It needs to be admitted that as far as fiction is concerned, this approach to history is rather inspiring. Ackroyd combines this conception of history with the use of the term *genius loci* – a rather vague term which, however, suits his purpose perfectly. As Christian Norberg-Schulz noted in his *Genius Loci*, a man dwells in the world once he/she is able to concretise the world in the buildings and things. Concretisation is a function of a work of art and as such is the opposite of scientific abstraction.

For Ackroyd, *genius loci* plays a different, but equally important role, that of participation in the past. His characters participate in London's past through rituals. Murders are never just murders, they are also in part sacrifices. Chalupský provides readers with a comprehensive map that offers an insight into Ackroyd's world: the key points on this map are “energy and darkness” in Uncanny London, serial killings in Felonious London, psychogeography in Antiquarian London, pathos and pantomime in Theatrical London and counterfeiting and metafiction in Literary London.

Chalupský's view of Ackroyd's novels seems to have been inspired by the writer's dictum that London is theatrical at heart. And it is not only the legacy of the great Elizabethans; there is much theatre in Dickens, there are the fascinating music halls at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century, there is the contemporary theatre. It is no accident that Ackroyd emphasises precisely this feature of London, as it is this feature that makes it possible for him to intertwine his visions with rituals and esotericism. Consequently, his vision of English culture is magical. For him, the English tradition is inherently imaginative with a hint of mysticism.

However inspiring Ackroyd's vision of London's past and of English culture may be, there is a price to be paid. While in novels readers tend to be forgiving, it is in non-fiction that Ackroyd is often led astray by his excessive use of imagination (the factual blunders in his book on Blake are notorious). *Genius loci* and psychogeography can work very well in fiction; outside its realm they feel quite uncomfortable.

But non-fiction is not the focus of Petr Chalupský's book. He focuses solely on Ackroyd's novels and does a fine job indeed. Not only are his analyses apt and insightful but also the overall structure of the book does justice to Ackroyd's multi-layered fictional world. It is a book that deserves serious attention and should not be omitted in future discussions on Peter Ackroyd's fiction.

Works Cited

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