Alternatives in Biography

Writing Lives in Diverse English-Language Contexts

Alternatives in Biography

muni
PRESS

ALTERNATIVES IN BIOGRAPHY

WRITING LIVES IN DIVERSE ENGLISH-LANGUAGE CONTEXTS

Stephen Hardy

Martina Horáková

Michael Matthew Kaylor

&

Kateřina Prajznerová

MASARYK UNIVERSITY PRESS

Alternatives in Biography: Writing Lives in Diverse English-Language Contexts, by Stephen Hardy, Martina Horáková, Michael Matthew Kaylor, and Kateřina Prajznerová

First Masaryk University Press edition, December 2011

Chapter I © 2011 by Stephen Hardy
Chapter II © 2011 by Martina Horáková
Chapter III © 2011 by Michael Matthew Kaylor
Chapter IV © 2011 by Kateřina Prajznerová

This edition © 2011 by Masaryk University Press

All rights reserved. The use of any part of this publication reproduced, transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, or stored in a retrieval system, without prior written consent of the publisher or of the authors constitutes an infringement of the copyright law.

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Hardy, Stephen ; Horáková, Martina ; Kaylor, Michael Matthew ; Prajznerová, Kateřina
Alternatives in Biography: Writing Lives in Diverse English-Language Contexts / by Stephen Hardy, Martina Horáková, Michael Matthew Kaylor, and Kateřina Prajznerová. — 1st Masaryk University Press ed.
p. cm. — (Masaryk University Press)
Inclu
ISBN
1. Biogr ... glish. 4. English
Literatu ... nited States of
America
I. Title. ... ew.
V. Prajz

ISBN 978-80-210-7637-2 (online : pdf)
ISBN 978-80-210-5757-9 (paperback)
DOI: 10.5817/CZ.MUNI.M210-5757-2011

This vol ... : (Re)examining
Transgr ... Czech Science
Foundat

This vo ... ate Professor of
English ... tant Professor of
English

Cover: ... Gettysburg, 2008

Publishe
http://w

Printed

Contents

Preface vii

Chapter I: 1
Versions of Pastoral Biography:
Ackroyd, Carter, Berger

By Stephen Hardy

Chapter II: 91
Indigenous Collaborative Life Writing:
Narrative Transgression in *Auntie Rita*
and *Kayang & Me*

By Martina Horáková

Chapter III: 139
Uranian Autobiography:
Newman's *Rondeaux of Boyhood* and Reid's *Apostate*

By Michael Matthew Kaylor

Chapter IV: 231
Bioregional Biography:
The Landscapes of the Lives of Emily Carr
and Emma Bell Miles

By Kateřina Prajznerová

Preface

> There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.
>
> Charles Darwin
> Concluding sentence of *The Origin of Species* (1859)

The present volume originated from an assumption that proved true in only a limited fashion: that, especially after the seminal experiments of the Bloomsbury circle and others—such as Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians*, T. E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, Virginia Woolf's *Flush*, and A. J. A. Symons's *Quest for Corvo*—auto/biographical writing in English-speaking countries underwent a series of changes that corresponded to certain Modernist and Post-modernist tendencies, as well as to socio-political, economic, publishing, and other contexts and pressures. We, the present authors, assumed that those tendencies, contexts, and pressures led to "alternatives in biography," alternatives that, more often than not, involved a conscious employment of the full range of techniques expected from authors of fiction. Further, that by examining diverse auto/biographical specimens arising from those changes, we would discover within them a range of common features, similar ways of being in the world, predictable tendencies, and shared techniques. We anticipated that this would serve to situate the auto/biographies we were examining within a common ancestry, as offshoots of a family tree that had its roots in the established tradition of auto/biographical writing within the Western context. Bolstered by a research grant from the Czech Science Foundation, the four of us each collected representative specimens within our own areas of expertise, sorted and polished the auto/biographical remains at our disposal, assembled the panoply of residual bones, added flesh and trappings to provide that last realistic touch, then placed our specimens in cases, for public display. The result was one that Darwin would have anticipated, appreciated, and approved, but one that we did not anticipate: four utterly disparate chapters, a veritable museum devoted to auto/biographical diversity, to all those "endless forms" by which a range of auto/biographers have, through evolving metaphorical fins or wings or feet, swum or flown or pranced about, displaying unique potentialities for living and for capturing lives on the page. We decided simply to herald this diversity, to let the individual areas of our "natural history museum" remain distinct, rather than reworking, for purely scholarly purposes, our auto/biographical specimens into things they never were—associating the body of one with the wings of another, and the head of yet another. We realized, after attempting to do so on numerous occasions, that the result would have been little more than a collec-

tion of griffins or other composite fictional beasts such as one finds in a medieval bestiary.

Some of this arose from diversities of our own. “Living between the Lines,” the research grant mentioned above, allowed the four of us to exploit our shared interest in auto/biographical writings and issues, despite the fact that we are specialists in different areas (American, Australian, British, and Irish literatures and cultures) and have different scholarly concerns (environmental, gay, Indigenous, and philosophical). For the three years of the grant, we pooled our resources, intellectual and otherwise, which led, in regard to this topic, to an international conference, to two special issues of the journal *Brno Studies in English*, to an anthology of Czech translations, as well as to the present volume, which is divided in the following ways:

In Chapter I, “Versions of Pastoral Biography: Ackroyd, Carter, Berger,” writing which intersects with more conventional notions of the biographical from three rather different perspectives is reconsidered in terms of the pastoral, where pastoral is understood both in its poetic sense and in its more spiritual-ethical conception, concerned with both care for the land and for the community and its members. The first section focuses on the small fictional interludes inserted into the main body of Peter Ackroyd’s *Dickens* and their spiritual-fictional and, in this sense, pastoral significance. The second section looks at Paul Carter’s analysis of the life and death of the founder of Adelaide, William Light, connecting his dying to his relationship with the land, sea, air, and light of Australia, combining a poetics of the land with a political critique of biography as a form of memorialisation collaborative with imperial motives. The final section provides a reading of John Berger’s *A Fortunate Man*, a study of a general practitioner working in a community based in a relatively remote part of rural England.

In Chapter II, “Indigenous Collaborative Life Writing: Narrative Transgression in *Auntie Rita* and *Kayang & Me*,” such writing is revealed to possess a set of complex issues that involve textualizing the dynamic relationship between two narrative voices—the first, of the elder family member who is telling their life story; the second, a family member a generation younger who frames the telling by providing an accompanying commentary, by inserting fragments of their own lives and other materials. The two examined narratives from Australia, namely *Auntie Rita* by Rita and Jackie Huggins, and *Kayang & Me* by Kim Scott and Hazel Brown, are shown to represent a particular kind of Indigenous inter-generational collaborative life writing which inscribes a “dual voice.” The effect of this narrative stratagem is a *mélange* of voices from the past and present, voices enhanced by extracts from archival materials, paratexts, photos, and other important memorabilia: this *mélange* intentionally disrupts the official narrative of Australian nation-building.

In Chapter III, “Uranian Autobiography: Newman’s *Rondeaux of Boyhood* and Reid’s *Apostate*,” the first portion provides an overview of eleven strategies by which the “Uranians”—a cluster of pederasts writing during the Victorian and Edwardian periods—revealed, and sometimes even made capital on, their own autobiographical details, in defiance of obvious socio-political, religious, and other barriers. The second portion turns to two representative, yet innovative, Uranian “alternative autobiographies,” *Rondeaux of Boyhood* by A. Newman and *Apostate* by Forrest Reid. The former is a sequence of poems that is revealed to chronicle, in a strikingly autobiographical way, the development of Newman’s intimate relationship with thirteen-year-old Norman, with the themes and dynamics of this relationship surfacing progressively, without an overarching aesthetic ordering, which makes the slender volume an au-

thentic, chronological account of six years of their lives. The latter, Reid's literary portrait of himself during his boyhood and adolescence, is here shown to be unique enough (and not just among Uranian "alternative autobiographies") to warrant a coinage to capture that uniqueness—"fictionate autobiography."

In Chapter IV, "Bioregional Biography: The Landscapes of the Lives of Emily Carr and Emma Bell Miles," this form of biography is portrayed as bringing into the foreground the interplay of self, place, and narrative. A comparison of Emily Carr's personal nonfictions about the Cascadian bioregion of Victoria, British Columbia, and Emma Bell Miles's about the Appalachian bioregion of Walden's Ridge, Tennessee, suggests that these two contemporaries relate to place in strikingly similar ways. To illustrate this, the chapter provides a "dual walking tour" of selected sites with special resonance for Carr and Miles, which serves to interweave together the landscapes of their lives and locales, of their internal and external worlds. As the chapter shows, in each of their personal nonfictions the lives of the self and the place become a single story, as if inscribing each other into a relief map.

Amidst the process of constructing this volume, we came to appreciate that, for the most part, the auto/biographical works we chose to explore reflect less of an intentional break from, or adjustment of, the more established canons of Western auto/biographical writing than we had anticipated at the outset. Like the varied species and the evolutionary processes chronicled in Darwin's works, the range of auto/biographers who appear within these covers readily and unapologetically embraced whatever stratagems, themes, content, orderings, or styles best suited their own self-actualization, expression, survival—and auto/biographical writing is, perhaps more so than any other literary or scholarly genre, an attempt to secure survival, the perpetuation of a person or group of persons or oneself, despite the oblivion that often accompanies changes in time and environment, be those changes physical or cultural. Whether this involves, in the face of modern homogenizing capitalism and other forces that have no respect for history, tradition, or rural life, the preserving of pastoral values and spaces; whether this involves, under colonial and other pressures, the preserving of Indigenous cultures and their lush networks of personal connections and cultural resonances; whether this involves, in a society where such a love is dubbed too criminal even to refer to, the preserving of pederastic culture and its attendant dynamics and artefacts; whether this involves, in a world of spreading urbanization, the preserving of memory and spaces, regions of internal and external nature that some insightfully hold to be vital for a life well-lived—auto/biography is, as we came to appreciate with vigour, ever a struggle for survival and a struggle to give voice to that struggle.

Seen in this way, to have drawn elaborate scholarly connections tracing lines of evolution and descent from Rousseau's *Confessions* to the life of Berger's country doctor, or from Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* to collaborative Indigenous life writings, or from Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* to coded Uranian texts, or from Boswell's *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* to Carr's account of her authentic interactions with her beloved Cascadia, would, at best, have been tangential, speculative, disingenuous, or likely just plain wrong. For that reason we chose instead to highlight that the auto/biographical works examined in the present volume arose within idiosyncratic conditions and incomparable social and cultural constraints, express very distinct motives, and reveal very different precedents and influences. Nonetheless, they display, when considered

as a collective, the intriguing ways in which auto/biography adapts and flourishes, taking "endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful."

Stephen Hardy
Martina Horáková
Michael Matthew Kaylor
Kateřina Prajznerová

Brno
December 18, 2011

Chapter I

Versions of Pastoral Biography

Chapter I

Versions of Pastoral Biography: Ackroyd, Carter, Berger

By Stephen Hardy

> "Get a life."
>
> Closing comment of the film *Sliver* (1993)[1]

BIOGRAPHY and pastoral both constitute broad generic categorizations which are open to a constantly changing and developing variety of interpretations with regard to their precise nature and boundaries. This chapter primarily concerns itself with an analysis of parts of the work of three English-born writers, Peter Ackroyd (*b.* 1949), Paul Carter (*b.* 1951) and John Berger (*b.* 1926), and ways in which they provide instances of combining elements of biography and pastoral, while also challenging what might be considered as the boundaries of their conventional characterization. The commentary and analysis provided here are intended as initially suggestive rather than potentially definitive and do not therefore incorporate any theoretical overview of either genre. The prefatory remarks on biography and pastoral are provided as a form of contextualization which is intended to be of immediate relevance to what follows. No previous acquaintance is presumed on the part of the reader with the three writers in question. A short introductory sketch of the nature of their work will therefore be in order before embarking upon a more detailed exploration of those aspects relevant to the brief series of partly explicative and partly interpretive commentaries presented here.

Peter Ackroyd has, to date, produced a series of relatively conventional, mostly literary biographies, including those of T. S. Eliot (1888-1965), Charles Dickens (1812-1870), William Blake (1757-1827), Sir Thomas More (1478-1535), and William Shakespeare (1564-1616). These works, it can be argued, form part of a broader project, theoretically adumbrated in an earlier essay on the shortcomings and demoralisation of contemporary British culture, which also includes, in addition to the biographies, a series of novels partly characterized by markedly biographical elements in terms of the central part played in them by actual historical figures. Among these are Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), Nicholas Hawksmoor (ca. 1661-1736), Thomas Chatterton (1752-1770), and John Milton (1608-1674), as well as a great many other individuals

[1] From the film *Sliver* (1993), directed by Phillip Noyce and distributed by Paramount Pictures.

prominent in the history of English literature and culture. The tendency in Ackroyd's work is to weave an accumulative tapestry of interconnected historical figures, spiritually re-invigorated by a form of neo-gothic dramatization and supplemented by scholarly investigation that reconnects past and present through a blurring and interrogation of many of the lines customarily drawn between them. In the analysis presented here, the focus will be on the more unconventional elements included in his biography of Dickens.

The work of Paul Carter, a cultural geographer and historian born in Berkshire and educated in Oxford, but who has lived for the last few decades in Australia, constitutes a substantially different but, in certain respects, comparable form of project. In Carter's work, the focus is on a poetics of movement initially projected into a critical analysis of the colonization of Australia but including an examination of historically prior forms of subjectivity which close in upon themselves in ways which exclude sympathetic attention to the environment upon whose territory they invasively encroach. Like Ackroyd, Carter reads history from a perspective informed by a specific aesthetic but one which pays more attention to relations between created form and natural environment, rather than the creative word and spiritual belief. While his approach is not primarily biographical, it includes substantial studies of aspects of the lives of significantly representative figures in the physical and cultural context of both Australian and European geographies. One of these figures, William Light (1786-1839), is the subject of the third major study in Carter's book *The Lie of the Land* (1996) and will be the subject of the analysis provided here.[1]

John Berger, the third and final writer to be discussed, has developed a substantially different kind of project, moving from his earlier considerations of the significance of painting to a later phase, aspects of which will be analysed in this chapter. This later phase begins with documentary studies of intellectuals whose lives are involved with those of others in highly practical professional forms, notably the medical practitioner John Eskell ("John Sassall"), in *A Fortunate Man* (1967). It moves on, in *A Seventh Man* (1975) to an examination of the plight of migrant workers excluded from developing and articulating a meaningful sense of their own lives and, from the perspective of the study presented here, culminates, in the *Into Their Labours* trilogy (1979-1990),[2] in a partly fictional presentation of the lives of a very large section of the world's population, the peasantry, whose way of life would seem to be threatened, for the first time in its history, with probable extinction. Berger's project takes the form both of more obviously documentary studies but also, in his later work, "fictional" writing which indicates a close relation to existing, "factual" conditions. In all cases, the perspective presented is openly and unapologetically Marxist in orientation. Each of these studies, it will be argued, can be seen as a significant form of biography in their own right as well as providing, particularly in the later trilogy, a radical form of pastoral grounded in the everyday life and historical experience of the peasantry.

The order of analysis chosen here is not intended simply as a representative "ABC" or as a chronologically arranged itinerary. I begin with Ackroyd as someone who practises the writing of biography in the sense of the term which is generally accepted, even if the focus provided is upon aspects of his divergence from the conven-

---

[1] Paul Carter, *The Lie of the Land* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996).

[2] The following books are by John Berger: *A Fortunate Man* (Cambridge: Granta Books, 1989 [1967]); *A Seventh Man* (Cambridge: Granta Books, 1989 [1975]); *Pig Earth* (New York: Vintage, 1992 [1979]); *Once in Europa* (London: Granta Books, 1990 [1989]); and *Lilac and Flag* (London: Granta Books, 1990).

tional and his interest, in *Dickens* (1990), in muddying the clarity of the boundary between factual and fictional biography.[1] Paul Carter, while primarily a cultural geographer and historian, does involve himself in the production of lengthy and searching biographical sketches and, in the study considered in the present context, a partial interrogation of the biographies of colonial founding fathers. John Berger, as both essayist and novelist, has never produced a conventional biography of any kind,[2] thus situating himself, for the purposes of this study, at the furthest point from the conventional, but his documentary studies and the fictional work considered here are indicative of productive forms of deviation from what might be regarded as conventional norms. The trajectory of this chapter also affords a form of journey from one end of the political spectrum to the other—from Ackroyd's delicate shades of blue, through Carter's substantially green post-colonial perspective, to Berger's profounder shades of red, although this is rather more by chance than by design. The work of each of these three writers also expresses, it will be contended, a version of pastoral, different in kind, but related when viewed from this generic perspective. As stated earlier, while no attempt is made here to construct a substantial theoretical framework for the analysis offered, a few brief introductory comments on some of the ways in which the concerns of pastoral and biography might be seen as overlapping can usefully serve as prelude to a more detailed examination of the texts to be considered.

The notion of pastoral might be seen, in some respects, as even older than that of biography but both are closely intertwined in their beginnings. Catherine N. Parke, in her book *Biography: Writing Lives* (2002), traces the beginnings of biography to the earliest commemorative inscriptions of the third millennium BCE.[3] These are public testaments to the power of officially celebrated rulers and might be contrasted with the significance of those small, hitherto virtually unremembered, lives that William Wordsworth (1770-1850) attempted, in his poetry, to invest with a specific and relatively radical form of pastoral significance, often inspired both by the living and by the headstones in the graveyards he frequented in order to ponder upon the epitaphs presented there. Commenting on the way in which Wordsworth "countered magnificently" Samuel Johnson's observation that epitaphs lacked discrimination with regard to the particular character of the individual, Philip Davis, in his *Memory and Writing* (1983),[4] considers how Wordsworth's remarks and traces of his considerations, as in "a violet by a mossy stone," in perhaps the most memorable of all the "Lucy" poems, mark "that minimal difference between something and nothing which is the very principle of life itself."[5] In the introduction to his book dealing with a range of writing produced between the early and the first third of the twentieth century, Davis notes that "The works with which I am mainly concerned in what follows are those which, in complicated ways, derive from an autobiographical impulse often not choosing to express itself directly in conventional autobiography."[6] The line between an actual life and the memory or recording of that life, in whatever form, can, in certain senses, be almost as complex and various a process as that of life itself.

[1] Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens* (London: Minerva, 1993 [1990]).

[2] His *The Success and Failure of Picasso* (New York: Vintage, 1989 [1965]) is discussed in a later study of mine, *Implicating Environments*, which has yet to be published.

[3] See Catherine N. Parke, *Biography: Writing Lives* (*Genre in Context*) (London: Routledge, 2002), p. xxi.

[4] Davis, *Memory and Writing* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1983), p. 7. The reference is to William Wordsworth, *Prose Works*, in 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), II, pp. 56-57.

[5] Davis, *Memory and Writing*, p. 6.

[6] Ibid., p. xxiii.

In the opening chapter of the study previously referred to, Catherine Parke provides a helpful overview of the genre which draws attention to the significance accorded to personal acquaintance with the person whose life is to be studied and remembered, the problematic nature of such acquaintance and how it is treated, as well as the equally, and in some respects even greater, problem of writing the life of an individual with whom one has had no actual personal contact.[1] Much early biography, it might be suggested, tends to be either of a glorifying or hagiographical nature or tendentiously negative in kind. Modern biographers (and Parke observes that the terms "biography" and "biographer" do not make an appearance in English until the mid-seventeenth century), like their ancient counterparts in many respects, are faced with a task which is at least double: how to record a faithful history and how to effectively convey the nature of who, or what, the person really was or can be claimed to ultimately represent.[2]

Like Parke, William C. Dowling, in *The Boswellian Hero* (1979), is concerned with the inevitably literary aspect of almost any form of biography.[3] In Dowling's reading, Boswell is almost inevitably as much an artist as a historian; no tape-recorders were available, so whatever conversation James Boswell (1740-1795) had with Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) was inevitably recollected, even if it was at the ending of the day on which it took place—and should he have been an adept stenographer, would it have been a "real" conversation if Boswell took notes while he was involved in conducting it? Such considerations, as with any form of historical account, in some sense, compromise or complicate the attempt to provide an objectively faithful account of lives, events, and their historical context.[4]

One question which neither of these authors directly addresses (and, in terms of their own concerns, there is no particular reason why they should) is that biography or "life writing" might also be considered to be writing about not only a human life but about life in other senses, a category which in at least one sense includes everything ever written. The relevance of this question to the present discussion plays some part in the "pastoral" element in this chapter's title; the pre-modifying adjective connects to a substantial amount of writing covered by a more traditional reading of the substantive. Whether the notion of pastoral is older than that of biography might be considered as much a matter of pedantic etymology as serious cultural research, but for the purposes of this study one can observe that a helpful starting point can be provisionally located, in the context of western European culture, in Hesiod's *Works and Days* (composed sometime between 750 and 650 BCE) which, among other things, provides its own, culturally specific version of how the earth came into being, how things got complicated pretty quickly, and what we should and shouldn't do if we want to live a happy, worthwhile life. To partly invoke the name of a more recent writer, in the German philosophical tradition, with marked, if politically catastrophic, pastoral leanings, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), pastoral literature, biographical or otherwise, would seem to have much to do with "care," of one kind or another—for individuals, communities and the varied and various environments in which they are situated. The present chapter will move from consideration of a writer whose concerns can be viewed as pastoral in a more religious or theological sense, while also

[1] See Parke, *Biography*, pp. 1-34.
[2] See ibid., p. 1.
[3] William C. Dowling, *The Boswellian Hero* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1979).
[4] Ibid., pp. xi-xiii.

productively interrogating the boundaries between fact and fiction, to another whose preoccupations are with relations between colonialism, environment and a poetics of movement, and finally to a third who engages with a more directly political reading of the significance of the life both of a significant individual and of communities, focusing on the life of those forms of community which are still rurally based, though often negatively implicated in a developing metropolitan context. Only the first of these writers produces biographies in the full and more traditional sense of the term but the latter two include substantially biographical perspectives in their approach to relations between human life and both its immediate natural and broader social environments in a fashion which is as much factual as it is fictional.

PETER ACKROYD: DIVINING *DICKENS*

> Who is / Frank Moore?[1]
>
> "I Never Saw Him Again."
> . . .
> I Never Saw Him Again.[2]

The first writer to be considered, Peter Ackroyd, is the author of several biographies, a stream of novels and, increasingly, a number of cultural histories, in addition to a substantial body of literary reviews and one early work of literary-theoretical polemic. Many of these writings, both biographical and fictional, concern themselves with historical individuals, but almost all of them also focus on one place above all, namely London, and another of some significance, England. The two, or if one includes the historical individuals, the three, seem to merge into one, often mysterious, shadowy realm, over which its guardian, the caring author, seems to hold a certain influence, as he leads us into his labyrinth, somewhat in the fashion of a Virgil fastidiously guiding the bewildered reader-as-Dante through the deepest reaches of Hell and slowly upward into the higher regions of salvation.

This intended comparison with Dante is offered in a partly but not entirely facetious vein. Ackroyd's project can be viewed as part of an English tradition of Catholic writing under a Protestant political dispensation which stretches back at least to the time of Thomas More, the subject of one of Ackroyd's later biographies,[3] and which in the twentieth-century context might be considered as including writers such as G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936), Evelyn Waugh (1903-1966), J. R. R. Tolkien (1892-1973), C. S. Lewis (1898-1963), and numerous others. If one returns not merely to the beginning of the twentieth century but a little further into the middle and later years of the nineteenth, amongst these writers one might also include a partly gothic, partly neo-classical and homoerotic strain, the latter encompassing the work of Walter Pater

[1] "The Librarian," lines 72-73, in *The Collected Poems of Charles Olson* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 412-414.
[2] Ackroyd, *Dickens*, pp. 1118 and 1120.
[3] Peter Ackroyd, *The Life of Thomas More* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998).

(1839-1894), G. M. Hopkins (1844-1889), Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), the autobiographical narrator of Ackroyd's second novel, and F. W. Rolfe, "Baron Corvo" (1860-1913), author of *Hadrian VII* (1907) and subject of A. J. A. Symons's extraordinary biographical study *The Quest for Corvo* (1934).[1] With the last mentioned writers one begins to be involved with a conceptualisation of fictionate autobiography[2] that partly involves a conscious interrogation of notions of what constitutes the factual, and a consequent blurring of its relation to the fictional; immediate precedents for later biographical approaches can be found in works such as Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918),[3] which can be seen as consciously questioning more traditionally respectful and, in some respects, more imperialist versions of biography and history.

The "pastoral" element in Ackroyd's work thus includes, it will be argued, a substantial religious element, one partly concerned with returning England to the Catholic fold, though in a fashion and modality which can perhaps be characterized as being as much catholic as Roman Catholic in its related concerns with England's overall literary and cultural heritage. At the same time, Ackroyd's concern with place and the significance of everyday life and ordinary people, as well as a particular, and highly urban location, London, situates him in a tradition which takes us back at least to Hesiod but also indicates the immediate influence of one strand of literary modernism on his work. In this relatively brief analysis of a small element of his *oeuvre* the aim will be to focus upon a particular aspect of one of Ackroyd's biographies, *Dickens*, in order to indicate how it sheds light upon Ackroyd's work as a whole and the nature of some of his literary strategies and cultural attitudes. Rather than beginning with his fiction or biographies, a pertinent start can be made with a more theoretical study written at an early stage in his literary career, *Notes for a New Culture* (1976),[4] which will help in part to contextualize the nature of his subsequent work.

In *Notes for a New Culture* Ackroyd positions himself in relation to elements within both modern and modernist literature. The designation "modern" is intended to indicate the nature of developments in the history of literature from the time of the early to middle seventeenth century and their eventual critical interrogation by, in Ackroyd's reading, writers working from the middle of the nineteenth century, particularly in the French context, up to the time of the onset of post-structuralism, so-called. It is important to note that in this consciously polemical study Ackroyd is as much concerned with the cultural politics as with any more traditionally spiritual aspects of what he chooses to term a "dispirited nation,"[5] although that characterisation would also seem to refer to questions of religion and of national morale as much as to strictly literary and cultural matters. The book was published three years prior to *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word* (1979),[6] written by Colin McCabe, the non-renewal of whose contract provoked the so-called "Cambridge English Crisis" and the British version of the theory wars, played out in a somewhat different fashion in the United States where Ackroyd, on a Mellon Fellowship, had probably developed many of the perspectives included in his literary-cultural polemic.

---

[1] Frederick Rolfe, Baron Corvo, *Hadrian the Seventh* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1914). A. J. A Symons, *The Quest for Corvo: An Experiment in Biography* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001 [1934]).
[2] Regarding "fictionate autobiography," see pp. 221-237 of the present volume.
[3] Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009 [1918]).
[4] Peter Ackroyd, *Notes for a New Culture* (Portchester: Alikin Books, 1993 [1976]).
[5] Ibid., p. 147.
[6] Colin McCabe, *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word* (London: Macmillan, 1979).

Rather earlier, if less substantially, than McCabe, Ackroyd uses the example of Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) and related French thinkers as ammunition in a brisk interrogation of the nature of the philosophy and cultural attitudes attached to a certain form of representationalism and plain style associated with much English writing from about the time of John Locke (1632-1704). Ackroyd's targets are both approaches to language and modern notions of subjectivity. He takes as his starting point objections to the opacities of a style which can "spin disputation and subtlety out of thin air, out of nothing,"[1] taking Thomas Sprat's *History of the Royal Society for the Improving of Natural Knowledge* (1667), in addition to Locke, as his principal markers of examples of this hostility to linguistic artifice and the advocacy of a plain style which directly represents the truth of a "real world" as understood, or gradually, and partly unconsciously, developed by modern science and the Puritan conscience.

It is in the writings of the Marquis de Sade (1740-1814) that Ackroyd chooses to locate the first voice of a modernism which will begin to challenge the "ostensibly transparent" discourse of modern rationalism (as Ackroyd depicts it) and its neglect of language as a complex repository of historically developed experience.[2] De Sade opens the way for later writers, such as Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880) and Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898), to produce a literature which does not merely represent a "realm of solid objects and plain truths."[3] This approach is eventually related to challenges to modern notions of a stable individual subjectivity, where Friedrich Nietzsche's antagonism to both "God" and "Man" in this respect, are brought into play. Significantly, Ackroyd characterizes these developments as offering a return to an older tradition and "the presence of a language that existed before humanism in its orthodox forms. For the universe of classical and medieval discourse has no notion of Man as the source of its values."[4]

The tendency of this approach is further developed in terms of Ackroyd's reading of the English modernists, particularly one-time Vorticists, such as Ezra Pound (1885-1972) and Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957). These are viewed as revolutionaries conceiving of themselves as traditionalists, but more profoundly orthodox than their predecessors, and comparable in this respect to earlier writers such as William Blake or even John Bunyan (1628-1688). Particular attention is devoted to T. S. Eliot, soon to be the subject of Ackroyd's first biography, and James Joyce (1882-1941). Both of these authors are seen as diminishing or complexly compromising the role of the self in their writing. Joyce's self-advertised predilection for a form of Thomism is viewed as particularly appropriate to Ackroyd's reading of Modernism's creative discovery of the history of language. Joyce is characterised as a writer who sought to return to a time when the significance of language and the sacredness of the word had not been reduced to the role of representing a conceptually predetermined reality. We are eventually brought closer to the present by means of references to the work of the French phenomenological philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), whose approach to selfhood is seen as being able to open up: "a zone of possibilities into which we enter as we exist in our bodies . . . an autonomous and open self, a self which, like language—has gone beyond the truth and ends of Man."[5]

---

[1] Ackroyd, *Notes for a New Culture*, p. 14.
[2] Ibid., p. 19.
[3] Ibid., p. 28.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid., p. 93.

The interest in this perspective on relations between language and subjectivity and on the particular inflection of it provided by Merleau-Ponty would appear to have been one shared by an influential figure at the time Ackroyd was studying at Cambridge, the scholar-poet J. H. Prynne (*b.* 1936).[1] Prynne's more acerbically and overtly intellectual verbal style is in direct contrast to that of Ackroyd's work subsequent to *Notes for a New Culture*, but the degree of his influence on Ackroyd was likely to have been an element in his approaches to the poetics of subjectivity. Prynne, along with a number of other writers of the period, such as Frank O'Hara (1926-1966) and John Ashbery (*b.* 1927), is mentioned favourably as an example of the way forward in terms of challenging the new orthodoxies and, for Ackroyd, returning to older ones. The closing chapters of Ackroyd's study adopt a broader polemical approach: "From a false notion of literature is generated a false notion of 'life' and 'community' and our culture suffers."[2] The culture referred to here is national and English. The villains of the current predicament are those who are seen as ultimately failing to free themselves from a utilitarian and increasingly sociological perspective; these include F. R. Leavis (1895-1978), even if he is praised more than he is damned, and Raymond Williams (1921-1988), who for Ackroyd represents a continuation in the wrong direction, one he will seek to reverse both in his novels and his biographies.

Ackroyd's next major work after this polemical beginning was his first novel, *The Great Fire of London* (1982),[3] which again has a bearing on the preoccupations pursued in his biographical works. The novel appeared almost ten years after *Notes for a New Culture*, though, in the meantime, Ackroyd had written numerous book reviews as literary editor for *The Spectator*, many of which appear in *The Collection: Journalism, Reviews, Essays, Short Stories, Lectures* (2001), as well as *Ezra Pound and His World* (1980) and, at about the same time, *Dressing Up, Transvestism and Drag: The History of an Obsession* (1979).[4] As Barry Lewis observes in his introductory study of Ackroyd's writing, this book also has a distinct religious significance for Ackroyd:

> He asserts that one of the continuities within the English tradition is its penchant for heterogeneity. English art—and literature—is distinguished by its ready adoption of different styles. To be sure, Ackroyd's own writings have followed this imperative to the letter. Furthermore, he links this "plaintive mimicry of the transvestite disguise" with what he believes to be the buried inheritance of the Catholic tradition within English culture. In this light, it is interesting to reflect on the dressing up that occurs within the Catholic mass. The vestments are flowing and colourful, like traditional female clothing, and serve to demarcate the priest from his congregation.[5]

---

[1] James Butler's *Writing at the Edge of the Person: Lyric Subjectivity in Cambridge Poetry 1966-1993* (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, 1995) includes a particularly clear and perceptive analysis of the figures and issues involved in the sphere of lyric poetry in relation to Prynne and a number of other contemporary poets. (This doctoral dissertation is available at <http://etd.nd.edu/ETD-db/theses/available/etd-06302005-113210 /unrestricted/ButlerT082005.pdf>).

[2] Ackroyd, *Notes for a New Culture*, p. 123.

[3] Peter Ackroyd, *The Great Fire of London* (London: Abacus, 1984 [1982]).

[4] The following works are by Peter Ackroyd: *The Collection: Journalism, Reviews, Essays, Short Stories, Lectures* (London: Vintage, 2002 [2001]); *Ezra Pound and His World* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1980); *Dressing Up, Transvestism and Drag: The History of an Obsession* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1979); *London Lickpenny* (London: Ferry Press, 1973); and *Country Life* (London: Ferry Press, 1978).

[5] Barry Lewis, *My Words Echo Thus*: *Possessing the Past in Peter Ackroyd* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007), pp. 15-16.

When we turn to *The Great Fire of London,* the first of two novels Ackroyd completed before the publication of his first biography, of T. S. Eliot, in 1984, we find an apparently modest beginning. The novel is short and written in an immediately accessible prose style; this, as observed earlier, is in stark contrast to the stylistic exigencies of the most influential contemporary of Ackroyd's Cambridge years, the poet J. H. Prynne—but the demanding complexities of Ackroyd's approach might be seen as only thinly, if very effectively veiled, and are almost immediately perceptible in the subversive presentation of his narrative and the characters involved in it—including the city of London and one of Dickens's major novels. Nor is Charles Dickens the only submerged historical presence in the novel; the chartered streets of William Blake's poem "London" (1794), and the Marshalsea of Dickens's *Little Dorrit* (1855-1857) are woven into the thematics of *The Great Fire of London*, as is the neurotic, almost disembodied world of the kinds of characters whose voices we briefly encounter in T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land*, as well as in his plays.

The novel opens with a short prelude that provides a distinctly literary, *in medias res*, beginning that itself would seem to blur the distinction between fiction, history and reality; "the story so far,"[1] which is the first thing that the reader encounters, is that of a condensed version of the relevant parts of the plot of *Little Dorrit.* The reader is informed as to when Dickens wrote the novel, of the, fictional, fact that Little Dorrit was born in the Marshalsea prison and that her father "has now lost the will to rescue himself from his confinement."[2] This thematic element proves, in many ways, to be the fundamental driving force of everything else in the novel and can be seen to be related to Ackroyd's concern with a freeing up of the self as explored in *Notes for a New Culture.* The first chapter takes us into the actual world which the main body of the novel will inhabit, firstly through the character of Little Arthur, an eccentric lost figure who is "the proprietor of Fun City"[3] and whose name is an amalgam of Little Dorrit and Arthur Clennam, though perhaps distantly suggestive of a more spiritually redemptive semi-historical figure of British, and particularly English, mythology, King Arthur. Little Arthur is also a more distinctively Dickensian character in the sense that he appears to be an animated cartoon-like figure expressive of an emotionally charged attitude and situated in a body over which he has relatively little control.

Subsequent characters in the novel are more complex and developed at greater length; these include Spenser and Laetitia Spender, Timothy Coleman and his girlfriend, Audrey Skelton, as well as Rowan Philips, an opportunistic, gay, Canadian post-graduate studying at Cambridge. The life of Spenser in particular is overshadowed and haunted by the figure of the Marshalsea prison, which becomes the focus of his project for making a new film. The literary allusions in the novel are multiplicitous and will exponentially develop in Ackroyd's subsequent fiction. "Fun City," the partly Bunyanesque name given to Little Arthur's "amusement arcade," is the big wonderful, fun world of formerly "swinging" London and commercial capitalism but, like Spenser, it is situated in the shade of a deeper current whose ultimate electrical energies will spasmodically splutter into a partially liberating and redemptive explosion of energy at the end of the novel. In the meantime, the characters in the novel wander around like lost souls, attempting to orientate themselves and find a deeper

[1] Ackroyd, *Great Fire of London*, p. 3.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid., p. 5.

pattern and meaning to their lives. This tendency sometimes takes the form of Joycean epiphanies, as, for instance, when Spenser Spender, wandering the streets of London, finds himself, rather like the owner of one of the narrative voices in Eliot's *Waste Land*, close to Charing Cross Bridge, where he feels not a sense of Dantean despair at the state of hell or purgatory that most of the people in Ackroyd's novel inhabit, but a momentary escape into something larger and more inspiring:

> Spenser Spender was filled with a sensation of lightness, as though his own body were moving out, too, across the water, implicated in the lives of those human beings who trudged slowly through the dark. And they also became part of him—as though he contained them all within himself at the same time as they directed him forward. Each human figure seemed to emit its own brightness, so that the bridge itself resembled a line of energy, and one of irresistible momentum and sweetness. Spenser Spender was too elated to reflect then upon this experience, but he knew that it would remain with him, if he took care to nourish it.[1]

Elements of all the major figures of the first generation of the Romantic poets seem to be hinted at in this moment, as well as intimations of a Shelleyan electricity, but there is also the sense of a powerful, mystical moment of revelation as to the nature of the divinity of creation. Soon after this, the "line of energy" is substantially, though not completely, broken as Spender's wife leaves him and, like Little Arthur, he becomes "just a body and a noise over which he had no control."[2] He thinks his life is over, which is also close to being true—he will die at the end of the novel, though not until after a near apocalyptic transformation which situates him as a figure who adopts a suggestively Christ-like role. The climax to the novel is indeed a "great fire," though not that of 1666; allusions to other fires, both historical and allegorical, are, however, provided, as the novel moves to an ambiguously redemptive close which suggests that it is itself part of an ongoing process or story: "This is not a true story but certain things follow from other things."[3] This mystically revelatory element in Ackroyd's fiction will also play a significant part in his use of the explicitly fictional "interludes" in his biography of Dickens.

In his second novel, *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983), Ackroyd adopts a distinctly different approach to the presentation of his narrative.[4] In this case we have a novel which self-consciously masquerades as an autobiographical memoir. Having developed his approach towards the significance of drag and transvestism in his earlier study, Ackroyd dresses his novel in the personality of an imagined Oscar Wilde, one who is substantially proximate to the historically factual figure. That figure is, as with almost any historical or historically represented figure, almost immediately problematic. The elements of impersonation and pastiche, which act as the literary aspects of Ackroyd's sartorial concerns in his earlier book on drag and transvestism, are fully introduced for the first time in this novel and might be seen in terms of what could be characterised as ventriloquised autobiography.[5]

---

[1] Ackroyd, *Great Fire of London*, p. 37.
[2] Ibid., p. 95.
[3] Ibid., p. 169.
[4] Peter Ackroyd, *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (London: Abacus, 1984 [1983]).
[5] See Lewis, *My Words Echo Thus*, pp. 15-16: "As Ackroyd observes, '[Ezra Pound] often elicits great poetry from the manipulation of another's voice . . .'" (p. 16).

Ackroyd's Wilde provides his own, facetiously Derridean, comment on this venture less than two pages into the novel: "I am an 'effect' merely: the meaning of my life exists in the minds of others and no longer in my own."[1] The novel is presented as a dated journal, the second entry of which includes a characteristically playful, self-advertising form of speculation on the nature of its publication, down to its frontispiece, material form, and even the conditions of its reading:

THE MODERN WOMAN'S GUIDE
TO OSCAR WILDE

A Romance

"I owe everything to it." Mr Bernard Shaw

"I always consult this book when I travel." Mrs Patrick Cambell

Only one copy will be printed, on Japanese vellum,
and exhibited in the Natural History Museum.[2]

While the numerous references to literary history and actual historical events tend to be provided in the form of relatively subtle or subdued allusions in Ackroyd's first novel, in the second they are much more overt; this is also true of the religious element in the book, which begins with Wilde visiting a church and meditating on the significance of the life of St. Julien-le-Pauvre; that particular church commemorates two saints of the same name, Julian of Le Mans (ca. 3rd century) and another, who came from the Dauphiné region. Many of Wilde's observations on his life and writing suggest a substantially proximate relation to Ackroyd's own. Walter Pater urges Wilde to direct his writing skills towards prose rather than poetry: "Poetry, he said, was the higher art; but prose was the more difficult."[3] In relation to poetry, however, Wilde observes how he has found a way of expressing his direct concerns by adopting a voice which is not his own: "By wearing the mask of my own age, I realised that I could express quite directly my own feelings . . . I found myself borrowing another's voice."[4] Ackroyd is, in part, able to express his own approach through someone else expressing the same approach in different but comparable circumstances. The novel is substantially furnished with relevant historical research and speculation of a kind comparable to that found in the more directly polemical *Notes for a New Culture*, while being equally full of a multiplicity of narratives which include different approaches to story-telling. Fictional, autobiographical and historical narratives become intertwined precisely because story-telling is such an integral aspect of Wilde's own *oeuvre*. Wilde's artistic and social abilities, his relation to sainthood and martyrdom (expressed in his own modern, conspicuously radical and sexual fashion), and his cultural and sexual ambiguity are woven together and also related to the art of dressing up:

[1] Ackroyd, *Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, p. 2.
[2] Ibid., p. 6.
[3] Ibid., p. 37.
[4] Ibid., p. 38.

> I dressed like a Celt rather than an Englishman. My buttonhole cost me 10/6, and, like all expensive things, it expired at once; it became my fancy to purchase a new article of clothing each day—I was a saint collecting my own relics. Dress is the most complete representation of modern civilization after all, and I sailed through life on cloth like Faust upon his mantle.[1]

This autobiography, or final testament, in many respects follows the tradition of the writer reflecting upon the significance of his own life, its possible vanities, and its search for the good, truth and love, but is always, like Wilde, wittily ambiguous in its approach to a time-honoured tradition of writing an apology for one's own life or the *hubris* and fall of the great man and, in the Christian tradition, his possible claims to sainthood. Towards the end of his testament, the figure of Wilde's Happy Prince is deployed, but not for the first time, in connection with reflections on the significance of relating past to present:

> There is a picture of a young man in the Louvre—a prince, I believe, and his eyes are sad. I would like to see that picture again before I die. I would like to return to that past—to enter another man's heart. In that moment of transition, when I was myself and someone else, of my own time and in another's, the secrets of the universe would stand revealed.[2]

The vision presented can be seen as religious, eternal and cosmic, though also as homoerotic. In his first novel, Ackroyd includes some more straightforwardly, near deadpan, scenes involving homosexual relations that are depicted in relatively explicit fashion even for the time of their publication, given that the novel, like almost all of Ackroyd's work, is aimed at a relatively general rather than a specific readership. In the second novel, Wilde's homosexuality is certainly acknowledged but the more graphic details of his sexual encounters are not foregrounded. This can be seen as a decision both of the fictional Wilde and of Ackroyd, in different ways. Ackroyd's Wilde may be keen, in his final testament, not to over-advertise his primary sexual predilections; Ackroyd may be equally determined not to satisfy the sexually salacious with a gossipy rendition of the more spicy aspects of Wilde's sexual indiscretions. At the same time, the metaphysical and the physical, love and (homo)sexuality are almost irrevocably intertwined in the appreciation of a figure of art which is that of "a young man . . . a prince."

Ackroyd's first biography proper was *T. S. Eliot* (1984).[3] Here, as in those of his books which appeared earlier, Ackroyd opens with a "Prelude," echoing the title of one of Eliot's own works. This focuses upon Eliot's declaration, made towards the end of his life, that there were only two periods of his life when he was happy, at the same time proclaiming its own intention to concentrate primarily on the years in between these two periods, when most of Eliot's best poetry was written. Emphasizing that connections will be made between the life and the writing, Ackroyd also concludes that this involves an "attempt to elucidate the mystery of that connection."[4] All of these considerations are provided in a relatively short, prefatory paragraph, but

[1] Ackroyd, *Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, p. 89.
[2] Ibid., p. 181.
[3] Peter Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot* (London: Penguin, 1993 [1984]).
[4] Ibid., p. 13.

the notion of "mystery" makes an appearance, albeit in close proximity to subsequent elucidation.

Like the first novel, the biography appears to present itself as a relatively modest and conventional piece of work. At the same time, Ackroyd pursues certain aspects of Eliot's character which chime particularly with some of his own concerns, as expressed in the second novel and elsewhere. Ackroyd appears particularly interested in Eliot's exceptional aptitude for imitation, which extends to his literary abilities. He observes of Eliot that "In his early poetry he becomes charged with the style of the poet who 'possesses' him, as if he could only find himself within another."[1] This observation is later extended with reference to one made by Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), whose class in symbolic logic Eliot attended in 1914. Quoting Russell, Ackroyd notes of the British philosopher that

> He characterised Eliot in terms that after a while will become familiar: ". . . altogether impeccable in taste but has no vigour of life or enthusiasm"—Here in Russell's description of the well-dressed and impeccable young man, we have a glimpse of the philosopher as dandy. It is not that the principles or ideas which he affirmed were not genuine ones, or even that they did not significantly affect him, but rather that he could both understand and distance himself from them. He could play with them, in that intense way we play with things we hold most dear.[2]

By the end of this paragraph, the reader might be tempted to wonder whether it is they who are being addressed or whether Ackroyd is communing with himself, Eliot, or more likely both, as well as the reader. Eliot appears to display characteristics which are not incompatible with those of his biographer. Ackroyd, while providing a highly competent and ground-breaking biography, particularly given the problems faced in terms of accessing information about aspects of Eliot's personal life and his relationship with his first wife, is not beyond being not only intense but also playful. One can witness this tendency in Ackroyd's account of Eliot's fateful meeting with his first wife-to-be Vivien Haigh Wood (1888-1947), where its rendering might almost have been taken from the pages of a slightly updated version of *Middlemarch:*

> Now this virginal, perplexed, intellectually over-refined but emotionally immature young man encountered an adventurous and vivacious young woman . . . And what would she have seen in turn in Eliot—apart from a very clever young man who flattered her self-regard by becoming infatuated with her . . . here are the makings of their unhappy life together: from the beginning they misunderstood each other's characters.[3]

The mildly whimsical, maternally philosophical, element in Ackroyd's narrative incorporates an undertone which is altogether more serious and partly echoes the approach taken to inter-subjectivity and human relationships and their own relation to a broader universe which one can arguably find not only in the novels produced by George Eliot (1819-1880), the nineteenth century translator of Baruch Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670) and *Ethica Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata* (1677), but in

---

[1] Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot*, p. 27.
[2] Ibid., p. 51.
[3] Ibid., p. 63.

Ackroyd's own first novel: "Any human relationship is poised on so delicate an equilibrium that it can be disturbed and destroyed in a moment."[1] *The Great Fire of London* is more immediately concerned with the contingent and precarious nature of human relationships at every social level. *T. S. Eliot* devotes itself more to the nature of an actual person's experiential and literary development. Eliot's strangeness, an aspect of his character of which, it is observed, he himself was acutely aware, is again later observed in both meticulous and comic detail. The Sitwells are observed noticing at dinner "that he was wearing face powder: 'pale but distinctly green, the colour of forced lily-of-the-valley.'"[2] Their observation confirms what Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) thought she had seen, "green powder on his face . . ."[3] The reasons for this phenomenon are precisely speculated upon by Ackroyd, as are Eliot's meditations on his own behavioural peculiarities.

This concern with the details of what it was like to be *with* Eliot as a way of exploring what it was to *be* Eliot suggests a kinship with one of the major obsessions of many writers of this period, which was what it was like, and what it meant to be, alive from moment to moment in relation to expressing the nature of existence. Virginia Woolf is an obvious case in point in this respect. That Ackroyd is more interested in writing a biography of the more immediately enigmatic or mysterious, introverted Eliot rather than, say, another biography of Woolf or D. H. Lawrence (1885-1930) might be attributed to a series of factors. The most obvious, clearly, is that no substantial literary biography of Eliot had yet been written; he was a man (Ackroyd has not so far written a biography of a woman); he had a very significant religious element to his character and, despite, or perhaps because of, being American, he eventually wished to become British, or more precisely, English. These last two factors would seem to be strongly connected. Eliot's religious inclinations and their powerful link to his notions of an English tradition are explored in considerable detail in Ackroyd's book, as one would expect, at least in retrospect, from a biographer whose inclinations strongly parallel those of his subject in this area.

Previous to writing *Dickens*, Ackroyd had published a further three novels and was probably in the middle of at least conceiving a fourth; these are *Hawksmoor* (1985), *Chatterton* (1987), *First Light* (1989), and *English Music* (1992).[4] In *Hawksmoor*, Ackroyd adds to his interest in ventriloquising a historical narrator the technique of combining a double, juxtaposed, past-and-present plot with a whodunnit detective element, both of which themselves combine to provide a form of postmodern double-coding, to use the term apparently coined by Charles Jencks (*b.* 1939) in the period when they were written.[5] This conscious attempt by Ackroyd to provide an element of popular cultural architectonics within his narrative framework might in part explain the relative commercial success of the novel in terms of its positive reception in critical circles. It also ties in with Ackroyd's broader aim of including all elements of society within his textual church, particularly in terms of a potential readership.

---

[1] Ackroyd, *Great Fire of London*, p. 130.

[2] Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot*, p. 136.

[3] Ibid.

[4] The following are by Peter Ackroyd: *Hawksmoor* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1985); *Chatterton* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987); *First Light* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989); and *English Music* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1992).

[5] For a helpful introduction to this and a good portion of the endlessly vexed usage of the term "postmodern," see Hans Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History* (London: Routledge, 1995).

Before moving to a brief consideration of each of these novels and their relation to Ackroyd's second biography, it might be observed that each of them deals in greater detail with fundamental aspects of artistic genre. *Hawksmoor* concerns itself with elements of the significance of architecture; a painting plays a major role in *Chatterton*. The title of *English Music* also refers to the tapestry of artistic production produced within the context of a national imagination, thereby prefiguring the later, popular cultural history presented in *Albion: The Origins of the English Imagination* (2002);[1] the music of William Byrd (1539-1623), in particular, and other related figures, notably Henry Purcell (1659-1695), plays a prominent role in the novel. Literary allusions abound in all of Ackroyd's novels; and in later works like *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994)[2] there is an increasing preoccupation with aspects of popular culture such as the music-hall. *The Great Fire of London*, it might be recalled, is centred around the making of an exceptionally ambitious film version of *Little Dorrit*, a project probably already being undertaken by Christine Edzard (*b.* 1945) and her colleagues at about the time the novel was published.

As in that first novel, Ackroyd plays with the names of his characters, so that Hawksmoor turns out not to be the name of the historical architect but the detective who lives in his spiritual-historical shadow. The novel focuses more precisely on the older, "historical" part of London in the East-End and takes part of its inspiration from the speculative urban gothic writing of one of Ackroyd's friends and fellow London writers, Iain Sinclair (*b.* 1943), who by this time had completed his essay, substantially derived from Thomas De Quincey's "On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts" (1827), on Hawksmoor's churches, and a novel loosely related to the Jack the Ripper murders of the late nineteenth century.[3] All of these elements appear in *Hawksmoor*. Barry Lewis, in his reading of the novel, makes reference to them but focuses primarily on the way in which aspects of modernism influence Ackroyd's aesthetic, including James Joyce but particularly T. S. Eliot, likening Ackroyd's use of shadow to Eliotic historical echoes as employed in *The Four Quartets* (1943).[4]

If we move to the fiction published after *T. S. Eliot* and approximately contemporaneous with the publication of *Dickens, Chatterton* is arguably an even more ambitious novel than its predecessors, producing the same kinds of connection between past and present but producing a more radical questioning of relations between authenticity and forgery. If this is an apparently "postmodern" thematic, Lewis's shrewd observations on the significance of repetition and related themes in the novel might lead one to see not merely a relation to Baudrillard's sociological reflections on the nature of the contemporary simulacrum but also the more complexly philosophical interrogation of the significance of this field by Gilles Deleuze in *Difference and Repetition* (1968), *The Logic of Sense* (1969), and related works.[5] In *First Light*, Ackroyd goes back further in time, uncharacteristically providing his novel with a location beyond that of London, since its concerns are with the pre-historic, where the primary traditional location for speculation regarding this area is the south-west of England

---

[1] Peter Ackroyd, *Albion: The Origins of the English Imagination* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2002).

[2] Peter Ackroyd, *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (London: Sinclair Stevenson, 1994).

[3] See "Nicholas Hawksmoor, His Churches" (1975), in Iain Sinclair, *Lud Heat and Suicide Bridge* (London: Vintage, 1995), pp. 13-38; Iain Sinclair, *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* (London: Goldmark, 1987).

[4] Lewis, *My Words Echo Thus*, pp. 37-45.

[5] The following are by Gilles Deleuze in translation: *Difference and Repetition* (London: Athlone Press, 1994 [1968]); *The Logic of Sense* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990 [1969]).

and the barrows and henges in the region of Salisbury Plain, most notably Stonehenge. The novel provides a series of intertextual exchanges with some of the works of Thomas Hardy (1840-1928), perhaps the novelist who has most successfully made that construction a part of the English imagination and who is one of the nineteenth-century writers who most radically dramatises the existential implications of Darwin's scientific discoveries and their relation to the discoveries of a past much older than the Biblical. The details of Ackroyd's approach need not concern us here, but what is of interest is his attempt to include elements of scientific progress in a broader, more catholic, and optimistic view of the universe and its potential scientific discontents.

The novel Ackroyd published after *Dickens*, *English Music*, returns us to London. As Lewis observes, one of the features which elicited some positive aspects in reviews of the novel was its emotionally impressive treatment of the father-son relationship. Ackroyd's father, as far as one can gather, was and is a significantly absent presence in his life, one regularly present, in various forms, in different aspects of his writing. Although noting Ackroyd's distaste for Freudian readings of literature, and perhaps of the human psyche, Lewis, at the same time, sees elements in his work that share kinship with the substantially Freudian approach to serious poetic production of the literary critic Harold Bloom (*b.* 1930).[1] The claim made here will not be that Ackroyd's God is simply a replacement for a lost father-figure; there is very little that is simple about Ackroyd's fiction, despite its relatively transparent, though deftly casuistical, mode of expression. What might be remarked upon in relation to Ackroyd's approach is that it tends to move away from, if it ever seriously begins to engage with, immediately political questions about the way in which post-war British society, as well as Western, and consequently, global, society in general, has developed. The explicit hostility to overly sociological tendencies in English literary criticism voiced in *Notes for a New Culture* would seem to have been replaced, in the fiction, by a more complexly quietistic stance which tends to remain silent regarding the rise of neo-conservative and authoritarian social and political tendencies in the last two decades of the twentieth century; whether this is a mark of tacit approval is at least left to the reader's judgment. What may be of interest, as we now proceed in the second part of this section to an investigation of aspects of Ackroyd's approach to Dickens, is how Ackroyd, as Dickens's biographer, negotiates his relation to a writer significantly antipathetic to the church, among other major institutions of the period, and who is, in his broad attitude, as Ackroyd generally concedes, a social democrat. Dickens is a writer who feels that things should actually and actively be done, as well as felt, if the world is to become a better rather than a worse place in a time of such rapid social, cultural and technological flux.

Dickens can reasonably be regarded as the most ambitious and formally radical of Ackroyd's biographical ventures. As Lewis observes, it constitutes "Ackroyd's most sustained experiment in interanimating the genres of biography and fiction."[2] As with the biography of T. S. Eliot, the precise peculiarity of the man is an intimate concern of the Dickens biography, but whereas with T. S. Eliot Ackroyd sees himself as faced with a man peculiarly conscious of his own peculiarity in other people's eyes, in the case of Charles Dickens, Ackroyd eventually proposes an almost inverse characterization:

[1] Lewis, *My Words Echo Thus*, pp. 44 and 66.
[2] Ibid., p. 60.

> It seems clear that he did not himself always properly understand the nature of his own writing, just as the absence of introspection suggests that he never really understood the force of his own personality. He never realized how strange a writer he was, just as he never saw what others saw: how strange a man he was.[1]

As in the biography of Eliot, Ackroyd is keen to discover elements of religious experience or thinking in his subject. With Eliot, this is not an immediately challenging proposition; but, given Dickens's antipathy to most institutions, including the church, the challenge offered is initially more demanding.

Early on in the biography, Ackroyd has, in this respect, already set out a portion of his quietly tendentious wares: "even if Charles Dickens was not properly introduced to the beauties and mysteries of Christianity, he found beauties elsewhere."[2] This claim perhaps indicates as much, or more about, Peter Ackroyd, the biographer, than about Charles Dickens, his subject; religion, or its Christian, and given the characterization, its Roman Catholic form, is to be discovered through the mystery of beauty. But Ackroyd is able to find more direct links between the Roman Catholic Church and Dickens's potential susceptibilities to its charms. He considers the implications of Dickens's experience, in Genoa, while Dickens was on one of his European tours, of a dream that might partly have been inspired by a visit to the Palazzo Peschiere, a building which was reputed, according to Dickens himself, "[to] be very badly haunted indeed."[3] His dream was of Mary Hogarth, his wife's sister and, due to her tragically early death and Dickens's already intense feelings for her, the idealized woman *par excellence* of his early years. In the dream, she appears, this time in Ackroyd's words (how close they are to those of Dickens's memoirs is not made entirely clear), as "a Spirit wrapped in blue drapery, like a Madonna by Raphael."[4] This dream encounter is then transformed by Ackroyd into a dialogue from a drama, leaving the reader in considerable doubt as to how much of the narration and dramatization of the experience is provided by Dickens and how much by his current biographer. The final exchange between "Dickens" and his interlocutor, "The Spirit," moves to a discussion of the Roman Catholic faith:

> *Dickens:* But answer me one other question! What is the True religion! You think, as I do, that the Form of religion does not so greatly matter, if we try to do good? Or perhaps the Roman Catholic is the best? Perhaps it makes one think of God oftener, and believe in him more steadily?
>
> *The Spirit:* For *you*, it is the best.[5]

Having tendentiously dramatised the encounter, Ackroyd moves on to a potentially more prosaic explanation of Dickens's dream, but one which still insists on relating Dickens's imagination to the significance of the Roman Catholic Church:

---

[1] Ackroyd, *Dickens*, p. 493.
[2] Ibid., p. 47.
[3] Ibid., p. 462.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid., p. 463.