

**ENCOUNTERING 'THIS SEASON'S RETRIEVAL':
HISTORICAL FICTION, LITERARY POSTMODERNISM
AND THE NOVELS OF PETER ACKROYD**

by

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Abstract

“Encountering ‘this season’s retrieval’: Historical Fiction, Literary Postmodernism and the Novels of Peter Ackroyd” engages the novels Peter Ackroyd has published, and situates them within broader generic considerations and critical dialogue. Part I, an extended prefatorial apparatus, places Ackroyd and his published fiction within three historico-critical contexts: the problem of author-as-reliable-source and the disparate histories of (a) the historical novel and (b) postmodernism in general (and literary postmodernism in particular). By interrogating the histories and points-of-contention of these areas, this Part aims to problematize critical discourse enveloping Ackroyd's fiction.

Part II, comprised of four chapters, discusses specific groupings of Ackroyd's novels. After providing an overview of relevant aspects of the novels and their reception by critics, Chapter A, “Moulding History with Pastiche in The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde, Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem and Milton in America,” considers the multiple functioning of pastiche—often considered a mainstay postmodern implement—in Ackroyd's work. The chapter concludes that rather than achieving a singular effect in the novels, pastiche works in divergent manners and confounds the reading of past historical actuality they ostensibly represent. Chapter B, “The Presence of the Past: Comedic and Non-Realist Historicism in The Great Fire of London and First Light,” provides an overview of relevant aspects of the novels, and then analyzes how the presence of comedy in otherwise sombre historical fiction interrupts the realism of the narrative. This chapter argues that while camp comic effects disrupt the authority of quasi-historiographic techniques they cannot fully subvert realism and so create a suspensive modality. Chapter C, “Past!Present: The Uses of History in Hawksmoor, Chatterton, The House of Doctor Dee and English Music,” interrogates elements of the past-present fugue trajectories of these novels in order to problematize schematic readings of their supposed cultural politics.

Finally, Chapter D, "Those Conventional Concluding Remarks: The Plato Papers, (National) History and Politics," places Ackroyd's most recent novel (one uncharacteristically set in the future) within the preoccupations of his earlier fiction. The chapter concludes with a brief outline of future scholarship that would investigate the national Englishness constructed throughout Ackroyd's biographical and novelistic work.

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Encountering 'this season's retrieval':
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Part I:
The Prefatory and the Introductory; or, The Situation of the Novel(ist), in Consideration of
Authorship and the Potted,
Contentious Histories of Historical Fiction and
(Literary) Postmodernism

Why A Historical?

There are many aspects of writing historical fiction, many problems and many challenges. Some of these are common to all types of writing, others are particular to the genre. A historical can be every bit as gripping a read as a contemporary novel, and may be even more so. An outstanding one will linger in the minds of its readers for many years: Margaret Mitchell's Gone With The Wind, one of many notable first novels, is a classic example. But, far from being easier to write than contemporary fiction, it must be faced that historicals are, arguably, more demanding. So let us look at some of the reasons which tempt us to have a go.

Not Because It Looks Easier—It's Not

A historical novel may look like an easy option . . .

Rhona Martin, Writing Historical Fiction [a guide]

If, as a translated Michel Foucault contended in 1971, “[w]hat is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origins; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity” (1977 142), then the jumble of things found at the base of this project consists of books (and yet more books) and an organizing intelligence whose own style of contemplation is no exemplum of rationality, linearity or focus. The foundational books comprise two handfuls of novels—some twenty seven hundred pages of fiction—published by Peter Ackroyd between 1982 and 1999, as well as a much smaller handful of critical work that has begun to examine, analyze, classify and situate these novels as exhibiting X, belonging to Y or truly being an instance of Z. Contiguous with these latter pages are related fields of studies with whose tradition they engage and with which they partake in a mode of dialogue.

While the ten novels may be said to represent or embody cases of X, Y or Z, even the scantiest of knowledge of theories of the novel genre—as promulgated by as disparate (and arbitrarily selected) a set of writers as Bakhtin, Leavis, Girard, Goldmann, Lukács and Watt—will point to the complex polyvocality of the genre, and hint in turn at what might be called the genre’s irreducibility, if not uncontainability. Of course, such an uncontainability would appear instantly to work against systemizing gestures typically enacted by critics. Though this study takes as axiomatic the fundamental irreducibility of the genre, it certainly does not disavow the possibility of productive discussion of traits, tropes and tendencies in individual novels or, indeed, an entire oeuvre. What it aims to dismantle (at least partially), however, is an ever-popular encapsulating approach to works of fiction whose principal effect is to securely situate a work within a stable tradition—though often at the cost of simplifying both work and tradition. Criticism of the novels published by Peter Ackroyd is just one instance of this popular critical tendency. To posit—as many have—that “Peter Ackroyd is a writer of postmodern fiction,” for instance,

requires an extraordinarily selective reading of Ackroyd's novels as well as a feasible working model of the notoriously and hugely ambiguous term, "postmodern." That kind of critical system-building entails distortion and suppression, and as such requires no small degree of scepticism.

The situation of the novel becomes complicated still further when placed in the context of something that Edward Said has described as the "worldliness" (34) of a text. He explains:

The point is that texts have ways of existing that even in their most rarified form are always enmeshed in circumstance, time, place, and society—in short, they are in the world, and hence worldly. Whether a text is preserved or put aside for a period, whether it is on a library shelf or not, whether it is considered dangerous or not: these matters have to do with a text's being in the world, which is a more complicated matter than the private process of reading. The same implications are undoubtedly true of critics in their capacities as readers and writers in the world. (35)

While Said's own critical gesture stands in partial service to his need to dispute early 1980s' criticism—which he believed had "placed undue emphasis on the limitlessness of interpretation" (39)—my more literal reading and (re)use of his term is designed to point out the fact that each novel has been published into a dispersed marketplace and then read and reviewed globally as well as subjected to intermittent (albeit global) scholarly scrutiny. And lest it be forgotten, the marketing divisions of the multinational publishing groups with whom Peter Ackroyd (posed as the text's source) holds his contracts, actively pursue the visibility of their author on television and in print interviews. These processes of dissemination produce an ambiguous and multiplicitous text-author identity that also saturates diverse discursive fields. (It is of course commonplace for some celebrated figure—in the thoroughly mediated social circles of film, politics, sports, arts—to be subject to the inquisitiveness of others. Media pundits speculate on the motivations of a politician's off-hand comment, the changes of style in the Hollywood star of the moment, or a banned-drugged incident involving a well-paid football player who also represents a multinational sports-wear conglomerate and has been generally considered a fine role

model for the young North American male demographic So it goes increasingly with literary figures. As publishing concerns—newly infused with the marketing ethos and funding capability of conglomerate capitalism—produce celebrated “star” figures in their much-interviewed, award-winning, best-selling authors (whose very incomes, personal quarrels and mode of attire are hotly reported in literary pages in newspapers around the globe), the kind of gossipy speculation formerly reserved for other, more popularly known icons now turns to the formerly rarely observed (when not wholly hermetic) writer of literature. There is, moreover, an ancillary development in the overlapping circles of literary journalism and academic scholarship. In no special order, for example, a writer may be known to be well and widely reviewed, win a literary prize, negotiate a spectacular contract with a high-profile publisher. The religious beliefs, marital woes, public spats or (in the case of Martin Amis) orthodontic transformations of that same author are reported in near equal volume. Authors are conflated with their work and with the bits of information that comprise their dispersed mediated identity. The essential nature of the celebrated author/author’s work is so inextricably bound with their media identity that the two become one through the silent process of naturalization. In like manner, critical endeavour situates the work of the (always already mediated) author within fields of apparently irresolute politico-cultural significance. The effect is contradictory, at once stabilizing and/or categorizing author and work (author is X, work is Y) and rendering firm the terms of definition (author is a realist, the work is experimental) while effectively obscuring the fact that the terms themselves are in fact subject to historical evolution, open to interpretation and by no means transparent and self-evident or set like so much poured concrete. To say “Author X is a realist” is also to risk asking “How is ‘realism’ defined (and why) and how does Author A fit into that category? (and if she does not, what does that signify for author, critic and category?)”)

A contemporary celebrity-author, Peter Ackroyd provides an illuminating case-study of both this newly mediated and disseminated figure as well as the critical morass at

its centre. The sample categorizing sentence I offer here—"Peter Ackroyd writes historical novels in a postmodern vein"—sounds sensible enough in part because is a passable distillation of numerous citations of the author found in book reviews, newspaper articles, interviews and scholarly articles and studies. Though it declares something ostensibly matter-of-fact, if we stare at the sentence long enough, the apparent self-evident stability of the terms slowly erodes. For instance, if Peter Ackroyd writes remarkable "postmodernist historical novels" (as Amy Elias, Geoffrey Lord, Malcolm Bradbury and Brian Finney note), is a noteworthy practitioner of "historiographic metafiction" (as judged by Linda Hutcheon, Susana Onega, Alison Lee and Aleid Fokkema) or is one of the most famous British writers of the "historicised" novel (as Steven Connor states), it is equally clear that terms like "postmodern" and "historical novel" have histories (and hence are subject to both interpretation and temporal change). The histories of these terms reveal critical differences, mutations of form and, to borrow Michel Foucault's (translator's) felicitous words, "haphazard conflicts" (1977 154). So that sample sentence has now suddenly gaped open, become a veritable wound/cavern/orifice (please choose the apt metaphor) that demands illumination. Broken open like a nut, "Peter Ackroyd writes historical novels in a postmodern vein" requires examination, a taxonomy, some elucidation. Any discussion of my hypothetical and distillatory and ostensibly revelatory Ur-sentence, then, necessitates another, prefatory discussion of the terms which comprise it. If critics in general claim that "Peter Ackroyd writes historical novels in a postmodern vein," it is crucial to comprehend the undeniable history and variety of the words being employed. Overlooking these vital factors can only serve to hamper productive discussion and assure the success of critical approaches in need of closer examination.

This project's first section, "The Prefatory and the Introductory; or, The Situation of the Novel(ist), in Consideration of Authorship and the Potted, Contentious Histories of Historical Fiction and (Literary) Postmodernism," might be best understood as a prefatory frame. Unlike the normally brief and introductory preface, however, the admittedly lengthy

one here foregrounds, contributes to and informs the discussion that follows. It also reflects my own working through of the complexities of key terms and concepts, and by doing so may prove illuminating or at least memory refreshing for additional readers whose familiarity with the history of historical fiction or of postmodernism I cannot presume. The four chapters subsequent to Part I—which examine the permutations of comedy, significance of pastiche, the modalities of historical-use and nationality-profiling/constructing in the novels of Peter Ackroyd—gain greater resonance only when they are placed in context to the matters raised here and speculated on in advance. These concerns—discussed individually over the following sections—include the troubling, multiplicitous positioning of the author himself, the lively, epoch-spanning history of the historical novel and the contentious and complex history of postmodernism (particularly literary postmodernism). Again, the solid statement, “Peter Ackroyd writes historical novels in a postmodern vein,” necessitates a situating of the putatively straightforward words that are its elements. Only then can discussion of the meanings of history in the novels of Peter Ackroyd proceed with the precision that it demands.

1. Portrait of the Artist as Multiplicitous Simultaneity

A few savage tribes eat [books], but reading is the only method of assimilation revealed to the West. The reader must sit down alone and struggle with the writer, and this the pseudo-scholar will not do. He would rather relate a book to the history of its time, to events in the life of the author, to the events it describes, above all to some tendency. As soon as he can use the word “tendency” his spirits rise, and though those of his audience may sink they often pull out their pencils at this point and make a note, under the belief that a tendency is portable. E.M. Forster, 1927 (8)

No, that morality idea comes from the desire of the literary critic to find moral lessons in literature. That’s the great vice which the English and Americans share, the belief that great works of art are available for moral purposes, for elucidation. But I never met anyone who became a better person for reading a novel But there are many people indoctrinated with this belief that somehow literature is a branch of ethics, or a branch of sociology. A deep fear of pleasure, of course, lies at the heart of the academic study of literature. Whereas all I want to do is give people a bit of pleasure, a bit of slap and tickle. It’s true! Peter Ackroyd, 1988 (McGrath 47)

What we discern as “history” is, after all, only the sum of various interpretations of the past The past exists only as an extension of the

present, or, rather, as a myth by which we choose to explain the present. If Mrs Thatcher chooses to emphasise the virtues of the Victorian middle class, she is no less “right” or “wrong” than those who wish to emphasise the disadvantages of the Victorian working class.

Peter Ackroyd, 1983 (1983b 16)

The author mediated

Who is Peter Ackroyd? In what way does it matter? There is a direct answer to the first question that, by happy coincidence, points out an answer to the second. Peter Ackroyd is a male born in London, England on October 5, 1949. He grew up in council-flat housing with parents named Graham and Audrey (Whiteside). Graham Ackroyd subsequently deserted the family (Riddell 20), leaving his wife and her mother with the task of raising the son. After attending what he calls “a bad school run by Benedictine monks” (Onega 1996 209), Saint Benedict in Ealing, Ackroyd studied at Cambridge (First-class Honours (English); M.A. (1971)) and Yale (1971-73). His thesis at Cambridge focussed on American literature, specifically James Baldwin, Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison. “The Goldfish Sonata,” Ackroyd’s début as a published poet, appeared in the March 1971 issue of The Curiously Strong, a Cambridge poetry journal devoted to experimental work (Onega 1998 1-2). Later that same year, Ouch, Ackroyd’s first collection of poems, was gathered in an edition of The Curiously Strong wholly devoted to Ackroyd’s verse. Other poetry collections include London Lickpenny (1973) and Country Life (1978); The Diversions of Purley, and Other Poems, published in 1987, combines and retitles poems from the two earlier volumes. Ackroyd received a Mellon Fellowship in 1971 and studied at Yale for two years. There, he wrote Notes for a New Culture: An Essay on Modernism (1976), a cultural history and artistic manifesto. Notes calls for a revivification of English culture and a rejection of a humanism which, Ackroyd claims, “has turned out to be an empty strategy, without philosophical content or definitive form” (147).

Following his return to London, Ackroyd worked for several years as a journalist. He was employed in a variety of editorial positions by the Spectator: he acted as literary editor (1973-1977), managing editor (1977-1981) and film critic (until 1986). Since the mid-1980s, Ackroyd has been a principal book reviewer for the London Times. During his tenure as a magazine editor, Ackroyd published Dressing Up: Transvestism and Drag, the History of an Obsession (1979), a historiographic work that investigates cross-dressing, a phenomenon the author deems a “fundamentally inexplicable” behaviour that expresses a “repeated need for inversion and disorder” (10).¹ While writing Dressing Up, Ackroyd simultaneously carried out research on Ezra Pound, which led to the publication of the first in a prodigious number of biographies. They include Ezra Pound and His World (1981), T.S. Eliot (1984), Dickens (1990) (distinct from the supplementary work, Introduction to Dickens (1991), and the introductory essays for twenty Dickens titles published by Mandarin), Blake (1995), The Life of Thomas More (1998) and London: The Biography (2000). In 1981, furthermore, Ackroyd began to write a series of well-received and best-selling novels. To date those novels are: The Great Fire of London (1982), The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde (1983), Hawksmoor (1985), Chatterton (1987), First Light (1989), English Music (1992), The House of Doctor Dee (1993), Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem (1994; U.S. title: The Trial of Elizabeth Cree), Milton in America (1996) and The Plato Papers (1999). In addition to his Times of London reviews, Ackroyd’s regularly writes on books for The New Yorker and The New York Times. Currently at work on a biography of Shakespeare, Ackroyd is also well-attuned to the nuances of public relations; his “voice” is thoroughly dispersed in the media upon the publication of any of his books. In addition to his routine television and print interviews, Ackroyd has recently made news because of the £650,000 publisher Basil Blackwell paid him for his Dickens and Blake biographies and the £1.24 million contract he arranged with

¹Curiously, later works like The Plato Papers (1999) and London: The Biography (2000) purge this title altogether from their otherwise thorough listing of Ackroyd’s previous publications.

Sinclair Stevenson for the eight books that began with The Life of Thomas More, continued with The Plato Papers and which will include biographies of Turner, Defoe and Shakespeare. Even the AIDS-related death of Ackroyd's longtime partner, Brian Kuhn, in 1994 was widely reported in British daily newspapers. Prodigious book publication, noteworthy eccentricity and eyebrow-raising monetary exchanges have, in short, propelled Ackroyd into the kind of literary celebrity possessed by a Martin Amis (or perhaps a Dame Barbara Cartland).

What the preceding breathless recitation of astounding facts and figures connotes is that Peter Ackroyd maintains a significant presence in the British literary landscape; that, as his oracular journalist friend Brian Appleyard predicts,² he may be "by increasingly common consent . . . likely to be one of the few English writers of his generation who will be read in a hundred years' time" (50). (And/or: "He is also, again by common consent, the funniest man in London, a luncher of genius and a brilliant drinking companion" (50).) So, Ackroyd is a boon companion, sells many books and is paid handsomely for his efforts. His authorship has no little authority. Yet the questions—Who is Peter Ackroyd? In what way does it matter?—have they been answered? One answer states that Peter Ackroyd is a brilliant and prolific writer, a winner of prizes, stupendous contracts and popular praise. The litany of occasionally banal details supplies a familiar, journalistic kind of representation, but leaves much of Ackroyd (and, more specifically, his work) untouched. After all, "brilliant" or "prolific" are virtually useless as critical descriptors despite their impressive sound. Another reply, my own on a given day, might be, "He's an author I enjoy reading." Again, that does not say much. The point this deliberation inevitably leads to is a relativistic truism: as always, much depends on who talks to whom, on whose words one chooses to disregard or accept. As open-ended as it may seem, this

²Appleyard makes an additional, anonymous—yet authoritative—appearance as a blurb on the paperback edition of The House of Doctor Dee: "'Our most exciting and original writer . . . one of the few English writers of his generation who will be read in a hundred years' time' —Sunday Times."

answer can point out interesting critical turns. Consider the case of Peter Ackroyd's authorship, something that we³ often take at face value: Ackroyd, common sense tells us, is as he has been earlier described. But of course nothing is so simple. For example, some hold that since we live in an age of cultural pluralism—one marked (as the term suggests) by delirious networks of traditions, complicated strata of behaviour and contradictory modes of perceiving existence—there are only ever provisional answers (to any question, really) based on class position, culture, race, gender, etc. At the risk of advocating an absurd or at least unhelpful solipsism, the meaning of "Ackroyd('s work)" is then unique to each individual. Or else (see #3 in this section): we are implicated in postmodernism, a historical epoch and/or aesthetic style noteworthy for what Paolo Portoghesi (after Jean-François Lyotard) eloquently if vaguely calls "the fall of centered systems" (Docherty 1993 311), and hence admire (or deride: where do your ideologies lead you?) someone like Peter Ackroyd for . . . his game-playing, his cheeky subversions, his jouissance. Or else: we—consumers, purchasers of Ackroyd's product—are implicated in postmodernism, a historical epoch and/or aesthetic style marked by what Fredric Jameson famously delineates in apocalyptic colours, "a whole historically original consumers' appetite for a world transformed into sheer images of itself and for pseudo-events and 'spectacles'" (1991 18), and so stare with ovine complacency at a novelist such as Ackroyd and his dazzling legerdemain, his distracting literary pyrotechnics, his elaborate acts of pastiche. Who are we going to believe—and why? If the very nature of "we" alters as much as "Peter Ackroyd," how can "we" even begin to discourse? What might it mean to study a book or an author in such a cultural milieu? Is there a postmodern manner by which to study a

³A fiction, this "we." It is an illusion-making figure, a narratorial convenience. After all, "we" can mean the presumed handful of readers of this sentence or the unimaginable 357 million citizens of North America—never mind the more than six billion human inhabitants of the planet. In Imagined Communities, Benedict Anderson charts a history of consciousness-of-nation nationalism, and states, "[The nation] is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings" (7).

postmodern novel, a postmodern scholar whose counterpart is the postmodern author? While I am posing these questions with serious intent, it is not certain I am able or willing to answer them here—the terms are so broad and contentious, they have absorbed the attention of entire conferences (and assured countless careers in scholarship). If I am skirting matters of grand philosophy, there are none the less aspects that interest me. Foremost is the twice-iterated question: who is Peter Ackroyd?

Play concerning origins and shell games about authenticity come frequently and easily in the novels and biographies authored by Peter Ackroyd. It is perhaps appropriate, then, that their author-figure “exists” in a hall of mirrors, as a multiplicitous simultaneity, any modality of which may stand in contradiction to another. This sort of ambiguous existence is not news, exactly; it is also a truism to say that individuals express different parts of themselves at different times and to different audiences. And, within the context of literary criticism, it is some three decades since Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes announced⁴ the end of the tyranny of (the cult of) the Author. And from an altogether different a critical milieu, more than five decades have passed since Wimsatt and Beardsley published their nothing-outside-the-poem manifesto, “The Intentional Fallacy.” Some sixty years have passed, too, since E.M. Forster rejected “tendency criticism” in his 1927 Clark

⁴“Writing,” Roland Barthes explains in his 1968 essay, “The Death of the Author,” “is the destruction of every voice, of every point of view” (142). Under the thumb of positivism, “the epitome of capitalist ideology” (143), however, “The author still reigns in the histories of literature, biographies of writers, interviews, magazines, as in the very consciousness of men of letters anxious to unite their person and their work through diaries and memoirs. The image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centred on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions, while criticism still consists for the most part in saying that Baudelaire’s work is the failure of Baudelaire the man The explanation of the work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the author ‘confiding’ in us.” (143)

At the close of his celebrated 1969 essay, “What is an Author?,” Michel Foucault remarks that the “author-function” is a historical construct and as such far from immutable. He envisions a future diminution of the current centrality of authorship: “We can easily imagine a culture where discourse would circulate without any need of an author. Discourses, whatever their status, form, or value, and regardless of our manner of handling them, would unfold in a pervasive anonymity.” (138)

Lecture. Yet despite the undoubted multivalency of Ackroyd, critics and others persist in directly connecting, for example, his public persona—variously: genius, an overdressed camp homosexual, a giggling drunk, a great writer, a bookish antiquarian, “lonely, has no life, is embittered and self-centered” (McGrath 47), and so on—to the putative excessive/inadequate/undeveloped qualities of his literary output. And it is not in journalism alone that this tendency persists. In Peter Ackroyd, the brief and to date singular study of Ackroyd and his oeuvre, Susana Onega often risks contravening the Wimsattian commandment against extracting meaning from the interpreted intention of the author. She in effect returns to Ackroyd’s artistic childhood, and draws from it traits which provide a complete deterministic conceptual framework for the interpretation of his later novels. Onega links statements from Notes for a New Culture (a book Ackroyd himself rejected in an interview with Onega in 1996⁵) to his poetic production in the 1970s, and concludes, “As we shall see, Ackroyd goes on to use the same technique in the writing of his novels” (10). The key, as Freud might have said, lies in his childhood. The gross effect of these acts of portrayal of course is to render a singular, easy-to-comprehend Peter Ackroyd. Whether it is Ackroyd-as-alcoholic or Ackroyd-as-evolution-of-technique, the image works as an explanatory paradigm. The paradigm, as such things are wont to do, neatens via categorization—with causal links the corporeal Ackroyd (a wealthy male living in London at this very moment) joins to the act of writing and to the illuminating, informing intelligence inside all the published work.

If only things were so simple. Anything longer than a cursory glance, however, reveals Ackroyd’s multiplicity. His public self-presentation and representations through media point, to employ Stephen Greenblatt’s words in a new context, at identity as “manipulable, artful process” (2). In other words, it would not be remiss to suggest that

⁵He explains to Onega, “I wouldn’t disown the book, but I would say that my own understanding of things has moved on since I was 20” and “I wouldn’t exactly agree with the thesis of my criticism now, because it was written when I was very young” (218). He alludes to “other forces [and] other contexts” (218) that have gained in significance for him, but does not explain further.

Ackroyd's self-conscious (or not) performances render the tendency to rely on his corporeal authority or intent or control difficult; this lack of solidity in turn works to further question the supposed direct and untroubled relationship between author and text. To illustrate my point and underscore the core unreliability and/or multiplicity of "Peter Ackroyd," let me survey some of the many guises Ackroyd assumes. As for "mediated," my choice here is intended to convey the notion of "Peter Ackroyd" as intrinsically textual. That is, like our understanding of the historical past, we come to know the figure from what we read about him.

Mediated self-presentation (i)—Writer-as-revolutionary

Notes for a New Culture (1976), Ackroyd's "extended essay directed against our [i.e., British] declining national culture," aims to cure the "general malaise of English literature and literary studies" (9). In the essay, Ackroyd judges largely continental European artistic "Modernism" (as expressed by Mallarmé through to Derrida) as vastly superior to the British tradition of literary realism, empiricism and humanism. Ackroyd claims that with very few exceptions, "England is a dispirited nation" which has "a social weakness that runs very deep" (146). The sole remedy for "the failure of our cultural and intellectual tradition" (146), he contends, is swallowing a large dose of continental Modernism—described by Ackroyd an anti-rational, non-representational aesthetic—that will aid the recuperation of the sickly tradition deeply rooted in English culture.

Mediated self-presentation (ii)—Novelist-as-(fraudulent)-historian

In each of his many interviews Ackroyd describes his writerly purpose as centred upon history. The nature of his overall schema regarding history varies from an epic and apparently megalomaniacal investigation of English History to a moderately scoped recreation of a discrete historical moment. In 1992, Ackroyd described his project's modus operandi to John Walsh (1992) with unusual grandiosity: "In the back of my mind on a good day is the thought that I'd love to be able to reinterpret the whole of English culture from the beginning to the end. Sometimes, I set out the areas I haven't covered yet—the

Dark Ages, for instance" (5). More typically, as a novelist whose books observe the English past, Ackroyd has been certain to assert the image of himself as an assiduous student of archeology. In early interviews, he always described his painstaking research. "I wanted to assimilate the voice of the time, to train myself so I could write in that style without self-consciousness"(3), he told Elizabeth Kolbert in 1986. Talking to Walter Ross in 1987 he explained, "The whole point of the exercise in reconstructing the past was to give it immediacy, so I read everything I could from that period with the aim in mind of writing the language as easily as I could write ordinary twentieth-century English. It did take quite a lot of preparation" (3). The salient characteristics of Ackroyd's self-portrait—meticulous research and the perfect translatability of historical consciousness leading to faultless ventriloquism—lend themselves freely to a reading of the author as a highly ethical practitioner of the art of literary historical reproduction.

At the same time, Ackroyd has presented himself as a cavalier pasticheur, a writer who plays fast and furious with the hallmarks of historiography and the historical novelist's vaunted aims of authenticity and verisimilitude. Revealing the genesis of *Hawksmoor* to Patrick McGrath, Ackroyd described his novel as "a patchwork of other people's voices as well as my own. . . . an echo from about 300 different books" (44). His self-described "process of assimilation" was both frantic and haphazard:

The major book was Johnson's dictionary—that was invaluable. . . whenever I had to write a sentence about, say, someone looking out of the window, then I'd look up 'window' in Johnson, and there'd be all sorts of definitions, and phrases with the word in it, and these I also co-opted for the book. So it was a continual process of assimilation, all the way through. I've never admitted this before—I always went along with the tacit assumption that I'd made it all up. In fact I hadn't. But there's nothing wrong with that—it's like montage, similar process I enjoy stealing things if I can. (45)

Walking with Matthew d'Ancona (1993) in Clerkenwell, London after the publication of *The House of Doctor Dee*, Ackroyd said, "[Dee's] house would have been here. But of course I made it all up" (2).

Mediated self-presentation (iii)—Writer-as-provocateur/trickster/liar

"I thought the idea of being a writer was to make things up. I just made it up. She had such a nice laugh, I couldn't resist" (4), Ackroyd told Mark Lawson in 1995. He was referring to a previous interview in which he had informed a journalist that he spent one hundred pounds on each of his weekly visits to the circus. The journalist subsequently passed the information off as a revealing vignette—psychologically illustrative of the aftermath Ackroyd's traumatic childhood. This puckishness extends further than interview high jinks. When pressed by McGrath to clarify his intent in *Hawksmoor*, Ackroyd exclaimed, "I don't know what I'm doing. I don't think I'm aspiring to do anything actually. (Laughter) I'm not!" (45). In a lengthy interview with Susana Onega, Ackroyd narrated the origin of the fictional interludes in his biography of Dickens: "I just got tired of writing a straightforward biography, and I wanted to make it more fun, for me as well as the reader" (213). A moment later (in interview time) he replied "Oh, yes, all the time" to Onega's oddly-phrased query about Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem, "Do you sometimes use historical facts that are not true?"—

Yes, O.K. I don't know why I do these things. I think it is possibly because I have such a loose hold on the truth. I mean, continuously we are inventing ourselves as a person, so that I don't find any real sacrosanct quality about so-called facts and so-called truths. I mean, that's probably rather wicked of me or impious of me to do that. But as far as I'm concerned, everything is available for recreation or manipulation. (214)

Eight years earlier, he had described his biographical work on T.S. Eliot in a similar vein:

This is another thing about biography, how cruelly deceived most readers of biography are—because on the whole, the most important things are made up by the biographer. They have to be. You have to link things up, and you have to find your own little ways to do this, and you create a character who bears no living relation to any living person that ever was, and the poor reader of the biographer reads it and thinks, well, this must be right. But it never is. (McGrath 46)

Mediated self-presentation (iv)—Writer-as-English-mystic

From even his earliest interviews, Ackroyd assured his audience that he was by no means an ordinary historical novelist guilty of what Henry James deemed "fatal cheapness" (332). For example, he told Walter Ross in 1987 that, "I'm not so much interested in

writing costume dramas or anything of that kind; I'm much more interested in playing around with the idea of time" (3). The exploration of time and history, in interviews and novels alike, has led Ackroyd to a what he calls "territorial imperatives" (Lawson 4), a kind of transhistorical "place" that for him contains the quintessence of Englishness. He said so to Rhoda Koenig in 1994 ("I believe in the pattern of circumstances forming a medium around us, so you move through it like water" (45)), and much the same to Brian Appleyard nine years earlier: "We can live only in the present, but the past is absorbed within the present so that all previous moments exist concurrently in every present moment" (52). For John Walsh (1992), Ackroyd utilized Rupert Sheldrake's notion of "morphic fields or morphic resonance," that is, "the ability of a race or a species to create a field round [sic] them in which the past and the present co-react" (5).⁶ For Ackroyd, the "race field" is a source of creativity. For Mary Riddell, Ackroyd explained his "vision," "When I realised I was inextricably linked with something, with London, subjects emerged as if by magic" (20).

Mediated self-presentation (v)—Writer-as-conservative/non-postmodernist

True to his spirit of self-contradiction, Ackroyd has significantly revised an earlier position regarding tradition and the utter necessity in England for continental European philosophy. Already during McGrath's 1988 interview Ackroyd had distanced himself from the influence of writers associated with postmodernism. "You mean Derrida and so on? . . . I haven't looked at them since [writing *Notes for a New Culture*]" (44).⁷ McGrath replies, "Hasn't it all stayed with you, though?" and Ackroyd confirms his lack of interest: "No it hasn't, no" (44). To Susana Onega's 1996 question, "Would you describe your work as postmodernist?" posed nearly a decade after those of McGrath, Ackroyd replies,

⁶Ackroyd discusses this notion of history and spirit in almost every interview he gives. See also: Billen (1992); d'Ancona (1993); Kolbert (1986); Lawson (1995); Riddell (1996).

⁷Ackroyd's statements of forgetfulness are remarkable. He told McGrath (1988) that after his Eliot biography, "I completely forgot about Eliot as soon as I'd written that biography. Haven't thought about him since" (45). Earlier, he claims that he never read fiction. When an interviewer reminded him he had written a thesis on the fiction of James Baldwin, he claimed to have forgotten.

“No, it’s English. It’s a completely different thing As far as I’m concerned, it’s just part of the inheritance that goes back as far as a thousand years. It’s nothing really to do with postmodernism” (217-18).

Ackroyd’s utterances are of course only part of the manufactured output of mediated Ackroyds. Additional versions are regularly produced by journalists assigned to “profile” Ackroyd and academy-based critics eager to assign his place in the literary pantheon. For example—

Mediated identity (i)—Ackroyd-as-enigma

Brian Appleyard (1985), a longtime friend of Ackroyd, described the complex personality of the author as innately mysterious: “the truth is it would be easier to drive a nail into a cloud than to define Ackroyd. He has made a profession out of evasion, camp denials and sudden changes of perspective” (50). Appleyard adds that in Ackroyd there is “a certain refusal to be caught in any definition, however seriously intended He has constructed exactly who he wants to be and how he wants to live” (50). (To support his claim, Appleyard relates Ackroyd’s own statement that, “Each one [of my books] has recognizable elements of me, the campness, the sententiousness, the skills of language I learned as a child. Each one represents a kind of theoretical self, raised instead of oneself, which is why I am always reluctant to appear as myself” (50)).

Media identity (ii)—Ackroyd-as-contradictory-mess/fraud

Riddell’s 1996 profile of Ackroyd refers to rumours of the author as a “louche, hard-drinking figure, sprawled on sofas at literary parties loudly propositioning men, generally heterosexual, who caught his wandering eye” (19). Julia Llewellyn Smith reported in 1994 about Ackroyd’s “constant contradictions,” and noted “[t]he discipline of work, mixed with large quantities of drink are, he says, what keep him going” (16). In a hostile⁸ and lengthy Sunday Times profile, Rhoda Koenig openly wonders about

⁸Koenig is matter of fact about her dislike: “[Ackroyd’s] reputation has also, no doubt, been helped by the number of literary journalists who find him delightful company, affable and bubbly, though little of these qualities is manifested to this interviewer” (45).

Ackroyd's talent, all the while tying his behaviour during the interview to the "increasingly hostile" (45) reviews his books have received. She ultimately compares his fiction unfavourably with that of Dickens:

In Ackroyd's fiction, however, we are just joining the dots: without the warmth of full-blooded characters, all the meticulous set-dressing and literary name-dropping fails to keep the circular time vision from devolving into a kind of down-market occultism, a bookworm's version of I-am-you-and-you-are-me-and-we-are-all-together. (51)

Koenig repeatedly connects the "lack of humanity" and coldness (51) she evidently detects in Ackroyd's novels to his alcohol-induced quirks and general excesses of personality.

Media identity (iii)—Ackroyd-as-postmodernist

Without explicitly defining their terms, many journalists place Ackroyd in the company of such "British postmodernists" as Julian Barnes, Jeanette Winterson and Martin Amis. What that seems to signify is that Ackroyd's work displays a degree of self-consciousness and formal experimentalism absent in more conventional realist fiction. In scholarly studies delineating the forms of postmodern fiction, moreover, Ackroyd's name is ubiquitous. Aleid Fokkema includes Ackroyd's Hawksmoor in his investigation of ten "'canonical' postmodern texts" (15), as does Alison Lee (who, as a former student of Linda Hutcheon, refers to the novel as "a postmodern historiographic metafiction" (1990 68)). In his encyclopaedic The Modern British Novel, Malcolm Bradbury sees the "'Victorian' conventions of narrative and literary morality, authorship and readership" as orthodoxies that "the postmodern writer must unpick" (4). Core members of this dismantling elite include Ackroyd along with such a disparate selection of authors as Margaret Drabble, David Lodge, Marina Warner and Graham Swift. Essays⁹ by Elias, Onega, de Lange and Fokkema in British Postmodern Fiction (1993) place Ackroyd's novelistic production centrally in postmodern discourse; Linda Hutcheon likewise sees a

⁹The preceding is a partial list. See also Connor (1994), Elias (1995), Finney (1992), Herman (1990), Hotho-Jackson (1992), Peck (1994) and Schnackertz (1994).

“postmodernist detective novel” (1988 156) like Hawksmoor as employing characteristic destabilizing techniques. (See #3 for additional comments and considerations.)

2. Politics and Historical Fiction: Unearthing the Past with Fictions

Certain historians, sometimes whole generations of historians, find in certain periods of history nothing intelligible, and call them dark ages; but such phrases tell us nothing about those ages themselves, though they tell us a great deal about the persons who use them.

R.G. Collingwood, 1956 (Holton 19)

Often of course I must have done through ignorance what would horrify me if I could revisit the past . . . but one can at least desire the truth; and it is inconceivable to me how anyone can decide deliberately to betray it.

Mary Renault, 1969 (McEwan 19)

Despite the prevalence of Kitsch historical novels—the kind which become spectacular movies in the Cecil B. DeMille style—the state of the art of historical fiction is still high.

Fleishman, 1971 (xvii)

The “historic” novel is, for me, condemned, even in cases of labour as delicate as yours [Sarah Orne Jewett], to a fatal cheapness, for the simple reason that the difficulty of the job is inordinate and that a mere escamotage, in the interest of ease, and of the abysmal public naïveté becomes inevitable The childish tricks that take the place of any such conception of the real job in the flood of Tales of the Past that seems of late to have been rolling over our devoted country—these ineptitudes have, on a few recent glances, struck me a creditable to no one concerned.

Henry James, 1901 (332)

(i) The historical novel: past

As a site of inquiry, “the historical novel” has no less a complicated story than “Peter Ackroyd.” It too has been subject to politicized interpretation and historical vicissitude: to say that “Peter Ackroyd writes historical novels” is to invoke nearly two centuries of a changing tradition—a tradition which poses questions about the very nature of historical knowledge as well as readers’ relations to it. Despite the acute issues the historical novel genre raises, its origins as literature are modest. If the historical novel can be said to hold any pedigree, it is one tied to popularity and an impressive sales volume rather than one stemming from highly regarded perfection of form. There is no doubting that since the genre’s rise in the early nineteenth century the prodigious literary genre has

been best-selling.¹⁰ Yet it has also been deemed by many as intrinsically corrupt. Condemnation began early—the Italian critic Zajotti called the genre “an immoral, irrational, hybrid form” (Manzoni 30) as early as 1820¹¹—and has persisted up to and including the present day.¹² Historical fiction has been judged a con, cheap, a mode of kitsch, dishonest, an embellishment, a betrayer of literary ideals and mere popular escapist entertainment. Even fictional protagonists know it: Joan Foster, the narrator of Margaret Atwood’s Lady Oracle (1976) and a guilty secret author of Costume Gothics herself, explains:

Those books, with their covers featuring gloomy, foreboding castles and apprehensive maidens in modified nightgowns, hair streaming in the wind, eyes bulging like those of a goiter victim, toes poised for flight, would be considered [by her husband, a professor of philosophy] trash of the lowest order. (30)

¹⁰When he was writing in the late 1950s Lion Feuchtwanger calculated “more than 100,000 historical novels in verse and prose have been published in the past 150 years” (21).

¹¹Zajotti’s contemporary in France, Stendhal, noted that “a thousand shadows are being spread over history proper” by the historical novel. And Stendhal believed the situation required an authoritarian remedy: “I believe that in the end, the authorities will be constrained to order these new novelists to choose: either to write pure histories or pure novels, or, at least, to use crochet hooks to separate one from the other, the truth from the falsity” (Manzoni 68).

¹²In “The Renanimators: On the Art of Literary Graverobbing,” a 1999 Harper’s Magazine article discussing American novelists from DeLillo to Doctorow, Jonathan Dee complains that fiction featuring figures from history has become a “veritable epidemic in the last twenty-five years or so” (77). Interestingly, the terms of Dee’s discussion—“invention,” “real life” and the “taboo” that works to maintain the distance between the two—are no great ideological distance from those employed by Zajotti or Stendhal.

From a reverse position, in “Truth or Fiction? Rewriting the Past,” Guy Vanderhaegh describes the difficulties he faced in writing his historical novel, The Englishman’s Boy. Though Vanderhaegh considers historical fiction “an idiosyncratic way of contemplating history and its possible meanings” (B11), he was nevertheless troubled by this mixing of “truth” and “invention”:

“Conscientious historians would not do as I did, amend or doctor the evidence. Perhaps they might comment on its probable validity, but that is not possible in a novel. So as a writer of fiction qualified by an adjective—the historical novel—I continually confronted the problem: To what do I owe my allegiance? Do I serve history, or the artistic imperatives of fiction? In the end, when I faced a conflict, I answered what I perceived to be the needs of my novel, agreeing with Mark Twain who said, “First get your facts. Then do what them what you will” (B11). Roger G. Seamon’s 1983 article, “Narrative Practice and the Theoretical Distinction between History and Fiction” provides a welcome (historicized) comment on the stark distinctions between serving history and artistic imperatives that Vanderhaegh invokes.

The principal cause of complaint is seemingly ontological, and one whose roots stretch far into antiquity. In Zajotti's aforementioned dismissal, for example, it is not difficult to hear echoes of Plato's famous expulsion of poets from his Republic. Critics allege the historical novel represents a kind of miscegenation of genre or species: since these critics regard invention and history as having distinct properties and purposes, the intermingling of those discrete qualities can result only in monstrous offspring. A genre seen to be "combining novel and history, false and true" (Manzoni 30), the historical novel is then classified as at least obfuscatory, a kind of "dangerous supplement," as Jacques Derrida might suggest.¹³ A historical novel (Falsity) poses as a representation of history (Truth and/or an "explanatory paradigm" (Foley 1986 13): a duty-bound discourse whose purity of form and purpose is rarely questioned¹⁴), even though it is layered with invention, and so confounds ostensibly distinct and purposeful categories. More to the point, critics charge the historical novel sullies the sanctity of the historical record; with manifold deceptions, ploys and evasions, these opponents of the genre argue it works to dismantle a science-based, carefully archeologic historiography.¹⁵ With a woeful inadvertence, this fanciful

¹³Though Derrida is discussing speech and writing, it is provocative to substitute the terms, "history" for "speech" and "fiction" for "writing": "But the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself in-the-place-of; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void. If it represents and makes an image, it is by the anterior default of a presence. Compensatory [suppléant] and vicarious, the supplement is an adjunct, a subaltern instance which takes-(the)-place [tient-lieu]. As a substitute, it is not simply added to the positivity of a presence, it produces no relief, its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness" (145).

¹⁴By these authors, at any rate. Lion Feuchtwanger provides two unusual but pointed remarks in his study of historical novels. From Schopenhauer: "Clio, the muse of history, is as thoroughly infected with lies as a street whore with syphilis." Countess Liselotte, former courtesan at the court of Louis XIV, responded to a biography of the Sun King as follows, Feuchtwanger reports: "If such lies can be told about what we ourselves have experienced, what are we to believe about events which have been reported from the remote past? I am convinced that all history books with the exception of the Holy Scripture are as full of lies as a second-rate novel. The only difference is that the novels are more entertaining" (16).

¹⁵In "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" Michel Foucault presents via Nietzsche a challenge to the traditional historiographic enterprise which, he says, "assumes the existence of *immobilē* forms that precede the external world of accident and succession" (142). In place of "the site of truth" (143) and "unbroken continuity" (146), Foucault serves "the ancient proliferation of errors" (143): "What is found at the historical beginning of things

supplementing of historical verities alludes to the very textuality of the written record itself—a chronicle whose own undeniable textuality and narrative conventions are never the less traditionally overlooked or suppressed. Since, critics reason, history tells us who we are, a story of fragments, a chronicle of half-truths or a palimpsestic record can only hinder our gaining of self-knowledge. Impure, a mongrel, a contaminant—falsified history on the one hand and fiction that uses history as an elaborate, decorative crutch on the other—the historical novel has intrinsic qualities that deem it ultimately satisfactory in no manner. At best, it is disposable “trash” entertainment. As Dee’s “veritable epidemic” (77), the historical novel poses a threat, blurring the privileged branch of knowledge through which we may come to understand our historicized selves.

The historical novel has been caught in this critical bind from its popular onset. Alessandro Manzoni’s 1850 book-length essay, On the Historical Novel is an early, well-argued, influential and still persuasive example of the historical-fiction-as-false-idol position. It was written while the historical novel was reaching its first height of popularity in Europe and after the publication of Manzoni’s own famous historical novel, I promessi sposi (1825-42). On the Historical Novel initially concedes the hypothetical worth of historical fiction, but ultimately repudiates the genre because in practice its compound nature is contradictory. Manzoni surrounds his epigrammatic conclusion—“A great poet and a great historian may be found in the same man without creating confusion, but not in the same work” (126)—with argumentation that lionizes history writing and literature (so long as each knows its proper place). Marking his literary predecessors as Aristotle’s Poetics and the Ars Poetica of Horace, Manzoni bases his rejection on quasi-moral grounds. Since he believes positivistic historiography can lead to emancipatory knowledge, then the sly inventions of historical fiction can only confuse or hamper the right-minded

is not the inviolable identity of [human] origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity” (142). He adds further in the essay: “We want historians to confirm our belief that the present rests upon profound intentions and immutable necessities. But the true historical sense confirms our existence among countless lost events, without a landmark or a point of reference” (155).

historiographer's effort. Though Manzoni admits, "History, it is true, does not lack its tall tales, even its lies," he notes further, "But these are the historians' fault and are not endemic to the genre" (73). His faith, in short, resides in a reasonable, scientific historiography, one that clearly distinguishes between the inventions of fiction and the extracted facts of historical study. Manzoni envisions history as the "orderly and systematic account" of human events, a cognitive map built by scrupulous historians from available evidence:

History acts almost like someone who, when drawing a city map, adds in distinctive color the streets, plazas, and buildings planned for the future and who, while distinguishing the potential from the actual, lets us see the logic of the whole. History, at such moments, I would say, abandons narrative, but only to produce a better narrative. (75)

Manzoni acknowledges that historical reconstruction may be a kind of narrative. Yet more significant for Manzoni, however, is that such reconstruction occurs with an eye on scientific principles and another on univocal Truth. On the other hand, the historical novel has fewer scruples, being "a species of a false genre which includes all compositions that try to mix history and invention" (81). In such a false genre fancy and objective fact are married, and the joining has unnatural consequences. Manzoni suggests that if history makes the reader doubt it is "because it intends to have you doubt"; and that is quite unlike the historical novel, "which encourages you to believe while at the same time removing what is necessary to sustain belief" (74). History's philosophical doubt "brings the mind to rest" while the doubt provoked by the historical novel produces merely "disquieting" (74) states of mind.

Other scholars of the historical novel seem temperate (or perhaps indifferent) when placed next to Manzoni's disdain or the Babel-is-imminent panic of Zajotti or Stendhal. In the twentieth century a number of studies bypass the ethical question underlying the assessment of the historical novel or collapse it with near tautological reasoning: for them, a "good" example of the novel is one which well captures the spirit of the times under observation. The underlying guideline relates to the fiction's high probability of

accuracy—if the representation does not wander too far from the known facts of history, then it is a success. Studies of the genre are always wary, however, admiring the genre's "good" aspects while warning how quickly a novel can descend into dishonesty and irresponsible decadence. In his 1924 essay, The Historical Novel, an apologetic Herbert Butterfield views the historical novel¹⁶ "as a work of resurrection, a form of 'history,' a way of treating the past" (Preface), which, like "legends, the traditions of localities [and] popular ballads" (3), acts as a kind of substrate of historical consciousness, contributing to a generalized sense of the past. For Butterfield the historical novel aims "to make History speak for herself" (31); it is "one of many ways of treating the past and of wresting from it its secrets" (112). A historical novel can never substitute for the proper study of history, though it might serve well as a provider of an ethereal "something"—

The novel does not replace the history-book; it is a splendid thing if it drives us to the history-book, if it provides us with something—some sort of texture—in which the facts of the history-book, when we come to them, can find context and a lively significance and a field that gives them play. (95)

Like Butterfield, Helen Cam's survey pamphlet, Historical Novels (1963), finds in historical fiction¹⁷ an instructive function that runs alongside its entertainment and "escape" elements. Cam imagines that such novels can "give the young a taste for history" (5) and "awaken the incurious, especially the young, to interest in the past" (19): "They can be for some, if not all, students of history a stimulus to the imagination and critical faculties and an education in human sympathies" (3). Along with Butterfield, too, Cam views historical novels as legitimate contributions to "historical understanding" (14). For Cam the historical novel—a "form of literature ancillary to the study of history" (8)—is a complement and a

¹⁶Butterfield eschews defining the genre (it "claims to be true to the life of the past" (3)), and instead presents an ill-defined novel-as-prosthetic theory: "Whatever connection the historical novel may have with the history that men write and build up out of their conscious studies, or with History, the past as it really happened, the thing that is the subject of study and research, it certainly has something to do with that world, that mental picture which each of us makes of the past; it helps our imagination to build up its ideas of the past" (Preface).

¹⁷In her pamphlet Cam is not troubled by matters of definition. According to her, historical novels are those "which aim deliberately at re-creating the past" (3).

supplement, providing of course that the author has expressed the “proper respect for history” (8):

The historical novelist has resources, as we have seen, from which the scientific historian is debarred. He may fill in the lamentable hiatuses with his own inventions. But he must keep the rules. His inventions must be compatible with the temper of the age—its morals and its psychology no less than its material conditions—and they must not be incompatible with the established facts of history. The novel that can do all this is a good historical novel. (19)

Whereas Manzoni considers “invention” antithetical to true, single perspective historical understanding, Cam utilizes the historical novel as something close enough to history to serve “good” purpose; when well-wrought it admirably fulfills literature’s educative function.

The historical novel genre receives a politically-inclined treatment in a pair of influential works, Avrom Fleishman’s The English Historical Novel (1971) and Georg Lukács’ The Historical Novel (1937; trans. 1962). Both studies are concerned with outlining the genesis of the historical fiction genre as well as theorizing about its ideological premises and assessing its ultimate value. Moreover, each is typologic¹⁸ (what it is)

¹⁸Scholars writing after Lukács and Fleishman (and who are not wholly satisfied with their predecessors’ criteria or methodology) attempt more structured definitions of the historical novel. In “The Kinds of Historical Fiction” (1979) Joseph Turner writes, “Aside from the tautology of common sense (all historical novels are novels about history), in short, all we can say in general about the genre is that it resists generalization” (335). Generalization he regards as critical folly—“Finally, and perhaps most importantly, because the very diversity of the genre frustrates our rage to generalize, and condemns our results—should we persist—to triviality: for there are at least three distinct kinds of historical novels (those that invent a past, those that disguise a documented past, and those that re-create a documented past), and therefore no single description can blanket all three without losing most of its significance” (335).

Harry Shaw’s The Forms of Historical Fiction (1983) provides an excellent survey of the problem of constructing a typology of historical fiction forms. He accepts the “intuitive” notion that “historical novels are works that in some ways represent historical milieux” (20), and later extends that intuition into an axiom: “Historical novels, then, are works in which historical probability reaches a certain level of structural prominence” (22). (By “probability” Shaw means, “our sense of a novel’s ‘fit,’ both the way it fits the world it imitates and the way its parts fit together to produce a unified whole” (21)). Shaw admits that though his definition may seem “impotent and lame,” it leaves open the possibility that “history may mean different things in different works” (22)—something he believes is missing from previous scholarship typing historical fiction.

prescriptive (what it should be) and apologetic (why its highest achievements are worthwhile). And though each author writes from markedly different political vantage points, the two share with Butterfield and Cam the opinion that historical fiction performs an important cultural function by teaching in an easily assimilated manner the fact of history and the weight of history on individuals and their cultures. Significantly, the two take as unquestioned the straightforward pedagogic function for literature; it is axiomatic to them that quality literature leads to quality thought and therefore to an enlightened readership. For them, what is particular to and special about historical fiction is that its ancillary history lesson makes clear the central role of the past in every reader's life.

While in The English Historical Novel, Fleishman links the popular genre to such troublesome tendencies as nationalist "self-intoxication," "rhetorical didacticism" and "inordinate sentiment" (ix), he notes too that not all novels are kitsch to the degree of Margaret Mitchell's Gone With the Wind (1936). Fleishman contends that the "greater achievements" (14) of the historical novel genre exhibit qualities that make them worthy of readerly (and scholarly) attention. Presenting an overview of the genre, Fleishman states that in order to qualify as "historical" commentators have in general agreed that a novel conventionally takes place forty to sixty years in the past, should include a "number of 'historical' events" and must feature a "'real'" historical personage (3). More than being a

In History and the Contemporary Novel (1989) David Cowart arrives at four rubrics under which to discuss historical fiction. They are: "(1) The Way It Was—fictions whose authors aspire purely or largely to historical verisimilitude. (2) The Way It Will Be—fictions whose authors reverse history to contemplate the future. (3) The Turning Point—fictions whose authors seek to pinpoint the precise historical moment when the modern age or some prominent feature of it came into existence. (4) The Distant Mirror—fictions whose authors project the future into the past" (8–9). At the conclusion of his introduction Cowart touches on an "apocalyptic tinge" (29) seen in contemporary "historical fiction in an age of anxiety," which may or may not become an addition rubric for some later discussion.

Finally, Murray Baumgarten adds lively philosophical provocation in "The Historical Novel: Some Postulates" (1975). Rather than saying what a historical is, he speculates about what issues the genre raises and what a critical response to it should entail.

simple set of techniques, the historical novel must also approach the matter of historical consciousness. Fleishman notes—

[The historical novel] is an imaginative portrayal of history, that is, of past states of affair affecting human experience. The historical novelist provokes or conveys, by imaginative sympathy, the sentiment de l'existence, the feeling of how it was to live in another age. To do this he must describe and interpret—more or less accurately—the states of affairs that called forth responses of the kind he wishes to portray (4)

Historical fiction is valuable, Fleishman argues, because it asserts the material fact of history and thereby prompts thoughts regarding both the nature and centrality of the past. And though he concedes—anticipating work, such as Hayden White's seminal Metahistory (1973), which emphasizes the emplotted, narrative-like nature of historiography—that even though “the nature of the historical fact is problematic,”¹⁹ historical fiction can none the less provide (enlightening, entertaining) access to a past closed off from direct experience. Fleishman suggests alongside Cam that historical fiction has access to truths hidden from the historian, who can only ever rely on informed readings of material evidence:

We might compare the historical novelist to the restorer of a damaged tapestry, who weaves in whole scenes or figures to fill the empty place which a more austere curator might leave bare. But if the insertion is made on the basis of sympathy, experience, and esthetic propriety, it can lend revived expressiveness and coherence to the tapestry. (6-7)²⁰

The key terms for Fleishman are “sympathy, experience, and esthetic propriety.”

Fleishman's high quality historical novelist is more akin to Freud's cautious archeologist (Gay 175-77), who through careful observation is able to enact a seamless “reconstruction of the scene” (185) in order to recover the original artifact (in his case a psyche), than Foucault's genealogist, whose patient documentation leads nowhere close to a singular and coherent originary moment (1977 139-154). The “accuracy” and “sympathy” of

¹⁹Unlike White, however, Fleishman expresses no particular concern with the fact-ness of history or the possible problem presented by the narrative nature of historiography. Neither places him in a philosophical quandary.

²⁰Cam's metaphor is that of a artist who paints realistic portraits (9) and colours in the gaps when the sitter is absent.

Fleishman's ideal historical novelists work to bring history alive for the reader. In doing so, they elucidate and educate, recovering the past and effecting heightened consciousness.

Fleishman contends too that what "makes a historical novel historical is the active presence of a concept of history as a shaping force—acting not only upon the characters in the novel but on the author and the readers outside it" (15). He refers approvingly to "one of the finest of current historical novelists," Mary Renault, whose three philosophical principles supplement Fleishman's blueprint: historical novelists accept (a) truth in a novel as in correspondence with historical fact, (b) novelistic truth as speaking to the universals of human nature, and (c) historical novels enable liberation from provincialism (xii-xiii). While such terms as "truth" "universal" and even "fact" were becoming increasingly difficult to utilize unexamined when Fleishman published his book in 1971, he nevertheless adheres to a general model of literature as pedagogical, a vehicle of moral improvement: through an accurate representation of past events the historical novelist illustrates the weight of history as well as elucidates history's significance for the present day. Fleishman summarizes, "These principles of realist responsibility, universality of vision, and imaginative sympathy with the men of the past are those that make historical fiction a continuing and an estimable tradition in English and other literature" (xiii). Akin to an influential critical work like F.R. Leavis's The Great Tradition (1948), Fleishman's study views literature as a privileged transmitter of culture; with its historicist bent, this species of fiction teaches of the centrality of the past even as the culture reading about it progresses rapidly into the future.

If Fleishman's evocation of historical fiction's underlying ideology conforms closely to a liberal humanism not far from that of Matthew Arnold—that its lessons for readers centre on communality, universality, and cultural progress and continuity—then Georg Lukács' *The Historical Novel* expediently places the genre into the realm of direct political action. Lukács begins by outlining what he sees as the true ("classical") principles of the genre, ones that will detach the novel completely from "remnants of the harmful and

not entirely vanquished legacy of bourgeois decadence” (17), and argues that historical fiction is a kind of realism, one that arose from a particular historical event (the French Revolution) and which was intertwined with the rise of nationalism, individualism and historicism. Lukács further highlights the genre’s role in instructing readers. The “true” historical novel—distinct from mere costumery or decadent escapism—is an enabling art form: it allows “men to comprehend their own existence as something historically conditioned, for them to see in history something which deeply affects their daily lives and immediately concerns them” (24). His exemplar, the “honest, keenly observant” (32) Walter Scott, published fiction which “endeavors to portray the struggles and antagonisms of history by means of characters who, in their psychology and destiny, always represent social trends and historical forces” (34). Lukács elaborates—

Scott’s greatness lies in his capacity to give living human embodiment to historical-social types. The typically human terms in which great historical trends become tangible had never before been so superbly, straightforwardly and pregnantly portrayed. And above all, never before had this kind of portrayal been consciously set at the centre of the representation of reality. (35)

Leading figures in Scott, then, “generalize and concentrate” (39) historical-social realities and by doing so highlight Marxist touchstones like class struggle and the determining influence of history.²¹

Marked by what Fleishman calls “Marxist progressivism” (49), Lukács nevertheless shares with Fleishman the belief in the pedagogic and transformative power of literature. The arguments of both critics implicate a standard (or generic) reader who will learn history’s clearly articulated lessons; an incommensurable history has no part in their hermeneutic project. Fleishman, concluding his study with a brief discussion of Woolf’s *Between the Acts* (1941), remarks that the only authors “worth building hopes on” (257) after Woolf are Mary Renault and William Golding. For Lukács, the historical novel circa 1937 remains under the reign of a democratic humanism and so is little other than “a

²¹For contemporary responses to Fleishman and Lukács see Elisabeth Wesseling’s Writing History as a Prophet (27–66) and Harry E. Shaw’s The Forms of Historical Fiction (19–50).

decadent play with forms—the conscious violation of history” (251). His classical historical novelists (Scott, Manzoni, Pushkin, Tolstoy) stand unchallenged since only they “were able to grasp and portray popular life in a more profound, authentic, human and concretely historical fashion than even the most outstanding writers of our day” (333). Because of cultural conditions that preclude a revival of the classical historical novel (349), Lukács awaits an emergent tradition that will not only eclipse the dominant decadent novel of history but approximate classical form while speaking of and to contemporary concerns.

(ii) The Historical Novel: Present

Societies have to reproduce themselves culturally as well as materially, and this is done in great part by putting into circulation stories of how the world goes It is through such stories that ideologies are reinforced—and contested, for subordinate groups struggle to make space for themselves, and attempts to legitimate the prevailing order have to negotiate resistant experience and traditions.
Alan Sinfield, 1989 (2)

In post-war art, however, the past in its three major manifestations of memory, tradition, and history, has reasserted itself, demanding attention, allegiance, and even homage from the present. By 1950, Western culture had begun to question seriously its break from the past, especially since the pastless present has given the world concentration camps, totalitarian governments, cold war, atomic bombs, and industrial pollution.
David Higdon, 1984 (6)

(a) The Post-War Novel

For all their cataloguing capabilities, Fleishman and Lukács appear not to have anticipated (and certainly do not address) their century’s innovation in the (historical) novel form—a change that would seem to challenge their very comfort with the unassailed durability of history-writing, the knowability of the past and the conventionally educative role of literature. Concomitant with the emergence of this new form as well was a critical position more self-consciously politicized than seen in championing critics such as Butterfield, Cam and Fleishman. Whereas in 1924 Butterfield marvelled at the historical novel because for him it possessed the ability to give people “the consciousness that the world is an old world that can tell many stories of lost years” (96), several decades later the

cultural materialist Alan Sinfield observed²² that competing and divergent stories about how the world goes circulate freely. What is notably different about the two perspectives on “stories” is ideology. Whereas Butterfield imagines a wondrous tumult of narratives relating an alluring world of manifold mysteries, Sinfield ascribes ideological force to stories. For Sinfield some stories have greater significance than others, and come to reign largely unfettered because they are naturalized to the point of becoming self-evident truths. As a cultural critic he is interested in seeking out and unearthing alternate stories, ones that can offer other truths and lead to a transformation of culture itself.

There is a large cluster of stories that centres on the progress of the English language novel after 1945. The stories are not entirely consistent, though any consensus would suggest that a not inconsequential permutation in the novel’s contour has emerged during the past several decades. Yet what that change signifies is another story. For instance, within this narrative cluster it is not difficult to discover a story of rebellion, one that details the death of an austere and overbearing modernism or the death of a conservative nineteenth-century style realism. Nor is it a challenge to find a tale of radical transformation, one that emphasizes the novel’s return to long-forgotten historical themes or the novel’s veering toward subversive literary experiment. A number of critics utilize another kind of story, one describing “organic” growth, decline and revitalization. Patrick Swinden is characteristic of this approach, arguing that British novels of the 1940s and 1950s were part of a “a tradition . . . [that] seemed doomed to extinction,” in part because they had become infused with “imaginative anaemia²³ and provincialism” (1). He views

²²Sinfield argues that literary texts—just one aspect of cultural production—contribute to the contest over signs and meanings, but that they are “not necessarily conservative or radical”: “The apparatus of literature has been made by people, and we can remake it . . .” (36). The “we” he speaks of are interested in the emancipation of suppressed voices and identities.

²³Compare: Bergonzi (1970); Lodge (1971); Bradbury (1979); Stevenson (1986). While he avoids the conceptual vagueness of Swinden’s organic metaphor, Steven Connor none the less expresses similar sentiment. He writes: “Over the course of the twentieth century, but with accelerating force in the years since 1945, the assurance of the special relationship between the history of Britain and global history has steadily been eroded. Where the history of Britain and the English-speaking peoples had at one time seemed to

novelists such as Elizabeth Bowen and L.P. Hartley, for example, as having effectively placed British fiction in a quarantine, protecting it from foreign influences while also depriving it of wider perspective. In like manner, Bernard Bergonzi nods approvingly at a comment by the poet Adrian Mitchell—"The disease of the British artist since 1945 has been a compulsion to stay small" (1970 66)—and suggests that compared to American fiction British fiction of the "fifties and sixties has been both backward- and inward-looking, with rather little to say that can be instantly translated into universal statements about the human condition" (56); most domestic contemporary novels, he laments, are by and large realist "nullity" (68). The story continues. After these dissolute decades, however, and in association with a revival of generalized history inquiry,²⁴ writers began to publish novels representing what Swinden labels "a new mutation" (19). Though innovative, these novels were nonetheless ones "carrying within them much of the same genetic code that made their permuted forms so distinctive" (20). And, by his account, in being British they were ever-moderate, as always "preoccupied with establishing proper limits within which human beings can best conduct themselves" (12). The newly revitalized novel stood, in effect, on the shoulders of giants. Connected to a grand—yet a touch aged and woody—literary tradition, the new green scions (Bergonzi (1979) cites Berger, Fowles, and Farrell) hold the promise of youths who respect their elders even as they rebel.

(b) The Post-War Historical Novel

be identical with the history and development of culture in general, the final splintering of Empire and the redefinitions of world power after the Second World War made that association less than credible. The long, continuous narrative of Britain and the West began to seem narrow, arbitrary, even a bit ramshackle, in the light of all the omissions, glossings and distortions necessary to maintain its coherence. After the Second World War, Britain seemed progressively to lose possession of its own history" (1996 3).

²⁴The revival is in turn tied to a reaction to the supposed historical amnesia and/or corrupt reign of modernism. According to the broad strokes of Elizabeth Dipple's narrative, "In the late 1950s and early 1960s when the time came to rebel against the overlordship of modernism, the hunger for the new was expressed by asserting Modernism's passé nature through a term that is combative and implies a surpassing of the recent past. And so Postmodernism was born" (8).

Formal and ideological change is particularly visible in fiction newly addressing history—if simply because in the decades leading up to and immediately following the Second World War the traditionally styled historical novel of any repute was resolutely out of fashion. A return of the history-themed novel was immediately noteworthy since it had been nearly extinct. Yet if, as David Higdon contends, the past reasserted itself via literature into contemporary consciousness, it did not only arrive in the shape of popular romance-centred costume histories and “classical” imaginings in the Lukács mould. Joseph Turner remarks that defining historical fiction is something of a challenge in the twentieth century since authors working within the genre were coming to terms with and responding to the idea that “neither history nor fiction is itself a stable, universally agreed upon, concept” (333). Hinged to that realization are inevitable questions about the purpose and reliability of historiography and the “historical record” (not to mention historical truth and, in general, knowledge) as well as the purpose and reach of fiction. Harry Shaw observes, “The situation of historical fiction in our own century becomes more complex” (24), and draws readers’ attention to the likelihood that for many authors the underlying premises for the writing of historical fiction had radically shifted.

The complexity Shaw refers to largely regards the new found pluralism of historical fiction forms. In the current marketplace, for instance, books that conform loosely to what Fleishman, Renault, Cam and McEwan (Lukács remains anyone’s guess) might label commendable historical fiction remain plentiful. More numerous still are those that Fleishman disparages as “costume flummery” (255), novels which use history as a backdrop that decorates formulaic romance plotting. The innovation, however, is a species of historical novel that, as Steven Connor observes, “seems to lack, and only rarely to lament, the easy confidence in the capacity of fiction to encompass history, or plausibly to make that connection between small individual lives and the large tides of history” (134). Susana Onega describes the innovative form as one that

strikingly combines, on the one hand, the intensely parodic, realism-undermining self-reflexivity of metafiction, inherited from modernism, with,

on the other, the historical element, suffused by the relish in storytelling, in the construction of well-made plots, carefully delineated characters and realism-enhancing narrative techniques characteristic of classic realism. (1995 7)

Such fiction is considered to dwell on realism's gaps or elisions, frequently pointing to their undeniable (yet often denied) presence. Insofar as it is possible to speak of the genre holding a collective mandate, we might say that according to much criticism the new historical fiction aims to highlight the difficulty of representing history, comprehending and attaining historical consciousness and crafting the historical record. In this fiction, the pageant of history is a procession of infinite variety and complexity never observed by a witness with an unobstructed vantage point.

Critical reception of and response to the new development in historical fiction falls broadly into two categories, which themselves bear no little resemblance to the remarkable achievement/artistic failure binarism of Lukács and Fleishman. The first tends to be suspicious and occasionally antagonistic. A hybrid position that incorporates the views of Cam and Butterfield as well as those of Manzoni, it validates "classical" profile historical fiction-as-a means of exploring the past and learning from and about it. Here, critics rely on the similar kind of historiographic model seen in Manzoni in which the past is a stable (enough) referent made more solid still by the historical record—itsself the ongoing cautious aggregation of physical evidence. An un-Manzonian sentiment, however, legitimizes historical fiction as a distinct kind of historical knowledge. The proviso of course is that the novelist reconstructing a past era must (à la Cam, Renault and Fleishman) remain 'true to the times,' portraying that epoch "more or less accurately" (4) as Fleishman sees it. Renault's statement that "the past is part of the human environment and should not be polluted by falsehood" (McEwan 18) provides this critical position with a principal credo. Such criticism takes for granted literature's supportive role in the educating of readers about familiar or easy to recognize past historical moments. Within that viewpoint, any gaps or lacunae of the historical record are a matter of cautious speculation and respectful reconstruction. What Cam calls the "lamentable hiatuses" (19) of history are considered

best filled with the probable and the precise (as possible), and not stained by irreverent invention. In fact, fiction lacking integrity and which might be stochastic in effect—that which does not actively contribute to a faithful completing of the historical puzzle—is positively discouraged. Neil McEwan (1987), for instance, argues as he examines the “threat to historical fiction today” (13) that able or right-minded historical novelists should avoid the temptation (183) of fantasy or propaganda.²⁵ Card-carrying traditionalists must not, furthermore, succumb to the urge to “treat the past as though it were the present in a different costume, or to treat it like it were completely unlike what we know” (183) because, it is understood, the events and conditions of the past are pretty much what we expect—human nature here is assumed to be more or less constant from era to era and the teachings of history books more or less accurate and only hampered by the absence of available physical evidence which fiction can supply. Aligned with sentiments expressed by Fleishman, Lukács and Renault, McEwan suggests that good and respectful novelists will also as a matter of course resist the seductive French theories like those of Roland Barthes,²⁶ and claims “historical fiction enriches our culture by protecting the past which in Barthes’s theory falls away, like reality itself, leaving the dullness of solipsism to which all

²⁵McEwan does not mention other threats but may well have had Lyotard’s “What is Postmodernism?” (1983) in mind as he wrote the passage. Lyotard concludes: “The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and the communicable experience. Under the general demand for slackening and for appeasement we can hear the mutterings of the desire for the return of terror, for the realization of the fantasy to seize reality. The answer is: Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name” (Hassan and Hassan 341).

²⁶For instance, in “The Discourse of History” (1967) Barthes asks, “Does the narration of past events, which, in our culture from the time of the Greeks onwards, has generally been subject to the sanction of the historical ‘science’, bound to the unbending standards of the ‘real’, and justified by the principles of ‘rational’ exposition—does this form of narration really differ, in some specific trait, in some indubitably distinctive feature, from imaginary narration, as we find it in the epic, the novel, and the drama” (7)? He later asserts: “In other words, in ‘objective’ history, the ‘real’ is never more than an unformulated signified, sheltering behind the apparently all-powerful referent. This situation characterizes what we might call the realistic effect” (17). Foley (1986) comments, “For Barthes, the insistence upon a referent beyond textuality is not simply a gesture of epistemological naïveté: it is an act of political repression” (34).

reductionism ends" (17). As Steven Connor notes, this traditional "mode of historical fiction confidently assumes its adequacy to the task of historical representation" (142).

Perhaps in anticipation of Connor-like scepticism, McEwan asserts that

[c]ertain facts, such as those of geography, are constant in historical times, and cannot be ignored. Between these and the most improbable wisps of legend there are countless layers of reliability in what survives, and our consciousness of a period is tiered accordingly. Historians deal with the realities of the past and with speculation. Historical novelists are privileged by our consent in their freedom to speculate but they are constrained by the real, and they will not hold attention unless they respect the past which is common to all readers. (12-13)

Literally in the ground beneath our feet, then, the past is not something to be ignored; nor is it something "to be ruthlessly occupied and redeveloped" (177). Like Elizabeth Dipple, who is disdainful of the "perverse sense of chaos that characterizes the current fictional scene" (7), McEwan envisions an earnest literature penned by writers working in seeming concert to build a logical, educative representation of "our" past.

Similar to McEwan, Marguerite Alexander in Flights from Realism constructs a "before" and "after" image of British fiction, and argues that post-World War II fiction is markedly different, more fragmented and less confident than that of earlier times. This lack of confidence is not especially productive. Alexander implies the existence of a more or less unblemished Victorian epoch²⁷ which stands in starkest contrast to the sullied culture of today, and conceives of contemporary/postmodern fiction as an "assault on common sense" fueled by the theories of Barthes and Saussure—

The great English and American novelists of the nineteenth century shared with their readers certain assumptions—about the ultimate value of society, whatever specific criticisms of it might be made; about the place of the individual within that society; about the existence, if not of God . . . then a body of universal truths which included an agreed concept of human

²⁷The distinction between writer and society is quickly extinguished here: for Alexander writers are emblematic or maybe synecdoches, their reflecting of "certain assumptions" actually also describes the state of the nation. If "nineteenth century novelists" (that teeming mass) shared a singular conception of, say, "the place of the individual in society," then we can confidently assume that so did most everyone else in England and the United States, 1800–1899.

nature—but that concord can no longer be said to exist, at least as far as postmodern novelists are concerned. (4)²⁸

In her account, these latter-day novelists are reflective, moreover, of a chaotic world and a response to the horror of war and the ever-present threat of nuclear assault:

The fact of the 'unbelievable' happening, in recent and remembered history, has placed a strain on that distinction between the credible and the incredible on which the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century bourgeois realist novel depended. One of the terms of this 'contract' which implicitly existed between reader and writer was that the reader could only collude in a fiction that at least on some level held a mirror up to the everyday world, so that the fiction was to a degree neutralized by the everyday world that it reflected. And that everyday world, with its belief in reason and progress, had banished the supernatural except in practices of organized religion. (13)

It is tempting to suggest that a nostalgia for "the real" is the foundation of such a critical position: that, faced with the very possibility of chaos or annihilation or meaninglessness, these critics look to literature and history for order and meaning, to tell, in short, a comforting story that makes sense of the world. But instead of seeing only easy-to-fault nostalgic sentimentality, it might be more appropriate to say these critics hold their faith in a project that works to assemble a relatively unified representation of human history instead of one that emphasizes the gaps in the story and the inherent difficulty of adequately filling them. While they are not strict positivists like Manzoni, there is no doubting these critics accept the adequacy of literary representation and scientific reasoning; the very possibility of knowledge (historical or otherwise) is a matter that remains largely unquestioned in their criticism.

The second critical position acknowledges and to an extent celebrates the "breakdown" of linearity and progress a scholar such as McEwan laments. Scholars like

²⁸See Steinmetz also: "In the nineteenth century there existed nevertheless unanimity about one issue: if one spoke about history, one meant a single history, the history" (90). Later: "This nineteenth-century agreement about the existence of a single history fell to pieces in the course of the twentieth century; the break-up has been so radical that not only have different concepts of history emerged in the course of this century, but as we approach the millennium history as such has been put into doubt, questioned and unmasked as a construction, regarded as an invention engendered entirely by the human need to create meaning (and maintain power)" (91).

Scanlan, Gasiorek, Connor and McHale, holding a less panicked view of Alexander's "assault on common sense," tend to be suspicious of the ideologies that underpin traditional categories and societal conventions; they wonder openly about the stories that may be missing from history, and ask why. As a result, perhaps, they consider commendable that fiction which questions the truth of the historical record and invents or reclaims (with political intent) its obscured events. All the while, this mode of fiction is seen by apologist critics to take for granted that the worlds they imagine are not exactly, as Margaret Scanlan succinctly states, a positivist celebration of calibrated evolution:

History as presented in the contemporary British novel is neither glamorous nor consoling. It is too diffuse to offer lessons, too unfinished to constitute a space into which we can escape, and we ourselves, implicated in the failures, cannot even enjoy its ironies comfortably. Whatever the authors' professed politics, their novels resonate with a profound pessimism about the consequences of public action. What actuates these fictions is not, then, a confidence that the past will teach us how to behave, but a quieter conviction that it is better to know than remain ignorant, even though much of what we learn is the enormous difficulty of understanding our lives historically. (16)

Scanlan is no anarchist, however. She concedes the centrality of some kind of historical knowledge and the importance of attempting to understand moments of the past. She also accepts the challenge arriving at these planes represents. The primary difference between a position-like Scanlan's and that of McEwan concerns confidence. For Scanlan, historical knowledge is a complex and fluid thing, far more than a matter of the cautious arrangement of evidence. In keeping with Sinfield, Scanlan imbues the narratives of history with ideological weight, and accepts as a rule that some stories have greater impact than others and that one version of a historical instance can elide or erase another. Scanlan, building from the work of Michel Foucault²⁹ and viewing history as "the dispersed contents of the past" (4), welcomes the new fiction because it resists neat teleology and openly queries the significance of fissures, failures and blanks of historical awareness. This is not to say, as

²⁹Cf. Foucault (1977): "History is the concrete body of a development, with its moments of intensity, its lapses, its extended periods of feverish agitation, its fainting spells; and only a metaphysician would seek its soul in the distant ideality of the origin." (145)

McEwan would have it, that such criticism embraces meaninglessness or chaos or solipsistic hermeticism. Steven Connor presents another, less dismissive view, positing that the new novel of history offers an “enactment of the continuing need to inhabit history, however discontinuous and enigmatic it may” (1996 164). Contrary to McEwan and according to the second critical position, history in new historical fiction does not necessarily fall away into empty solipsism, though it might be said to become more a garden of forking paths than an easily travelled, well-marked road leading in only one direction toward enlightenment.

(c) Naming the Prodigy

In The English Novel in History 1950-1995, Steven Connor takes issue with what he views as the finally reductive and unproductive stances exhibited by a number of the convention-bound critics he surveys. He suggests that there is little that is particularly valuable about measuring the verisimilitude of a work, and instead asserts that “it is more interesting and profitable to ask what a novel does, intellectually, affectively, imaginatively, politically, with and in history than to ask merely what kind of truthfulness to history it displays or denies” (132). Connor’s discussion of historical fiction is embedded in his broad query about the role narrative plays in human communication. He observes:

Depending on the context, it may plausibly be said that a given narrative might act to persuade, explain, reassure, combine, transform, instruct, liberate, enslave, uplift, excite—in fact, to bring about all of the effects that human beings commonly seek to bring about via other linguistic or communicative means. (4)

Though he is employing different terms, Connor is not far removed from a conventional understanding of the emancipatory properties of literary narrative, whether delineated by a Helen Cam or a Sir Philip Sidney. When he writes, for example, that “narrative can bring about psychological and cultural enlargement” (4), he is in line with centuries of literary criticism and is expressing ideas which remain unstated but implicit in much of the conventional criticism of historical fiction. Within narrative’s putative capacity for

enlargement, Connor locates what he terms a “consolidation” function which can work to expand self-awareness. He explains, “To extend the self, whether individual or collective, into different sorts of unfamiliar or otherwise unavailable experience may also allow the self to become more apprehensible to itself” (4). Connor finds, too, a “transformative” component: “narrative can also transform, criticise, displace, limit, interrupt” (6).

Complicating matters somewhat, Connor explains that

[c]onsolidation and transformation are contrasting, but not wholly antipathetic functions. Indeed, one, somewhat conservative view of the function of narrative might be that it exists to manage and mediate the shock of exposure to newness, contradiction and difficulty, to bind and transform transformation itself into a form of consolidation. (133)

With this model of consolidation and transformation serving as his critical foundation, Connor moves on to discuss historical fiction as either “historical” or “historicized,” that is, “fiction about history” on the one hand and fiction “about its own historically relative construction of history” (142-143) on the other. Rather than discussing the “truth-telling capacities” (132) of such literature, Connor proposes that critics study the uses fiction finds for the polysemous word “history.” And in line with his view of narrative as being consolidatory and/or transformative, Connor suggests criticism seek out the political significance (the personal through to the communal to the national) ascribed to a historical moment by writers addressing history’s pages.

Connor is by no means alone when he attempts to name the new historical fiction form and extract (or codify) its properties. Indeed, there has been wide discussion among critics about the shape and name of the new forms of fiction that emerged after the Second World War that were often marked by their seeming retort to or refusal of tradition. Particularly, in British literary critical circles, the debate about the new literary departure has conventionally hinged on or addressed the experimentalist/realist divide (for example, see Bergonzi (1970); Byatt; Bradbury; Gasiorek; Stevenson; Lodge; Alexander; Dipple). Still more recently, a modern/postmodern binarism has superseded the earlier experiment/realism model. This new historical novel, which does not conform to Lukács’s

“classical” realist form of emancipatory narration nor imitate the cautious-reconstruction-of-epoch-and-sentiment example championed by Fleishman, Renault and McEwan, initially attracted negative attention; a trend and still emerging development, it was duly noted as something which might or might not have staying power and significance. In any case, critics defined or codified the new historical as a form that broke away from the norm. An early commentator, Frank Kermode (1966), refers to the late twentieth century as an age of crisis, and detects a not unexpected “pattern of anxiety” (96) within contemporary modernist works. Adopting metaphors from Christian history and eschatology, Kermode sees “apocalyptic” or “schismatic” (98-104) variants (he cites Beckett and Burroughs as examples) within modernism proper that are also endemic to it, the flip side of “traditionalist” modernism. Kermode argues that “what distinguished [the two] broadly is that the older, in an ancient tradition, remade or rewrote its past, but the latter has a nihilistic, schismatic quality” (122). Following Kermode’s lead, Harry Henderson (1974) perceives “the most pronounced division among significant novels of the historical imagination [in an American literary context]” has been between those expressive of a “liberal conscience” (e.g., Malamud, Styron) and others, as exemplified by the novels of Barth and Pynchon, which implement an “apocalyptic parody” (270). Despite the sombre tone, the dark side of Henderson’s Janus-faced “historical imagination” aims to “parody not only fictional forms but the historical assumptions underlying both progressive and holistic [imaginative] frames” (270). More darkly still, Barbara Foley (1978) remarks on such apocalyptic fiction: “In the ‘apocalyptic’ historical novel history is itself ultimately absurd, and whatever coherence the novelist extracts from it is a reflection not of any pattern immanent in his materials but of his own narrative control” (101).

Altogether side-stepping the dire associations that come with the term “apocalypse,” Robert Scholes (1970, 1979) locates a vital tradition of experimental fabulation or

metafiction within a larger realistic/naturalistic tradition in North American literature.³⁰ He bases his argument on Charles Pierce's "fallibilism"—which is a reaction to positivism, and in turn springs from Pierce's belief that "[o]n the whole, then, we cannot in any way reach certitude nor exactitude. We can never be absolutely sure of anything, nor can we with any probability ascertain the exact value of any measure or general ration" (1979 8). Scholes states that contemporary fabulators accept and even emphasize their fallibility while, regardless of their own sense of sophistication, searching for the true and the real. Like Scholes, Johnson Smith frames his discussion in non-inflammatory rhetoric. After surveying three modalities of historical fiction, Smith (1979) observes the arrival of a new type which focusses on the artificiality of the text and the intrusion of the author. Johnson identifies "what we might call comic historical fiction," a form that "pok[es] fun at these generic conventions, playing delightful variations on the interaction of their fictions with history, and generally flaunting the inescapable artifice of their creations" (351). Such self-reflexive fiction, Johnson argues, works to point out the constructed nature of any historical document and thereby challenges readers about both their comfort with and assumptions about the veracity of the historical record.

Elisabeth Wesseling, attempting to measure "the extent to which postmodernist permutations of historical materials envision an alternate, utopian—or rather, uchronian³¹—history," arrives at a binarism that (along the lines of Connor) conveniently divides "postmodernist counterfactual historical fiction" into "negational and confirmational parodies of history" (157); the latter category "includes works which unfold alternate histories inspired, with varying degrees of emphasis, by emancipating, utopian ideas"

³⁰For further elaborations on metafiction, see also: Fogel (1974); Alter (1975); Hutcheon (1980); Christensen (1981).

³¹Wesseling's coinage. She defines it as such: "These apocryphal histories inject the utopian potential of science fiction into the generic model of the historical novel, which produces a form of narrative one could call 'uchronian'" (viii). This new breed is also distinct from self-reflexive historical fiction. For instance, Wesseling describes Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* and Ackroyd's *Chatterton* as "best situated somewhere in between the categories of self-reflexive historical fiction and uchronian fantasy" (157).

while the former “comprises novels which haphazardly transform history” (157). Though Wesseling spends no time outlining how she can critically distinguish between a recuperative “inspired” novel and a deleterious “haphazard” one—and so bringing to mind Connor’s adroit open question about the purposefulness (not to mention methodology) of measuring verisimilitude in fiction—she follows a general pattern of categorization, finding on the one hand fiction which works to emancipate (even if through subversion) and that which on the other only negates. Finally, in *Telling the Truth*, Barbara Foley studies the history of “documentary fiction” in all its protean manifestations. At base, she argues, the species “locates itself near the border between factual discourse and fictive discourse, but does not propose an eradication of that border” (25). Rather, it “purports to represent reality by means of agreed-upon conventions of fictionality, while grafting onto its fictive pact some kind of additional claim to empirical validity” (25). Foley fully outlines her modalities of documentary fiction—

Historically, this claim has taken various forms. The pseudofactual novel of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries simulates or imitates the authentic testimony of a “real life” person; its documentary effect derives from the assertion of veracity. The historical novel of the nineteenth century takes as its referent a phase of the historical process; its documentary effect derives from the assertion of extratextual verification. The documentary novel of the modernist era bifurcates into two distinct genres. The fictional autobiography represents an artist-hero who assumes the status of a real person inhabiting an invented situation; its documentary effect derives from the assertion of the artist’s claim to privileged cognition. The metahistorical novel takes as its referent a historical process that evades rational formulation; its documentary effect derives from the assertion of the very indeterminacy of factual verification. Finally, the Afro-American documentary novel represents a reality submitting human subjects to racist objectification; its documentary effect derives from the presentation of facts that subvert commonplace constructions of reality. (25-26)

Foley’s delineation of the metafictional novel of history is essentially apologetic. From her Marxist perspective, the form is admirably radical, for it “continues to invoke a number of the representational conventions of earlier historical fiction, but it no longer assumes that historical actuality constitutes a self-evident object of cognition” (195). Moreover, the form “sets out to refute the empiricist illusion of neutral subjectivity and the positivist illusion of

neutral objectivity, as well as the complacent liberal progressivism that these illusions sustain" (200). Foley finds that not every such novel "frees itself from the positivist paradigm that it takes as its adversary" (200), and then proceeds to construct a model built of "radical" metahistorical novels and other unnamed (presumably "unradical") ones.

(d) The Prodigy in Perspective

Following cues provided by predominant critical typologies, readers will learn that entertainment and "escape" are the hallmarks of the largely formulaic and critically discarded romantic historical novel, while "imaginative sympathy" in aid of a readerly raised consciousness and the construction of civilized society stands as the benchmark of traditional or classical historical novels. Moreover, the "sympathy, experience, and esthetic propriety" (6) Fleishman claims as the founding criteria for the "greater achievements" (14) of the historical novel genre serve to buttress the genre's position as surrogate historiography. To utilize Cam's simile, for such critics conventional historical novelists are like artists who paint realistic portraits and then fill in the gaps once the sitter has departed. Mimetic faithfulness (or at least the high probability thereof), then, based on what is already extant in various (unproblematized) historical accounts, enables this genre of fiction to operate in quasi-factual fashion. Though for some critics this literary tissue comprised of the actual (because History) and the imaginary (because Fiction) can only create epistemological (what is history?) and ontological (who are we as historical subjects?) obfuscation, a more influential and pragmatic tradition of criticism overlooks this disputed zone of overlap since the core "imaginative sympathy" entails both an educated process of reconstruction and intentions of responsible propriety (recall Renault's emblematic statement of 1969 that "one can at least desire the truth; and it is inconceivable to me how anyone can decide deliberately to betray it" (McEwan 19)) and because the fiction's purpose is thought to be primarily 'good,' aiming for education, illumination and cultural growth. The intent and effect aimed for, in short, eclipses the means of attainment.

Neither necessarily classical nor romantic, contemporary historical novels—such as those published by Peter Ackroyd—have received a far less uniform critical delineation. Surveying scholarship that responds to the new historical novel reveals some critics who elaborate both general typologies (schismatic, apocalyptic, comic, counterfactual, historicist, metafictional) and general function analyses (ranging from the radical subversion of dominant cultural ideologies to an equally radical apocalyptic unmaking of the normative textual world). Still other critics, those who resist the refusal of the firm assumption of the steadfast nature of the historical record, openly condemn this modality of fiction, contending that such work in effect hinders any understanding of true history because it either harshly questions the motivations of history writers or altogether renounces the cautious archeologic approach to historical knowledge in favour of an irreverent, anti-communitarian “solipsism” (McEwan). This critical position maintains that the renunciation leads to an unproductive stalemate—if not an anarchistic nihilism outright—and proposes that a pragmatic choice (i.e., “as close as it gets in an imperfect world”) remains the most useful approach for considering history through fiction. As with the debate about the traditional historical novel, what is seemingly at stake here is not simply the matter of truth and falsity of form but the nature of (historical) knowledge itself: if a contemporary historical novel is freed from the Fleishmanian mainstays of “responsibility” and “propriety,” then—critics ask—what is there to prevent it from rewriting any past moment (or indeed entire epoch) in whatever manner it chooses? And while there is no denying that these novels are fiction, since they manage yet to simulate the very form of history-telling—and create a textual world that may be radically distinct from the one history books teach—then what is there to prevent readers from believing the invented version of things they read about on the page? For a critic like McEwan, this potential for chaos lurks right inside the cover of each historical novel. Viewed from another point, a critic such as Scanlan might observe, the very inventions of the contemporary historical novelist can inspire in readers a scepticism about the putatively objective and neutral formation of the

received history record as well as queries regarding what has been made invisible (or highly visible) and marginal (or central) over time.

3. The Politics of Postmodernism: Framing the Debate

Labels are always comforting, but often also castrating.

Linda Hutcheon, 1980 (2)

Postmodernism: does it exist at all and, if so, what does it mean? Is it a concept or a practice, a matter of local style or a whole new period or economic phase? What are its forms, effects, place? How are we to mark its advent? Are we truly beyond the modern, truly in (say) a postindustrial age?

Hal Foster, 1983 (ix)

Unfortunately, “postmodern” is a term bon à tout faire. I have the impression that it is applied today to anything the user of the term happens to like.

Umberto Eco, 1984 (65)

At worst, postmodernism appears to be a mysterious, if ubiquitous, ingredient, like raspberry vinegar which instantly turns any recipe into nouvelle cuisine.

Ihab Hassan, 1986 (Calinescu 23)

Paradoxes, in general, can delight or trouble.

Linda Hutcheon, 1988 (x)

(i) What Do We Mean When We Talk About Postmodernism?

“Peter Ackroyd writes historical novels in a postmodern vein,” that hypothetical, distillatory critic’s sentence working to summarize, circumscribe and/or contain the novels of Peter Ackroyd, unveils another new found complication when one of its elemental words, “postmodern,” is considered more fully. As with “the historical novel” a complex and contentious history lurks immediately below the surface of an apparently mundane and self-evident term. Thus, to situate, say, Hawksmoor and Chatterton within postmodernity (as a postmodern product? reflective of a postmodern sensibility?) does not necessarily provide instant or satisfactory illumination since the vast territorial reach of postmodernism gives it an entire topography—arid through to lush—of signification. Bluntly speaking, there are many users of the term and within that population a wide array of interpretations. In fact, from the onset of its popular usage and near ubiquity in the academy in the 1980s, “postmodernism” has remained a consistently amorphous and hence complicated, difficult to clearly employ term. Over the years prominent theorists from Hassan to Habermas have

wrangled with defining its shape and evaluating its significance; countless conferences across the globe have been held that map out its shadowy regions; the shelves of a small library could be filled with books discussing its intricate parameters. Postmodernism has come to be seen in (or as) the buildings of Arata Isozaki, Rem Koolhaas and Michael Graves (not to mention the “unsigned” commercial structures that fill industrial landsites and run parallel with highways), the films of John Greyson, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Monika Treut, the novels of Christine Brooke-Rose, Timothy Mo and Martin Amis, the performances of Annie Sprinkle, Rosa von Praunheim and Madonna . . . and in (or as) advertisements on television (whose programs and programming equally exemplify the postmodern), consumption patterns at the local shopping mall and business strategies implemented by transnational corporations (themselves likewise postmodern entities). Postmodernism may be a cultural “sea-change” (Harvey vii), a “new paradigm” (Huyssen ix), a “specific ‘mood’” (Docherty 1996 97), an “ideal category—or, better still, a Kunstwollen, a mode of operating” (Eco 66), a process of “cultural mongrelization” (William Gibson in McHale 1992 225), a current “trend” (Nilsen D3) or an “it” whose various definitions are “mutually inconsistent, internally contradictory and/or hopelessly vague” (Callinicos 2). Then again, maybe not. Terry Eagleton, for instance, refers to postmodernism as “depthless, styleless, dehistoricized [and] decathected” (1986 132), a “sick joke” at the expense of modernist “revolutionary avant-gardism” (131).³² And for Elizabeth Dipple it is a “falsely boastful word whose very definition is uncertain at every level” (8). Perhaps because of its core intangibility, Steven Connor pointedly remarks that

³²Eagleton’s sentiments are greatly expanded in The Illusions of Postmodernism. Throughout that lengthy essay, he discusses the “bizarrely heterogeneous term” (21) in a strangely homogeneous manner. While Eagleton acknowledges the plurality of forms, he nevertheless always discusses postmodernism as an “it,” a singular “style of thought” (vii) about which he is more “against rather than for” (viii). By doing so he constructs a simplistic representation, reminiscent of a social club or a political party. See also: Graff (1979), Habermas (1981), Jameson (1984), Newman (1985), Callinicos (1989), McGowan (1991) and Norris (1993) for further critiques of postmodernism.

the question, "Does postmodernism really exist, after all?"³³ has been asked in manifold forms by countless critics many times the world over—

Is there a "unified sensibility" running across and between all the different areas of cultural life (Jürgen Peper)? Does post-modernism unjustly limit or prematurely curtail the "unfinished project" of modernism (Jürgen Habermas)? Is there anything new or valuable in the alleged "postmodernist breakthrough" (Gerald Graff)? In other words, does postmodernist culture exist and if so (sometimes even if not) is it a "good thing" or a "bad thing"? (1989 6-7)

³³In writings on postmodernism, there is inevitably a near ritualistic invocation of the intangibility of the subject/object under consideration inquiry. My own introduction is apparently part of that ongoing tradition. The ritual is evident everywhere, from Fredric Jameson ("The problem of postmodernism—how its fundamental characteristics are to be described, whether it even exists in the first place, whether the very concept is of any use, or is, on the contrary, a mystification—this problem is at one and the same time an aesthetic and political one" (1998 25)), Thomas Docherty ("Yet this amorphous thing remains ghostly—and for some ghastly" (1993 1)) and Matel Calinescu ("an admittedly confusing but not unuseful label" (Hassan and Hassan 265)) to Malcolm Bradbury ("if the term 'postmodernism' means anything at all it surely refers to a time of interfused styles, mixed cultural layers, oddly merging traditions, multicultural pluralism" (1993 xii)), Ihab Hassan ("I begin with the most obvious: can we really perceive a phenomenon, in Western societies generally and in their literatures particularly, that needs to be distinguished from modernism, needs to be named? If so, will the provisional rubric 'postmodernism' serve?" (1987 84)) and Charles Newman ("The 'Post-Modern' is neither a canon of writers, nor a body of criticism, though it is often applied to literature of, roughly, the last twenty years. The very term signifies a simultaneous continuity and renunciation, a generation strong enough to dissolve the old order, but too weak to marshal the centrifugal forces it has released. This new literature founders on its own hard won heterogeneity, and tends to lose the sense of itself as a human institution" (5)). Surveying the fragmented field, Brian McHale (1987) smartly observes: "Whatever we may think of the term, however much or little we may be satisfied with it, one thing is certain: the referent of 'postmodernism,' the thing to which the term claims to refer, does not exist [P]ostmodernism, the thing, does not exist precisely in the way that 'the Renaissance' or 'romanticism' do not exist. There is no postmodernism 'out there' in the world any more than there ever was a Renaissance or a romanticism 'out there.' These are all literary—historical fictions, discursive artifacts constructed either by contemporary readers and writers or retrospectively by literary historians" (4). Lastly, while the debate shows signs of slowing, the matter of the undecidability of the precise nature of postmodernism remains an open question. The September 2000 issue of Utne Reader features "America True Blue," which surveys depression in American culture and links it with the postmodern condition: "And so now we find ourselves in the postmodern hall of mirrors. It's difficult to talk about postmodernism because nobody really understands it—it's elusive to the point of being impossible to articulate. But what the philosophy basically says is that we've reached an endpoint in human history . . ." (80). When this article originally appeared in Adbusters in June 2000, another one on a similar topic appeared in the June 13, 2000 edition of The National Post. The gist of Patchen Barss's "Old Style in New Novels" is summarised in the article's sub-heading: "Has 'postmodern fiction' been around ever since Odysseus told his own story inside Homer's Odyssey? One scholar goes so far as to claim there's no such thing" (A17).

Since his position as a critic is embedded in a book entitled *Postmodernist Culture*, Connor no doubt fully understands the irony of his contribution to the overwrought debate.

The matter of the putative moral status of postmodernism aside, even synthesizing an overview of responses to postmodernism is no small feat. After all, for virtually every scholar within the vast field of critical theory—from Altieri to Zizek—there is an article (if not an entire volume) that discusses some facet of it in addition to the critic's pitched response. An enterprising publisher could yet produce a volume or two that would follow the trajectory of replies to what Ihab Hassan elegantly (albeit vaguely) terms a "cultural moment" (1987 xi). And beyond the relatively small confines of academic investigation, of course, postmodernism is a term bandied about wide and far.³⁴ In the interests of economy, then, I would like propose a guided tour on which I will briefly consider two instances from the debate at large before leading onward to a terminal site, postmodernism in literature. This pair of moments arrives, conveniently enough, in chart form; like shorthand, the charts are concise but tend toward the simplistic and reductive—which may be most apropos for such a broad and brief overview. In two neat columns, the charts configure the cultural "tendencies" (to employ another of Hassan's words—after Forster?) of two discrete *Weltanschauung*. As Hassan knows, the linear typographic order of the columns is itself a kind of fiction, and belies the fact that behind their clean borders stand debate, disagreement, unstable definitions and category disloyalty.³⁵ None the less, charts

³⁴Including popular shorthand explanatory histories/cultural literacy primers like Appignanesi and Garratt's *Postmodernism for Beginners* and Ward's *Teach Yourself Postmodernism*. A satiric (?) website called "The Postmodern Generator" <www.elsewhere.org/cgi-bin/postmodern/> produces essays—on any topic one chooses—that look convincingly postmodern simply by employing jargon familiar to any English Department graduate student.

³⁵McHale notes that "spatialized representations" (1992 269) of the differences between the two categories (such as Hassan's below) are not uncommon and cites Venturi (1977) Jencks (1980), Wollen (1982), Fokkema (1984) and Lethen (1984). However, Lethen's "dichotomic scheme" is designed to show that in fact such a schematic approach (a) "shows the battlefield on which modernism itself operates" and is (b) "inherent in Modernism" (236). Through their dichotomic structure such schema incidentally lend credence to the notion of the 'postmodern breakthrough,' a cultural rupture whose existence implies a radical separation from past cultural forms.

serve well as a crude, at-a-glance typologies even though their populism and simplicity, detractors would argue, supplies damning evidence of the facile intellectualism of postmodern thought. The first chart was prepared by Hassan and placed in his influential, much-anthologized essay "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism" (1982), itself a continuation from Paracriticisms: Seven Speculations of the Times (1975). Conceptualizing what he says at the time existed without "concept or definition," Hassan wonders whether postmodernism may be "a significant revision, if not an original *épistème*, of twentieth-century western societies" (84). With more certainty, he implies that postmodernism—so widely disseminated—is readily apparent at both micro- (an individual's consciousness) and macrocosmic (global politics, economics, philosophy, art) levels. Hassan briefly considers ten conceptual problems inherent to the term (such as its instabilities (89-90) and indeterminacies³⁶ (92)), and follows those qualifications with a list of thirty-three conceptual (and ontological) distinctions between postmodernism (represented not only by a list but also a horizontal bi-directional arrow) and modernism (with its vertical bi-directional arrow), ten of which are reproduced here—

For another, this time ironic, spatialized representation see Graff (1979). He deploys his chart to illustrate the (ancient) rhetorical "melodrama" of politicized criticism: In this ring, audience, it is The Classical Order versus Contemporary Literature—

<u>Bad</u>	<u>Good</u>
representation	creation
text as determinate object	text as open, indeterminate "invitation"
boundaries and constraints	voyages into the unforeseen
docility, habit	risk
truth as correspondence	truth as invention, fiction (23)

Rather than sampling a "cultural moment," Graff charts an intense battle of academic politics, and implies that much of the force behind postmodernism is merely the work of zealous partisan scholars.

³⁶Hassan's clarification furnishes further terms and leads, unavoidably, to a yet wider and more pervasive idea of postmodernism. He explains: "By indeterminacy, or better still, indeterminacies, I mean a complex referent that these diverse concepts help to delineate: ambiguity, discontinuity, heterodoxy, pluralism, randomness, revolt, perversion, deformation. The latter alone subsumes a dozen current terms of unmaking: decreation, disintegration, deconstruction, decenterment, displacement, difference, discontinuity, disjunction, disappearance, decomposition, de-definition, demystification, detotalization, delegitimization—let alone more technical terms referring to the rhetoric of irony, rupture, silence. Through all these signs moves a vast will to unmaking, affecting the body politic, the body cognitive, the erotic body, the individual psyche—the entire realm of discourse in the West" (92).

Modernism

Purpose
Design
Mastery/Logos
Presence
Centering
Root/Depth
Narrative/Grande Histoire
Metaphysics
Determinacy

Postmodernism

Play
Chance
Exhaustion/Silence
Absence
Dispersal
Rhizome/Surface
Anti-narrative/Petite Histoire
Irony
Indeterminacy (91)

Hassan annotates his chart with detailed explication of the phenomenon of postmodernism, a basic “fact,” he claims, in most developed societies—

as an artistic, philosophical, and social phenomenon, postmodernism veers toward open, playful, optative, provisional (open in time as well as in structure or space), disjunctive, or indeterminate forms, a discourse of ironies and fragments, a “white ideology” of absences and fractures, a desire of diffractions, an invocation of complex, articulate silences. Postmodernism veers toward pervasive procedures, ubiquitous interactions, immanent codes, media, languages. (93-94)

With typographic linearity and this brand of hallucinatory elaboration, Hassan’s schema remains perplexing. Considering its usefulness as a guide to literature or a provider of insight about culture, it is not difficult to find the distinction between qualities obscure, if not altogether lacking. Inserting, for instance, a trio of canonical modernists (say, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce and Wyndham Lewis) or a trio of prominent postmoderns (Hassan names Norman Mailer, Alain Robbe-Grillet and Donald Barthelme in 1971’s “POSTmodernISM”), and then gauging either group in relation to a single listing on the chart—purpose/play, perhaps, or presence/absence—reveals how inadequate the terms are as critical tools. In what way, for example, is “presence” so salient in Woolf’s Between the Acts, while absence takes such a key position in Mailer’s The Armies of the Night? Can the metaphors “purpose” and “play” be usefully and distinctly applied in order to argue that Joyce’s Ulysses and Barth’s Snow White belong to vastly different cultural moments or conceptual categories? There is no doubting the terms of Hassan’s proposition are suggestive and appear to make strong assertions for a cultural watershed. Yet studied for a

time, their inherent restrictions delimit them as critical tools. In much the same way that Connor (1996) complains that measuring the degree of verisimilitude in a work of historical fiction produces a more or less dead-end criticism, so too does Hassan's delineation promote a curiously un-resonant schema: what does do with it? As the basis for a critical methodology Hassan's typology would appear to consist of establishing the ostensible norms of modernism and then discerning how much a given work adheres to or diverges from the standard. That divergence, in turn is a measure of the work's dissatisfaction with former ideological or worldview truths: for example, "Barth's Snow White, so replete with playful indeterminacies, is emblematically postmodern and signals the author's critique of the Grand Histoire metaphysics of modernism." Tautologically, the measurement of degree from norm illustrates degree of critique of that same norm. Hassan's method, demanding a monolithic and ever-stable modernism, separates the contemporary from the superannuated (and so, arguably, the good from the bad) in order to indicate the distinction between one cultural "tendency" and another.

Some seventeen years later—during which time Hassan himself has revised his earlier statements, and speculated that "postmodernism itself has changed, taken, as I see it, a wrong turn," becoming "a kind of eclectic raillery, the refined prurience of our borrowed pleasures and trivial beliefs," which, tenacious and still vital, is reaching for "something larger, something other, which some call posthumanism" (1987 xvii³⁷)—the

³⁷And again in "Prospects in Retrospect," the concluding essay of the same volume. Hassan recounts his 1985 visit to an exhibit of postmodern wares at the Grand Palais in Paris: "Walking through the bright farrago, hectares of esprit, parody, persiflage, I began to feel the smile on my lips freeze; it never became scowl or snarl, only an approximate leer. I realized then that postmodernism, that sort of postmodernism, had become arrested wit, wit waiting on disbelief. Unlike the immense glass space of the Grand Palais, postmodern design was a kind of belle époque drained of heroism, illusion, faith" (229). Though Hassan does not forsake postmodernism, he confides that it is possible for a "cultural moment" to choose the wrong fork on the road. Unexpectedly, he concludes his final essay with a call for faith in an "unfinished" and "pragmatic" pluralism that points (if to anything at all) "to something beyond mourning or nostalgia for old faiths, points, in many directions at once, to belief itself, if not renewed beliefs" (29). His ultimate statement is nothing if not equivocal: "Let postmodernism now work itself out as it might. Perhaps all we have learned from it is what the gods have taught us in both myth

term has broader currency yet. Richard Nilsen's 1999 article in The Globe and Mail, (which purchased it wire-service from The Arizona Republic) titled, "It's a PoMo PoMo PoMo World," is characteristic of the popular take on the (ir)relevance of postmodernity. Like Hassan, Nilsen divides "the world" in half, into a "before" and "after" loaded with a momentary finality. Whereas Hassan-the-scholar fixed on the ephemeral new temper of a cultural moment as expressed principally through its art forms, Nilsen-the-journalist focuses insistently on the differences between the "modern" (as distinct from modernist?) and the "postmodern" in terms of (Americocentric) consumer products, celebrated personalities, and patterns of behaviour. Here, for instance, are ten of Nilsen's forty-five categories—

Modern	Postmodern
Coca-Cola	Classic Coke
Office	Cubicle
New York City, New York	New York, Las Vegas
James Joyce	Donald Barthelme
Madonna	Jewel
Marshall McLuhan	Jacques Derrida
Free Love	Cyber Sex
Reading	Channel Surfing
Golden Arches	Swoosh
Essays	Lists

In his taxonomy, Nilsen simultaneously invests the cultural shift with significance and banality. From his chart it is possible to comprehend the change as more a new trend and a popular style than a new épistème: postmodernism is something that "hip" people have long been aware of, Nilsen suggests, so now you, dear Globe/Republic reader, can too! Furthermore, without an elaborated discussion of the terms themselves (is "postmodern" a historical term? an aesthetic one, an economic one?) or a clear notion of what is meant by the figures cited (how should readers infer the apparently paradigmatic difference between McDonald's Corporation (modern) and Nike Corporation (postmodern), an IBM PC and

and history: that even in their own omnivorous eyes, the universe is not single, but still One and Many as it shows itself to our sight" (230).

an iMac computer or a female performer who rose to fame in the 1980s (Madonna) and another (Jewel) whose rise came a decade later?), the categorical distinction can name though not provide productive meaning for critical assessment: McDonald's is modern, Nike is postmodern, so what? Nilsen observes that "[i]n a PoMo world, everything appears in quotation marks," and seems to imply that our perception of reality and our conscious role in it has altered remarkably:

Postmodernism, also called PoMo in a hipper context, began³⁸ as the name for a current direction in architecture, painting, sculpture, but it actually names a trend in culture at large: a self-conscious awareness of ourselves as playing parts, and a blurring of the lines between genres, and between media and life.³⁹ (D3)

³⁸To the contrary. For a brief history of the convoluted term, see Hassan, "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism" (1982). He employs a halting syntax that suggests uncertainty—"I will attempt to sort out the various postmodernisms, or, rather, the various critical constructs called Postmodernism, that have more or less established themselves at least temporarily over the past twenty-five years" (10). Douwe Fokkema's essay, "The Postmodern *Weltanschauung* and its Relation with Modernism: An Introductory Survey," traces the term forward from Frederico de Oníz (1934), Dudley Fitt (1942), Jerome Mazzaro (1946) and Arnold Toynbee (1947) to the 1984 conference where he presented his paper. In *The Origins of Postmodernity* (1998), Perry Anderson provides a lively counterpart to Fokkema's pluralistic survey. Like Fokkema, he reaches (in his "Prodromes" section) back to de Oníz and Toynbee. In "Crystallization" Anderson discusses the term's dissemination in the journal, *boundary 2*, rapid proliferation by the hand of Ihab Hassan circa 1971, and movement into architectural circles through celebratory writing by Robert Venturi, Robert Stern and Charles Jencks (who, Anderson reports, claimed in 1987 that "the response to my lectures and articles was so forceful and widespread that it created Post-Modernism as a social and architectural movement" (23)). Still later the term was picked up from Hassan by Jean-François Lyotard whose *The Postmodern Condition* was, according to Anderson, "[t]he first book to treat postmodernity as a general change of human circumstance" (26). Jürgen Habermas is the final scholar Anderson addresses before "Capture," a lengthy chapter about Fredric Jameson, a scholar who is altogether absent from Fokkema's survey. Anderson argues that Jameson's 1982 lecture at the Whitney Museum of Contemporary Arts "redrew the whole map of the postmodern at a stroke—a prodigious inaugural gesture that has commanded the field ever since" (54). Hassan, in "Prospects in Retrospect," exhibits less admiration for Jameson, whose scholarship he sees as being (unlike himself?) hampered by "the iron yoke of ideology" (n. 23 232).

³⁹For a less celebratory popular account, see, for instance, *Utne Reader*, July–August, 1997. Titled, "Reclaiming Real Life: Fed Up With the Faux World? Here's How to Get Real Again (Really)," it offers solutions to the postmodern parade of simulacra. Inside that issue two rather Platonic articles in particular maintain hope that we can get back to reality: Jon Spayde's "A Way Out of Wonderland" (48–54) and Cathy Madison's "Reality Hunger: The Search for Authenticity has Deep Social Roots" (55).

Yet under Nilsen's banal tutelage we learn that postmodernism stands as a "trend in culture at large," and is, apparently, "hot" (as opposed to the outmoded modern, which is "not"). Nilsen does not hazard to guess what kind of trend it may be—is it equivalent in scope to the rise in secularism or the return of platform shoes? With no framework of reference, moreover, there is no method through which to measure its dimensions and depths. Placed, moreover, in one section of a single day's edition of one Canadian newspaper alongside articles about gardening, summer movies, costly ticket prices and an exhibit of abstract expressionist painting, readers that day are left to decide which of all of these is mere fashion and what has import. Far less concerned with outlining possible ramifications than Hassan, Nilsen's article remains content to illustrate (though not explicate) in cartoon-like strokes elemental aspects of the times.

To the question, then, "What do we mean when we talk about postmodernism?" it is perhaps best to answer with a safe if frustratingly equanimous, "It depends. Who is talking? Where? When?" Historically, scholars such as Hassan, Fokkema and Anderson remind us, there was little agreement between the "postmodernismo" of Oníiz and Toynbee's "Post-Modern." Likewise, the incredulity toward meta-narratives so much a part of Lyotard's fashionable evocation of postmodernism is decidedly at odds with the eclectic play of historical architectural forms that marks Jencks's⁴⁰ celebratory version. And of course when Hassan asks, "if postmodern knowledge is essentially narrative, provisional, 'groundless,' then how can theory define or authorize practice (behaviour, values, norms)?" (1987 225-226), not only is he partially invalidating his own past critical enterprise, but openly speaking of the fundamental dilemma of a "tendency" built upon its own groundlessness. As noted earlier, the very intangibility of postmodernism is always already assumed; none the less critical work persists in applying an term acknowledged to

⁴⁰Anderson reports that Lyotard wrote without any knowledge of Jencks and that when he came across Jencks's construction, "[h]is response was acrid": the American's postmodernism was, Lyotard wrote, "amalgamation, ornamentation, pastiche—flattering the 'taste' of a public that can have no taste" (31).

be vague and tentative to a field (sociology, literary studies, architecture) in order to account for change.

(ii) What Do We Mean When We Talk About Postmodern Fiction?

Nearly imperialistic as a field of study, postmodernism has reached out to encompass art forms (it is, for instance, regularly encountered in photography, painting, film, architecture and dance) as well as diverse social and hard sciences, including economics, biology, sociology and anthropology. Though postmodernism is pervasive in literary studies as well, the recent multi-volume typological project of Linda Hutcheon (see 3.iii for further examination) has attained an especially high visibility. Hutcheon's work is particularly pertinent to our case because much of the scholarship related to Ackroyd utilizes her premises in order to illustrate the putative postmodern nature of his novels. Yet Hutcheon's work is by no mean criticism *ex nihilo*. In fact, a critical trend designating the parametres of literary postmodernism predates Hutcheon's project and, furthermore, established foundational problems inherent to the category (that Hutcheon and others later discuss). During the 1960s and early 1970s a small cadre of critics began to publish their observations about the modulations in the literary *Zeitgeist*; change, apparently, was in the air and more than a few scholars were quick to find something noteworthy about it. Though ostensibly pursuing a neutral, apolitical or objective cataloguing of qualities, debate about the value of the change was—and has often in fact remained—acrimonious, with words like “crisis” and “decay” vying in journals and conferences with ones like “innovation” and “revolution.” With underlying concerns recalling both the “false versus true” controversy central to discussions of the historical novel and Connor's late-dated query, “does postmodernist culture exist and if so (sometimes even if not) is it a ‘good thing’ or a ‘bad thing’?” (1989 7), criticism has wrestled not only with the amorphous borders of literary postmodernism but also its considerable ethical dimensions. What is more, the points of reference for the value of postmodern literature perform a small scale mimicking (or re-enactment) of the larger, more generalized dialogue we have already seen

regarding postmodernism. For all the various discussions of postmodern literature, it is not difficult to replace literature with, say, architecture . . . or dance, or painting. Strangely, there is little specific to literature—as a site of signification—that cannot be found in another art form.

The duly noted new literature did not emerge from a historical void From the beginning, critics set the stage in a particular manner: The Moments Following the Death of Modernism. Bernard Bergonzi, writing in 1968, paints a characteristic mise en scène—

The present situation is one in which Proust and Joyce and the other masters of the early twentieth century have, in Cyril Connolly's words, "finished off the novel", and yet where there are very strong cultural and sociological reasons, ranging from the dedication and aspiration of novelists to the commercial needs of the publishing industry, for the continuation of the novel form. (19)⁴¹

It is with considerably less sang-froid and more than a nod to melodrama that Irving Howe (1970) describes the "unsettling moral and intellectual consequences of the breakup of modernist culture, or the decline of the new" (vii)—

How enviable death must be to those who no longer have reason to live yet are unable to make themselves die! Modernism will not come to an end; its war chants will be repeated through the decades. For what seems to await it is a more painful and certainly less dignified conclusion than that of earlier cultural movements: what awaits it is publicity and sensation, the kind of savage parody which may indeed be the only fate worse than death. (33)

In short, a broadly disseminated query—"Whither literature?"—was posed in response to the perceived passing of an epoch, and no shortage of responses offered. Initial answers were anxious, if not condemnatory outright. In his Queen's University address of 1960, later published as "What Was Modernism?," Harry Levin championed the achievements of modernist literature, and suggested that contemporary reaction to those estimable feats was

⁴¹Bergonzi admits to feeling wary about the confidence of Anthony Burgess's 1967 statement that, "The contemporary novel is not doing badly. Soon, when we least expect it, it will do not merely better but magnificently" (12). Bergonzi later nails the coffin shut: "The situation of the Western novel during the past forty years has been precisely one in which a large amount of local movement has been evident, but no overall development since the achievement of Proust and Joyce and the other major innovators of the early twentieth century" (32). For further discussion of this time of transition, see also: Byatt, Binns and Reeve (in Bradbury 1979), Stevenson (1990) and Seltzer (1974).

blindly rash. Levin alludes to “the post-modern” as an “anti-intellectual undercurrent” within modernity (271), and then further invalidates it as wholly parasitic: “Lacking the courage of their convictions, much in our arts and letters simply exploits and diffuses, on a large scale and at a popular level, the results of [modernist] experimentation” (277). Leslie Fiedler’s essay “The New Mutants” (1965) surveyed in like fashion fiction of the “present age,” (i.e., “post-Modernist literature” (508)). Though he here⁴² appears to admire new developments, the steady qualifications of his admiration suggests he might fully rescind it at a moment’s notice. Nevertheless, Fiedler steers toward a vision of radical transformation into “post-humanist” (521) culture, which is to say—

the tradition from which [postmodernists] strive to disengage is the tradition of the human, as the West (understanding the West to extend from the United States to Russia) has defined it, Humanism itself, both in its bourgeois and Marxist forms; and more especially, the cult of reason—that dream of Socrates, redreamed by the Renaissance and surviving all travesties down to only yesterday. (509)

While Fiedler presents himself as a humble chronicler, the notes of panic and despair in his record place him near Levin and Howe. Anxious in another way, Bernard Bergonzi (1970) suggests that what he calls the “problematical mode” of fiction (which is analogous to postmodern fiction), whose initial appearance was defiant and liberating, “has itself become just another convention, by an inevitable process of cultural stabilisation” (227).

Other critics held more hope for the new literature. Examining the emergence of the critical construction of postmodernism, Alex Callinicos refers to Ihab Hassan as a principal “propagandist” (132) of the cause. And though his later essays celebrate the new forms, in his ambivalent “The Literature of Silence” (1967), Hassan mentions an emergent “new literature,” one “turning against itself, aspir[ing] to silence [and] leaving us with uneasy intimations of outrage and silence” (1987 3). Ever the aspiring typologist, Hassan

⁴²By contrast, his survey end-of-decade “Cross the Border—Close the Gap” (which appeared in Playboy (!) in 1970) delineates the new literature in neutrally descriptive terms, but calls for a new criticism whose language is appropriate to its subject. Old Criticism is for Old Novels, Fiedler writes; a Post-Modern criticism is necessary for understanding a Post-Modern literature (461–463).

uncovers in such literature metaphors of violence and apocalypse, obscenity and absurdist play; he notes “radical irony,” and detects a central—and a soon to be much extolled—principle of “indeterminacy” (9). Hassan observes, “By refusing order, order imposed or discovered, this kind of literature refuses purpose” (10). The form might be radical and subversive, Hassan acknowledges, but it is not ultimately nihilistic: “The new literature may be extreme, and its dream apocalyptic and outrageous. But it is conceived in the interests of life; and life, we know, sometimes progresses through violence and contradictions” (13). John Barth’s tentative and “much-misread essay”⁴³ (Barth 1980 284), “The Literature of Exhaustion,” which first appeared in The Atlantic in 1967, discusses “the literature of exhausted possibility” (19). Barth proposes that while “artistic conventions are liable to be retired, subverted, transcended, transformed, or even deployed against themselves to generate new and lively work” (1980 285), literature is not nearly dead but rather in transition. He modestly suggests his own work is a testament to new forms springing from old. Most enthusiastic, perhaps, is Raymond Federman’s introduction to Surfiction (1975), a collection of essays addressing new developments in literature. Federman programatically champions a new literature which—unlike the “moribund” and status quo “traditional novel” (6)—“exposes the fictionality of reality” (7). Surfiction (that is, surreality + fiction) is the only appropriate shape for the future and will, according to Federman’s bombast, eradicate duplicity, negate duality and abolish “all distinctions between the real and imaginary, between the conscious and subconscious [and] between truth and untruth” (8). Unlike the “boring and restrictive” fiction of tradition, the

⁴³In “The Literature of Replenishment” (1980), Barth claims that his earlier essay did not suggest that “literature . . . is kaput” [sic] (285). What he meant at the time was that he viewed the “aesthetic of high modernism” as an “admirable, not-to-be-repudiated, but essentially completed ‘program’” (286), and that a newer literature was being forged: “In 1966–67 we scarcely had the term postmodernism in its current literary critical usage—at least I hadn’t heard it yet—but a number of us, in quite different ways and with varying combinations of intuitive response and conscious deliberation, were already well into the working out, not of the next best thing after modernism, but of the best next thing: what is gropingly now called postmodernist fiction; what I hope might also be thought of one day as a literature of replenishment” (286).

new literature can “offer choice, participation and discovery” (10-11); it will be “deliberately illogical, irrational, unrealistic, non sequitur, and incoherent” (13); and within it, “linear and orderly narration is no longer possible” (10). More faithfully mimetic of the chaotic contemporary world than the spurious teleology of traditional fiction, innovative contemporary literature, Federman argues, is therefore the only apt literature.

Subsequent post-Federman deliberation has followed a kind of tradition, framing discussion in diagnostic, evaluative terms (basically, postmodern literature as ailment and/or vitality). Such discussion is either appended to or implicit in the critic’s typology of postmodernist literature. David Lodge (1977) is a case in point. Though more circumspect than the likes of Federman or Levin, the genealogy David Lodge presents in Modes of Modern Writing begins with Beckett (“who has a strong claim to be considered the first important postmodernist writer” (221)), and then moves on to consider that literature’s salient features, especially focussing vis à vis Roman Jakobson on the degrees of metonymy and metaphor in postmodern works. Yet Lodge’s typological project eventually concludes with a typical diagnostic flourish. Lodge contends that postmodern literature subverts a reader’s faith that a text is “ultimately susceptible to being understood” (226). His hypothesis is presented without any seeming rancour. It merely posits a contrast to earlier modernist literature, which apparently did not subvert faith so radically. And in a similar vein as Hassan, Lodge provides a set of keywords—contradiction, permutation, discontinuity, randomness, excess, short circuit—for the new literature. Unlike Hassan or Federman, though, Lodge judges postmodern literature as essentially a “rule-breaking kind of art” and “very much a hit-or-miss affair” (245). The descriptions alone diminish postmodern literature, suggesting, respectively, a juvenile acting-out and mere facile gimmickry. Forever limited, in Lodge’s view, to response or reaction to earlier (modernist in particular) forms, postmodern literature has, so to speak, no vitality of its own, no internal energy to foster growth and development.

In line with Lodge's assessment, Gerald Graff (1979) finds in postmodern literature (which, he believes, "extends rather than overturns the premises of romanticism and modernism" (52)) reaction borne of crisis. Graff holds, however, that the critical embrace of a literature that marks "our despair of the possibility of such understanding or our desire to celebrate its impossibility as a kind of release from social and philosophical determinisms" (239) is simply wrong-headed. And this is because he maintains that literature and criticism should cherish its Arnoldian touchstone, should shore up boundaries and work toward building civilization: "The writer's problem is to find a standpoint from which to represent the diffuse, intransigent material of contemporary experience without surrendering critical perspective to it" (238). So, "lacking in plausible motive or discoverable depth" (53), contemporary literature can serve only a perverse function. Graff's descriptive terms—from "alienation," "corruption" and "degeneration" to "irreverent," "arbitrary," "artificial" and "merely make-believe"—are a negative typology, and form a panic leitmotif. He claims that the new form's "inability to transcend the solipsism of subjectivity and language become the novel's chief subject and the principle of its form" (53), and that such a subject-form is intrinsically pessimistic and self-defeating.

Despite an inflammatory rhetoric, however, not all is lost. Within the varied field of postmodern fiction Graff locates two sub-genres. While the first, represented by Borges, posits "a universe in which human consciousness is incapable of transcending its own mythologies" (55), it simultaneously regards that limitation as a problem and hence "affirms the sense of reality in a negative way by dramatizing its absence as a deprivation" (56). The second, in contrast, views the dissolution of identity and the loss of meaningfulness as liberatory, "a prelude to growth" (57). This position gives Graff pause—

The weakness of much postmodern fiction lies in its ability or refusal to retain any moorings in social reality It indulges in a freedom of infinite

fabulation that is trivializing in that the writer is not taken seriously enough to be held accountable to an external standard of truth. (209)⁴⁴

Graff's unproblematic reference to truth finds an unexpected echo in the Manzoni, Fleishman and Renault discussions of the historical novel.

Two critics contemporaneous with Hutcheon serve to elucidate the most recent perspectives on postmodernism in literature. Fredric Jameson opens what Perry Anderson calls his field-commanding (54) essay, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" (1982), with an even by then standard admission that "[t]he concept of postmodernism is not widely accepted or even understood today" (Foster 111). Despite the fundamental lack of conceptual clarity he focusses on two aspects of "this new impulse": that postmodernism exists as a multifaceted reaction to modernism (which is considered by practitioners of the postmodern as "the establishment and the enemy—dead, stifling, canonical, the reified monuments one has to destroy to do anything new" (112)) and marked by the effacement of key boundaries such as "high culture and so-called mass or popular culture" (112). In his address Jameson identifies postmodernism as a style as well as a periodizing concept "for the emergence of a new type of social life and a new economic order" (113). It is the

⁴⁴See also Charles Newman (1985), The Post-Modern Aura. Like Graff (who, in fact, supplies the preface for Newman's study), Newman apparently holds some hostility to the alleged pretensions of postmodernity: "The Post-Modern is above all characterized by the inflation of discourse, manifesting itself in literature though the illusion that technique can remove itself from history by attacking a concept of objective reality which has already faded from the world, and in criticism by the development of secondary languages which presumably 'demystify' reality, but actually tend to further obscure it" (10).

And the debate takes on other perspectives. Though focussed on irony, Alan Wilde's Horizons of Assent (1981) views postmodern art in a positive light. He writes: "the defining feature of modernism is its ironic vision of disconnection and disjunction, postmodernism, more radical in its perceptions, derives instead from a vision of randomness, multiplicity, and contingency: in short, a world in need of mending is superseded by one beyond repair. Modernism, spurred by an anxiety to recuperate a lost wholeness in self-sustaining orders of art or in the unselfconscious depths of the self (control and surrender again), reaches toward the heroic in the intensity of its desire and of its disillusion. Postmodernism, skeptical of such efforts, presents itself as deliberately, consciously antiheroic" (131-132).

Consider further: Scholes (1967); Alter (1975); Thliher (1984).

latter development that concerns him, and “pastiche”⁴⁵ (in nostalgia films like Star Wars and in the historical novels of E.L. Doctorow) and “schizophrenia”⁴⁶ (exemplified by Bob Perelman’s poem, “China”) form the bifurcated core that illustrates the sense of space and time of the new impulse. Jameson, like Hutcheon after him, discusses film, music and literature (and later in the greatly expanded Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, dance, video and visual arts and architecture) interchangeably and acknowledges that the postmodern features he adumbrates are not altogether without precedent—they in fact characterized elements of modernism. What is new, though, Jameson suggests, is the predominance of these traits—

I must limit myself to the suggestion that radical breaks between periods do not generally involve complete changes of content but rather the restructuration of a certain number of elements already given: features that in an earlier period or system were subordinate become dominant, and features that had been dominant again become secondary . . . my point is that until the present day those things have been secondary or minor features of modernist art, marginal rather than central, and that we have something new when they become the central features of cultural production. (123)

Despite Jameson’s protests to the contrary (that his essaying performance is a descriptive and not diagnostic or prescriptive one), his very terms on one single page—“the

⁴⁵As opposed to parody. Jameson argues in effect that parody is a kind of literary social control. The parodist fixes on the private and idiosyncratic stylistic mannerisms of the object of ridicule in order to emphasize its deviation from the “way people normally speak or read”: “So there remains behind all parody the feeling that there is a linguistic norm in contrast to which styles of the great modernists can be mocked” (113–114). Pastiche, on the other hand, exists in a place without norms: “Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody’s ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic” (114).

⁴⁶Jameson’s “descriptive and not diagnostic” usage comes from his interpretation of Jacques Lacan: “psychosis, and, more particularly schizophrenia, emerges from the failure of the infant to accede fully into the realm of speech and language” (118). Furthermore, as Jameson sees it, the unfortunate schizophrenic, who does not “have our experience of temporal continuity either” is “condemned to live in a perpetual present with which the moments of his or her past have little connection and for which there is no conceivable future on the horizon. In other words, schizophrenic experience is an experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence” (119).

disappearance of a sense of history,” “the media exhaustion of the news,” “the transformation of reality into images,” “a perpetual change that obliterates traditions,” “the fragmentation of time into a series of perpetual presents” (125)—carry tangible weight and suggest that once upon a time there was something that if not prelapsarian was at least better, more meaningful than the dizzying, present day. “Nostalgia,” a term of abuse for Jameson, is a cozy blanket with which the critic himself seems to wrap himself. Jameson concludes his brief essay with an open question. He states that there is some agreement that modernist art worked “against its society in ways which are variously described as critical, negative, contestatory, subversive, oppositional and the like,” yet questions whether “anything of the sort [can] be affirmed about postmodernism and its social moment” (125). As with Hutcheon, Jameson does not doubt the direct linkage between art and culture, that art forms teach “lessons” (as Hutcheon claims) that influence audiences and so work to transform culture. Yet in contrast, Jameson lists nothing contestatory; that postmodern forms reinforce the logic of consumer capitalism Jameson has no doubt; whether these forms offer resistance remains unanswered.⁴⁷

With nary a reference to Jameson’s influential approach, Brian McHale (1987) none the less mines a similar vein in his study of a postmodern literary “descriptive poetics” (xi). In stark contrast to both Hutcheon and Jameson, though, McHale spends no time considering the putative effects of literature on culture. For him postmodernist literature does not represent a symptom of declining (Jameson) or revitalized (Hutcheon) culture; it simply reflects different sorts of questions certain novelists are asking. McHale

⁴⁷ Jameson’s answer to Linda Hutcheon on the matter of E.L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime* is instructive. For Hutcheon the novel is emblematic of the postmodern challenge to “andro- (phallo-), hetero-, Euro-, ethno-centrism” (1988 61). Jameson questions Hutcheon’s reading exactly because *Ragtime* is a “postmodern artifact” (1991 22)—“This historical novel can no longer set out to represent the historical past; it can only ‘represent’ our ideas and stereotypes about that past (which thereby at once becomes ‘pop history’) If there is any realism left here, it is a ‘realism’ that is meant to derive from the shock of grasping that confinement and of slowly becoming aware of a new and original historical situation in which we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach” (25).

adopts from Roman Jakobson the concept of the “dominant”—according to McHale “the focusing component of a work of art” (6)—and then modifies and arguably clouds Jakobson’s term so that there are many dominants at various levels: “In short, different dominants emerge depending upon which questions we ask of the text, and the position from which we interrogate it” (6).⁴⁸ From that point he arrives at the matrix of what he humbly calls a “one-idea book” (xii)—

I will formulate it as a general thesis about modernist fiction: the dominant of modernist fiction is epistemological. That is, modernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and fore-ground [the] questions . . . : “How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?” (9)

And in like fashion there is a distinct slant to the dominant of postmodernism’s literature—

This brings me to a second general thesis, this time about postmodernist fiction: the dominant of postmodernist fiction is ontological. That is, postmodernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground [the] questions . . . : “Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?” (10)

McHale studies the features of other critical constructions of postmodern literature such as Hassan’s and Lodge’s, and concludes: “it is the ontological dominant which explains the selection and clustering of these particular features; the ontological dominant is the principle of systematicity underlying those otherwise heterogeneous catalogues” (10). Like Jameson⁴⁹, McHale notes that one term does not exclude the other; epistemological questions “tip over” into ontological questions when they are pushed far enough. The

⁴⁸From McHale’s abbreviated discussion of dominants, it is difficult to comprehend where to place readers and critics. When he writes, for instance, “With the help of this conceptual tool, we can elicit the systems underlying these heterogeneous catalogues, and to begin to account for historical change” (7), terms like “systems” and “historical change” float detached from the speaker. But who is “we” and how is “we” positioned, inside or outside the dominants? Do the dominants “exist” within the text alone or, like in Jameson, is the dominant a generalized cultural phenomenon linked to economics and enveloping both text and critic?

⁴⁹See also: Foster (1984): “In this light, the rejection of modernism on the grounds that its elements are to be found in modernism may be countered with the argument that they now exist in a new order, transformed in place and effectivity” (201).

dominant, however, assures that one possibility is given more weight by readers than another:

This in a nutshell is the function of the dominant: it specifies the order in which different aspects are to be attended to, so that, although it would be perfectly possible to interrogate a postmodernist text about its epistemological implications, it is more urgent to interrogate it about its ontological implications. In postmodernist texts, in other words, epistemology is backgrounded, as the price for foregrounding ontology. (11)

Highlighting the “problems of modes of being” over modernism’s “problems of knowing” (10), postmodernist literature in McHale’s account insistently urges for (and here McHale’s view aligns with ones earlier expressed by Hassan and Lodge) speculation about the nature(s) of the (textual) world(s).

(iii) Linda Hutcheon: The Use and Abuse of Postmodernism

While Fredric Jameson’s elucidations have gained wide currency as an overarching conceptual approach to (or aetiology of) the phenomenon called postmodernity, in English literary studies generally and in discussions of Peter Ackroyd especially, the critical project of Linda Hutcheon that spans several volumes has come to occupy a more pivotal position. Her coinage and characterization of “historiographic metafiction” (discussed in 3.iv), a term regularly found in scholarly approaches to Ackroyd’s work, is fully imbricated in her broader project of mapping the contours of postmodernity. The shape and significance she grants to postmodernism are therefore crucial not only because they stand in contrast with other modellings but also because Hutcheon’s work has had such an influence in approaches to Peter Ackroyd’s novels. Critically considering Hutcheon’s map of postmodernity will enable a discussion of the implications of her map-drawing as a critical method and as an interpretive schema for novels such as Hawksmoor, whose postmodernity Hutcheon confidently lists alongside work by Margaret Atwood, John Fowles, Audrey Thomas, Anthony Burgess, Robert Kroetsch, Julian Barnes, Milan Kundera and Susan Daitch (1988 139).

While Hutcheon has been occasionally equivocal about the very existence of postmodernism—she writes qualifyingly, for instance, “The postmodern is, if it is anything at all, a problematizing force in our culture today” (1988 xi; emphasis added)—her studies usually answer Connor’s query, “[d]oes postmodernism really exist, after all?,” with an enthusiastic affirmative: postmodernism does exist, and it can be a good thing indeed. Though in her early study of contemporary metafiction, Narcissistic Narrative (1980), Hutcheon eschewed the term “postmodernism” as being both too vague and exclusive (2-3), she entered the critical fray several years later with a flurry of publications: The Canadian Postmodern (1988), A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction (1988) and The Politics of Postmodernism (1989). Most notably in her encyclopaedic, popular and six-times reprinted A Poetics of Postmodernism, Linda Hutcheon engages aspects⁵⁰ of what she variously labels the “cultural enterprise” or “cultural phenomenon” or “cultural practices” (x) called postmodernism. Rather than simply writing “yet another denigration” (ix) of postmodernism, Hutcheon envisions a “poetics”—that is, a “flexible conceptual structure which could at once constitute and contain postmodern culture” (x), and/or an “open, ever-changing theoretical structure by

⁵⁰Hutcheon focusses principally on art and cultural theory. Other fields engaged in the postmodern debate, from sociology and anthropology to law and philosophy, are seemingly excluded from her poetics.

For further evidence of Hutcheon’s power of dissemination, see her closely interrelated English language essays in Hutcheon, L. (Ed.) A Postmodern Reader; Adam, I. (Ed.) Past the Last Post; Bertens, H. (Ed.) Postmodernism; Testaferri, A. (Ed.) Women in Italian Culture; Perloff, M. (Ed.) Postmodern Genres; Smyth, Edmund J. (Ed.) Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction; Neuman, S. and Kambourelli, S. (Eds.) A Mazing Space; Whiteside A. (Ed.) On Referring in Literature; Merrill, R. (Ed.) Ethics/Aesthetics; Hoffman, M. (Ed.) Essentials of the Theory of Fiction; Kauffman, L. (Ed.) Gender and Theory; O’Donnell, P. (Ed.) Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction; Moss, J. (Ed.) Future Indicative; Davidson, A. (Ed.) Studies on Canadian Literature; Solecki, S. (Ed.) Spider Blues; New, W.H. (Ed.) Literary History of Canada Vol IV. Hutcheon’s acknowledgement pages, furthermore, list a spate of excerpts and related essays published in Canadian Literature, Essays on Canadian Literature, Canadian Review of Comparative Literature, Quarterly Review of Film and Video, Bete Noire, Dandelion, University of Toronto Quarterly, Textual Practice, Canadian Woman Studies, Poetics Today, Tessera, Bulletin of Humanities Institute at Stony Brook, Signature, Cultural Critique, Diacritics, Genre, Ariel and English Studies in Canada. Hutcheon gives thanks, as well, to numerous institutions and professional associations that heard parts of the research that comprised her studies.

which to order both our cultural knowledge and our critical procedures” (14). Ostensibly fluid and amorphous—despite its paradoxically supplying order and containment—Hutcheon’s poetics, then, is a structural critical equivalent or analogue to a certain representation of a commonplace conception (dating back to Hassan (1971) at least) of postmodernism itself. Much of Hutcheon’s Poetics supplies a typology or profile of the postmodern. For Hutcheon, who asserts her modest wish to “avoid polemical generalizations” of the sort she finds in work by Fredric Jameson, Terry Eagleton and Charles Newman (10), postmodernism is, in general and in ostensibly non-polemical terms, “fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical and inescapably political” (4).⁵¹ What is new about postmodernism, Hutcheon notes, is not so much its active questioning of heretofore stable ontological and epistemological systems, but rather “the concentration of the problemizations” (88). Hutcheon situates postmodernism in a seemingly bellicose world of disparate powers vying for control—though one where battles are pitched through words and discourse dominance rather than military gestures and legal restraints. What postmodern forms achieve, according to Hutcheon (after Barthes), is a comprehensive critical evaluation of “the given” myths or “what goes without saying” (3) in our culture. In place of the singular answer or a uniform Truth, it suggests multiplicity, provisionality and context; instead of a uniform, universal dogma, it offers local context and contingency.

As Hutcheon sees it, the “teachings” and “lessons” (the unexpectedly Sunday schoolish words are hers) of postmodernism—gleaned from brief excursions into building designed by internationally-recognized architects like Michael Graves and Paolo Portoghesi, disparate novels (from Margaret Atwood and Peter Ackroyd to Salman Rushdie and Tom Robbins), artwork by such practitioners as Cindy Sherman and Barbara Kruger and cultural theories from the likes of Jean-François Lyotard and Roland

⁵¹Hutcheon repeats this formulation with gusto in her other works on postmodernism. In The Politics of Postmodernism she says postmodernism is “a phenomenon whose mode is resolutely contradictory as well as unavoidable political” (1). In The Canadian Postmodern, Hutcheon writes that the “discontinuities of postmodernism” (20) are inherently political, contradictory and paradoxical.

Barthes—are multiple. Surveying its vast archive of forms and significant commentators, she stakes claims for the immense sway of postmodernism. This “cultural phenomenon” is always, as she points out over and again, contradictory and paradoxical. In particular, it is radical yet domesticated; it is something that openly questions, yes, but without ultimately becoming “extreme.” In keeping with her desire to be non-polemical, Hutcheon’s postmodern “cultural enterprise” strikes a moderate balance despite its seeming polymorphous and subversive nature. Hutcheon’s claims for the “phenomenon” occur page after page. She explains that postmodernism

- is not a new paradigm (4)
- has “seriously challenged” liberal humanism (4)
- questions from within but does not implode (xiii)
- works “within conventions in order to subvert them” (5)
- challenges the increasing uniformization of mass culture (6)
- contests culture within its own assumptions (6)
- “refuses to posit any structure” or master narratives (6)
- may signify “the site of the struggle of the emergence of something new” (4)
- “marks neither a radical Utopian change nor a lamentable decline to hyperreal simulacra” (xiii)
- has little faith in art’s ability to change society directly, though it does believe that questioning and problematizing may set up conditions for possible change (218)
- interrogates the notion of consensus (7)
- questions “narrative singularity and unity in the name of multiplicity and disparity” (90)
- does “not reject or merely accept” cultural norms (16)
- might be able to “dramatize and even provoke change from within” (7)
- is careful not to make the margin into the new centre (12)
- rejects any neat binary oppositions (43)
- says “there are all kinds of orders and systems in our world and we have created them all” (43)⁵²

⁵²Compared to Ihab Hassan’s neat schematic of postmodernism in “Toward a Concept of Postmodernism” (1982), Hutcheon’s own delineation simplifies the “effects” of the postmodern. And whereas (in “Pluralism in Perspective” (1986)) Hassan’s list of eleven links, a “catena of postmodern features” (18)—indeterminacy, fragmentation, decanonization, self-less-ness/depth-less-ness, the unrepresentable/unrepresentable, irony, hybridization, carnivalization, performance/participation, constructionism, immanence—broadens the postmodern thematic, Hutcheon’s own typology of contradiction, subversion and persistent questioning reduces the scope.

Outlining with broad gestures, Hutcheon states that goad-like postmodernism (which remains oddly yet persistently a singular “it” in her discussion) “asserts and then deliberately undermines such principles as value, order, meaning, control and identity” (12). Its modus operandi, as outlined by Hutcheon, involves a simultaneous back and forth or in and out movement. To borrow Hutcheon’s own metaphors, it “uses and abuses” and “installs and subverts” conventions. By doing so, this phenomenon continuously brings to the fore the synthetic, historically determined (and limited) and human-made quality of these conventions. And yet at the same time it is a gad-fly, not an anarchist. While Hutcheon is quick (and even eager) to point out what is paradoxical, contradictory and contestatory in postmodernism, she has equal certainty of its limitations. Postmodernism offers “only questions, never final answers” (42) and it “questions centralized, totalized, hierarchized, closed systems: questions but does not destroy” (41). To go so far as to unequivocally answer or destroy is tantamount to embracing another dictator after the tyrannical Emperor has been deposed. Hutcheon’s postmodernism reveals the ideology behind the “normal” and “traditional.” Power comes from the acts of revelation; it has no interest in occupying the gilded throne: “In many ways it is an even-handed process because postmodernism ultimately manages to install and reinforce as much as undermine and subvert the conventions and preoccupations it appears to challenge” (1989 1-2). It is not difficult to view Hutcheon’s envisioning of postmodernism as unsettling. After all, the phenomenon’s reach is so vast and inclusive, and yet, as Hutcheon herself notes, it is temperate and “even-handed”—despite knowledge and critical insight, the “process” is not too extreme and never uncomfortably radical; it is a wary if puckish teacher, not an armed revolutionary. Given Hutcheon’s claims for the enterprise and her careful emphasis on its subversive-yet-moderate political vision, the question arises: is this critical vision of postmodernism also a domesticated phenomenon? If it is, then to what degree is it “inescapably political” (1988 4)? The very even-handedness—comprised of the continuous

deferring modality of questioning and the disavowal of active cultural-making—would appear to qualify or curtail its “political” value and import.

Lorraine Weir eloquently raises the matter of Hutcheon’s positioning of postmodernism in “Normalizing the Subject: Linda Hutcheon and the English-Canadian Postmodern.” Among many topics, Weir addresses notions of “bad taste” and “normalcy” in the academy and “the worlds of community, shared values, mutual illumination, health, and moral well-being, values which have prevailed—in fact, become canonic—in English-Canadian literary criticism for more than a century” (180). Weir contends that Linda Hutcheon falls into that canonic Canadian literary critical fold, and takes postmodernism along with her. What for Hutcheon is a poetics that “could at once constitute and contain postmodern culture” (1988 x) looks to Weir like a taming that virtually enervates the intrinsic (albeit potential) dynamism of postmodern forms. Weir fears that Hutcheon’s “communitarian values,” which have, not coincidentally, helped assure Hutcheon’s vaunted status in the Canadian literary market-place, restrict and in effect de-claw the truly radical possibilities of postmodernism. Weir writes that despite her seeming revolutionary guise, “Hutcheon undertakes what Robert Kroetsch has called a ‘righting of culture’ which returns it to its long-held values, its code of civility, and privileging of clarity, good taste, and ‘standard English’” (181). Hutcheon’s poetics, then, “normalizes,” transforming the conceivable danger of the carnival into benign entertainment—

Less radical than the longer-canonized Northrop Frye, Hutcheon balances on the edge of English-Canadian acculturated intolerance of speculative thought, redeeming herself at every possible lapse through invocation of the official values enshrined in our literary tradition. In fact, so close to the rhetoric of the great Canadian hermeneutic/realist paradigm does Hutcheon’s poetics of postmodernism come that cooptation by the still dominant Tory tradition seems almost inevitable. Subjecting Canadian as well as international modernism to a normalizing influence, domesticating deviance and inscribing it within her postmodern paradigm, Hutcheon converts danger into safety, the marginalized into the mainstream, the non-referential into the referential. (181)⁵³

⁵³ In *The Jamesonian Unconscious*, Clint Burnham likewise takes Hutcheon to task for her reduction of postmodernism into a mode of liberalism (230–233).

Hutcheon's inscription claims a playful but none the less serious political intent for the "cultural practices." For Weir, Hutcheon's contention that this phenomenon "espouses a postmodern ideology of plurality and recognition of difference" (1988 114) needs to be considered in the context of Hutcheon's simultaneous normalizing or domesticating gestures. The degree to which plurality and difference are then understood (by the presumed audience) may be limited because in Hutcheon's view the questioning element is conjoined with a moderatism which always asserts the need for the commensurable, the recognizable and clear referentiality.

(In addition to the possibly domesticating, de-politicizing or "containing" trait of Hutcheon's inscription of postmodernism, there is another matter to consider: distinguishing "true" postmodernism from "mere" commercial knock-offs. As with Graff and Hassan, there are for Hutcheon apparently good and bad postmodernisms. In the introduction to The Politics of Postmodernism, Hutcheon refers to postmodernist architecture's use of "reappropriated forms of the past to speak to a society from within the values and history of that society, while still questioning it. It is in this way that its historical representations, however parodic, get politicized" (12). Inside yet critical, its modality is typical of Hutcheon's postmodernism: it "neither ignores nor condemns the long heritage of its built culture" (12). A sentence or so later Hutcheon refers to "commercial co-option" of such parodic forms:

To make this claim is not to deny the all too evident, trendy commercial exploitation of these postmodern parodic strategies in contemporary design: hardly a shopping plaza or office building gets constructed today that does not have a classical keystone or column. These usually vague and unfocused references to the past should be distinguished from the motivated historical echoes found, for example, in Charles Moore's Piazza d'Italia . . . (12)

Whereas Moore's structure "respectfully" parodies the Trevi Fountain, "kitschy shopping plazas," and "gratuitous" architectural citations (12) are apparently neither respectful nor worthy of study. They are "vague" and "unfocused," and not at all "motivated." But are such buildings postmodern? If they are not, how can they be categorized and what is their

significance? And if they are, where can they be situated within the field? Hutcheon is resolutely unclear on the matter. Hutcheon's criticism here makes an implicit distinction between high and low culture and pure and commercial architecture.⁵⁴ Though she claims in *Poetics* that contradictory and paradoxical postmodernist forms are, confoundingly, "both academic and popular, élitist and accessible" (and, in turn, close the gap between "high and low art forms"(44)), she nevertheless draws a line that is decidedly un-postmodern; it is not a big step to link her claim to those made in the long history of literary criticism (from Eliot and Arnold through to Sidney and Pope, if not further), that segregate good and moral art from that which is deemed bad and unworthy. Like her critical predecessors, moreover, Hutcheon's hierarchy clearly prefers the high and pure to the low and commercial. Clearly, then, there are in Hutcheon's schema unstated criteria that enable her to gauge the difference between truly interrogative postmodernism and that other sort which is only commercial. In light of her assertion of postmodernism's undeniable political activism, it is evident that some kind of work is political—eager for change, deeply critical, suspicious of tradition—while other sorts are not. Gauging from her examples the matter of discerning valid and invalid turns on (presumed) authorial intentionality. In other words, Hutcheon rates Charles Moore's architectural work—situated in an already coded gallery-like institutional space—as emblematic postmodernity because of its self-conscious engagement with art history. Of a warehouse or mini-mall utilizing neo-classical decorative motifs—which might be viewed as a problematizing of the "critical" nature of Hutcheon's exemplary postmodern artifacts—Hutcheon spends little effort analyzing, though she does express enough confidence to dismiss such forms as unworthy of closer consideration.)

(iv) Shaking Foundations?: Hutcheon's Historiographic Metafiction

⁵⁴Problematically, Hutcheon implies here too that true architecture is somehow disinterested, a contemplative exercise outside the purview of capitalism. As such—free of the drive to maximize profits—it is able to meditate on culture and history and the meaning of both in the contemporary.

Only conservatives believe that subversion is still being carried out in the arts and that society is still being shaken by it.

Harold Rosenberg, 1973 (in Hutcheon 1988a 217]

Postmodern fiction, then, plays (seriously) with the structure of authority. It exists in the liminal space between power and subversion.

Alison Lee, 1990 (xii)

The novel of postmodernism is of course simply one facet of a seemingly culture-wide phenomenon. For Hutcheon in The Poetics of Postmodernism, however, it stands alongside architecture as the paradigmatic art form of postmodernism.⁵⁵ Convinced of the novel's centrality—and not only within postmodern practices themselves but in the real world of politics, history-making and cultural change—Hutcheon unearths from it an almost unfathomably broad potential for actively scrutinizing (if not undermining) dominant ideologies:

the postmodern novel puts into question that entire series of interconnected concepts that have come to be associated with what we conveniently label liberal humanism: autonomy, transcendence, certainty, authority, unity, totalization, system, universalization, center, continuity, teleology, closure, hierarchy, homogeneity, uniqueness, origin. (57)

Whew! Yet it is not any current novel that Hutcheon perceives as being so profoundly interrogative. Only historiographic metafiction “explicitly” “cast[s] doubt on the very possibility of any firm ‘guarantee of meaning,’ however situated in discourse” (55).

Drawing on a brief chapter, “The Historical Novel,” in Umberto Eco’s Postscript to the Name of the Rose, Hutcheon reiterates Eco’s claim there are “three ways of narrating the past” (Eco 74) in fiction: the romance, the swashbuckling tale and the historical novel.

Hutcheon posits a contemporary fourth: historiographic metafiction. In attempting to elucidate the distinction(s) between the historical novel and the historiographic metafictional one, Hutcheon is initially equivocal—she states that it is “difficult to generalize” because in the historical novel “history plays a great number of distinctly different roles, at different levels of generality, in its various manifestations” (113). The demarcation can be found,

⁵⁵She moves on to photography and literature in The Politics of Postmodernism.

though. Characteristically for Hutcheon's postmodernism, the genre maintains "intense self-consciousness" (113) about the politics and ideologies of narrative-building. Always aware of its status as fiction, the genre compulsively signals that fact to readers.

Historiographic metafiction is marked by "the ex-centrics, the marginalized [and] the peripheral figures of fictional history"; it "plays upon the truths and lies of the historical record" and "incorporates" historical data but rarely "assimilates" it; and whereas in traditional historical fiction historical figures are deployed to hide the joint between fiction and history, the "metafictional self-reflexivity of postmodern novels prevents any such subterfuge, and poses the ontological joint as a problem: how do we know the past?" (114-15). In The Canadian Postmodern Hutcheon also draws attention to the lack of authorial self-effacement and multiplicity of narrating voices (64-65) in historiographic metafiction. She notes in Politics, too, that "postmodern historiographic metafiction" foregrounds the inherent ambivalence of the novel genre "by having its historical and socio-political grounding sit uneasily alongside its self-reflexivity" (15).

As much interested in the pedagogic function of historiographic metafiction as its profile or typology, for Hutcheon the "implied teachings of historiographic metafiction" (105) are various. Typically political, it challenges "the very separation of the literary and the historical" (105) and it "install[s] and then blur[s] the line between fiction and history" (113). Most significant, perhaps, is the genre's preoccupation with opening history up "to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological" (110). In creating alternative histories (like Jeanette Winterson in Sexing the Cherry), grafting historical "fact" with fancy (as in Peter Ackroyd's Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem), and inventing and/or reviving and de-marginalizing previously obscure histories (for instance, in Jean Rhys's, Wide Sargasso Sea and Caryl Phillips's Cambridge), this mode of fiction is judged to force

readers into questioning the norms and conventions of narrative—history and fiction equally.⁵⁶

Once again Hutcheon does not assert the uniqueness of historiographic metafiction's questioning of the order of things, or what she calls its "problematizing of the nature of historical knowledge." In A Poetics of Postmodernism she cites a 1910 Atlantic article, for example, in which the author states "the facts of history do not exist for any historian until he creates them" (122), and, furthermore, she incorporates one of Wilde's epigrams, "The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it" (96), in the service of her thesis. What has changed, Hutcheon contends, is that postmodernism "obsessively foregrounds" (122) that point. Its repetitive inquiry reminds readers over and again that history is (based on) text, and as a consequence is shaped, constructed, emplotted, manipulated, etc. Such fiction draws attention to the artificiality of historical discourse and hence questions its validity as uncontested Fact (and so Truth) arrived at by cautious, impartial, ideology-free empiricism—

Historiographic metafiction refutes the natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction. It refuses the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of the claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their major claim to truth from that identity. (93)

⁵⁶Hutcheon draws on Thiher (1984) for her genealogy of postmodern literature—a literary development that Thiher contends springs from the modern language theory of Heidegger, Wittgenstein and de Saussure. Coinciding with but not citing Hutcheon, Thiher (1990) notes that "Contemporary writers—and postmodern fabulists even more so—find themselves at once drawn to embracing history as the ultimate discourse—for who can resist the seduction of the real—at the same time that they reject the claims of history as fantasy, projection, rationalization, textual naiveté, or whatever. And this hostility is especially true when that historical discourse is found, naively or cynically, in the mouths of spokesmen for status quo ethics, religion or politics" (14). Thiher also makes a grand and generally unsupported generalization that brings to mind the like-minded assertions of Lee and Hutcheon: "We live in an era in which fiction has taken on a more strident ethical voice than it did when one could speak ponderously about the moral nature of writing . . . [and] the postmodern writer conceives of ethics, not as some set of prescriptions about acts, but as reaction to experience—fantasy, delirium, or the real—that claims to be history, our history . . ." (15).

Finally, Hutcheon notes that postmodern historiographic metafiction marks literature's return to history. Hutcheon's own narrative of the change from modernist to postmodern tells a familiar tale. "In the nineteenth century," she summarizes, "... literature and history were considered branches of the same tree" (105). With the rise of Rankean historiography, however, the tree split: "Then came the separation that resulted in the distinct disciplines of literary and historical studies today" (105). Hutcheon posits that such a division has until recent times effectively impeded literary work from mounting "internalized challenges to historiography" (106), a feat postmodern literature pursues with abandon. While Hutcheon momentarily foregrounds the very question of this literature's ability to subvert or resist dominant ideologies and enact or promote change when she refers to Harold Rosenberg's pronouncement about the relative ludicrousness of art-as-inciting-revolution, the bulk of her textual effort disregards Rosenberg's seeming cynicism. Rather, Hutcheon insistently asserts that via the questions it asks and the traditions and categories it opens to sceptical inquiry, the postmodern historiographic novel intensely problematizes itself (and, pointedly, other forms of discourse like History), and by doing so can be seen to prompt a host of radical and at least potentially consciousness-altering ways of perceiving.

In Postmodernist Culture Steve Connor openly (albeit briefly) challenges Hutcheon's assurance about the political might of postmodern historiographic metafiction. Echoing Weir's charge that Hutcheon domesticates deviance and "converts danger into safety" (181), Connor wonders, "[w]hat is not clear, however, is the degree to which this alleged undermining of the literary acts in the service of any actual or effective form of subversion" (127). Connor's point is acute especially because it addresses the term "politics" in a way that Hutcheon does only via implication—how, if at all, are the "challenges" offered by a work of fiction transformed into cultural change? Does a reader who walks into Chapters, purchases a copy of Hawksmoor and then read it experience the much-vaunted challenge to liberal humanism in any manner? Hutcheon's apparent model of

the absorption of literature, with its “lessons” and “teachings,” suggests that literature leads to enlightened readers and in turn to revitalized (non-oppressive, inclusive) culture—a position whose tenability surely requires some examination. Part of Connor’s critique is, moreover, developed further in The English Novel in History. There, he questions Hutcheon’s simplistic delineation of realism:

Unfortunately, her work is limited by what seems to be too ready an acquiescence to the manner in which history and fiction have traditionally been contrasted, namely in terms of the degree of their respective truthfulness or capacity to refer accurately to the real. Although she disagrees markedly with those who would wish to maintain a clear distinction between history and fiction, she continues to assume the explanatory centrality of the question of truthfulness and referentiality on which such a distinction depends. [Her argument] produces the illusion that prior to the emergence of the kind of postmodern fiction whose claims she is eager to advance, novel writing either numbly accepted its relegation as false and unserious or, more alarmingly, maintained its dignity by borrowing the implausible claims of history itself to represent the real. (131)⁵⁷

Connor’s expressed unease with Hutcheon’s confidence about the political weight of postmodern literature and her reliance on the “explanatory centrality of the question of truthfulness and referentiality” (131) in her model leads him to what he promotes as a more productive mode of scholarship. He contends that “it is more interesting and profitable to ask what a novel does, intellectually, affectively, imaginatively, politically, with and in history than to ask merely what kind of truthfulness to history it displays or denies” (132). Given that in A Poetics of Postmodernism Hutcheon ranges broadly through scores of art practitioners in order to state (rather than elaborate in detail or even prove) that their work complies with her use/abuse, install/subvert schematic of postmodernity—and so emphasizes in what category art forms belong over (pace Connor) what they do—Connor’s re-direction warrants consideration. After all, is there not more to be gained

⁵⁷ Connor goes on to cite the “breathtaking naivete” (132) of Hutcheon’s former student, Alison Lee. In her study of postmodern realist fiction, Connor states, Lee presents a “flattened” version of Hutcheon. Connor remarks that in “habitually capitalis[ing] the term ‘Realism’, [Lee] giv[es] the impression that there is a whole school of thought, with its own manifesto and resident café” (132).

from asking what, say, Peter Ackroyd does with the historical epoch he chooses to represent than to state that he is (or is not) a postmodern writer because his novels “enact or perform” (Hutcheon 1988 15) contradictions and paradoxes that form the base of one version of postmodernity?

4. Novel Situation

The lengthy preambuling segment that concludes here began scores of pages ago with a consideration of the obstinate patches of opacity intrinsic to the surface transparency of the statement, “Peter Ackroyd writes historical novels in a postmodern vein.” Such a sentence represents a feasible hypothesis, a fair amalgamation of critical assessments that form the mainstream of approaches in these early moments of Ackroyd scholarship—in short, as a response to that scholarship I have positioned as the standard (if not hegemonic) take on Ackroyd’s oeuvre of fiction. As such, the sentence requires close examination: after all, if it stands as a defining assessment is it not important to understand exactly what its clustered terms signify? As a critical perspective, “Peter Ackroyd writes historical novels in a postmodern vein,” has a common-sensical air, one easy enough to comprehend. Since novels like Milton in America and The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde depict recognizably historical figures and are set more than forty to sixty years in the past, they comply in large part with the delineation of the historical novel genre as typified by Fleishman and Lukács—and so, presumably, take seriously the education-through-accurate-representation role convention dictates. Other novels—those set in contemporary England yet preoccupied with the past, or those featuring a bifurcated narrative (one portraying a distant past, the other present day London)—cannot be described as conforming to the “classical” model. Still, these novels could be typed as a contemporary mode of “historical” fiction, along the lines of Connor’s distinction between “historical and historicised fiction, between fiction about history and fiction about its own historically relative construction of history” (1996 142-143). Moreover, though, and at the same time, throughout each of Ackroyd’s novels there are (in varying degrees) unavoidable anomalous

elements that complicate and disavow still further their status as “classical” and modern-day historical novels—self-reflexivity, authorial intrusions and additional kinds of foregrounded seams. The stylistic and structural anomalies—as Bradbury, Onega, Lord, Elias, Hutcheon, Lee, Jukic, Fokkema and other scholars and critics contend—would seem to place them de facto into the “postmodern historical novel” category; so broad and loosely and differently defined, the term absorbs much that does not strictly correspond with the contours of convention.

Beyond highlighting the problem inherent in the attempt to find an adequate descriptive terminology for Ackroyd’s atypical historical fiction, the foregoing sections have been designed to examine as well what is complex and contentious in the categories that are indeed employed to describe them. In short, the sections have worked to confound the surface simplicity of the statement “Peter Ackroyd writes historical novels in a postmodern vein” in order to demonstrate the useful limits of critical judgments that arrive at like conclusions about the novels of Ackroyd or the supposed intent of Ackroyd himself. Because to claim simply that “Peter Ackroyd writes historical novels” or that “Peter Ackroyd writes in a postmodern vein” is to also invoke a history of no small consequence—one that must not be overlooked or understood as merely self-evident. And that history, alongside definitional vagueness, can promote a statement that becomes as meaningless as it is concise. Typology can be, as Hassan noted years ago, a typographic short cut, one that carries with it an illusion of clean and linear boundaries. Yet typology is not particularly productive as analysis. While it surely situates an art form within a comforting historical context and within a particular ideological or perspectival frame, it finally functions best (as Connor notes) as something that proclaims what a work or genre is much more than what it does (and how). To contend, for instance, that “Hawksmoor is postmodern historical fiction and, as such, seriously plays with the structure of authority” is making a large claim for both literature and postmodernism in general. To delineate how that novel does so becomes another kind of claim altogether.

The latter perspective is the one through which I approach Peter Ackroyd's fiction. The disparate elements in his fiction produce an unusual effect that actively and frequently confounds the kinds of neat critical summarization that can be found in various treatments, from literary overview histories like Malcolm Bradbury's The Modern British Novel (1993) and Brian Massie's The Novel Today (1990) to scholarly work investigating the juncture of literature and postmodernism, such as the aforementioned volumes of Linda Hutcheon and Alison Lee's Realism and Power: Postmodern British Fiction (1990). While it would be unfair to characterize many of these works as anything more than sketches that are designed to facilitate an understanding-by-genre association (Ackroyd as historical novelist, Ackroyd as postmodernist; Ackroyd as not science fiction writer, Ackroyd as not conventionally realist), the inexorable accretion of like sketches tends to produce the weight of normalization, the factness of critical consensus: Ackroyd is a historical novelist, Ackroyd is a postmodernist writer. Encapsulated by this mode of thematic criticism, the novel becomes little other than exemplary of a stylistic trend or tic, and one performed identically by a great number of texts. In contrast, what is of interest to me here is the consideration of ongoing and repeated Ackroydian thematics—from The Great Fire of London (1982) through to The Plato Papers (1999)—and how they affect the various manifestation of "history" in the fiction. While Hutcheon's recipe for postmodern historiographic novels supplies a huge list of "subversive effects" they are described as producing, it does not examine any one novel closely enough to account for its discontinuous and contradictory nature. As discussed by Hutcheon, a given historiographic metafiction appears to function in one direction only, always working within one (realist, liberal humanist, patriarchal, empirico-historicist) tradition (it "installs" and "uses") in order to challenge, dismantle or openly question (to "subvert" and "abuse") it.

My broadly theme-centred criticism, usually working outside the bounds of the critical outlook(s) about literary postmodernism, has a greater interest in pursuing the "effect" as well as the "counter-effect" of a given thematic. Needless to say, the existence

of a very fluid thematic renders the “lesson” (to borrow the Hutcheon’s word) and political dimension of novels like The Great Fire of London or English Music not so readily identified. These textual “effects,” inextricably bound with Ackroyd’s use of comedy and pastiche, for instance, are not of course exclusive to any genre or periodizing category; they exist in modernist and postmodernist work (not to mention most other genres). In Ackroyd, however, they act in large part as internal disruption, disturbing other close-to-conventional (i.e., unified) narrative elements as well as rendering it difficult to reach the sort of confident interpretation that allowed Fleishman to proclaim the health of the singular historical novel in 1971. So, rather than supplying a mode of cultural critique à la Hutcheon’s subversive (but not too much so) postmodern literature, these traits produce an ambivalent textual effect emerging far in advance of whatever cultural, real-world critique they may offer: in order to enact their supposed subversion, the exemplar texts of Hutcheon must present some kind of unified representation; the very foundation of Ackroyd’s novels is discontinuous, a terminally unstable mixture of elements that forever fails to coalesce. The polyform narrative, then, inhibits the kind of reading of singularity in the works that is reflected by my hypothetical critical ur-sentence above. And since the understanding of “history” is always placed in suspension or multiply situated by the textual lack of integrity, the “lessons” of his novels are resolutely unclear. Certainly, other claims about the radical potential of postmodern literature become vaguely ludicrous vis à vis Ackroyd’s novels. Even at its most “serious,” the very polyformity of a given Ackroyd novel manages to undercut or indeed undermine the ostensible dominant sobriety. Thus though “subversion”—that ne plus ultra of many an apologist of postmodernist art forms—may “occur” within an Ackroyd novel, the form is never that of a simple, unidirectional nay-saying to hegemonic cultural norms and traditions.

The three chapters that follow this prefatory Part I track thematic categories like comedy and pastiche as a means through which to consider aspects of patterning in Ackroyd’s novels. Rather than engage in a lengthy and time-intensive discussion of each of

Ackroyd's ten novels via the thematic considered in a given chapter, I have gathered the novels together into somewhat arbitrary groupings. While the groupings—those novels set in the distant past, those set in a contemporary time and place and those whose narratives alternate between past and present—facilitate an economical approach to Ackroyd's fictional output, I hasten to add that each and every novel, from The Great Fire of London to The Plato Papers, would be eligible for placement within each chapter. In short, an element like pastiche courses through all of Ackroyd's fiction and affects the political dimensions of the narrative in a similar manner. These chapter-by-chapter considerations are not designed to merely confirm the factness of the categories (i.e., that, yes, Ackroyd's fiction is sometimes comic and often employs pastiche); what these elements in Ackroyd's novels produce, what they may or may not subvert (and how or how not) is the crux of the examination. Less generally, my interest is how the key concept "history"—a term of admitted complexity—gets filtered through these thematic structures. Part II opens with Chapter A, "Moulding History with Pastiche in The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde, Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem and Milton in America." Of all Ackroyd's novels, the topography of these three most closely approximates that of the traditional historical novel. Yet despite their seeming traditionalism, from the patently imaginary mise en scène (Oscar Wilde's turn of the century Parisian journal, John Milton's 1660 flight to the New World) of each onward, they do not entirely comply with the "probable fiction" axiom of traditional historical novels. Keeping in mind Connor's hesitant response to Hutcheon's confidence in the ability of postmodern literature to actually implement subversion of literary-cultural norms, the question asked about such postmodern works will not rest so much on whether not they accord with a specific model of postmodern literature as what, if at all, they subvert (and, of course, what they leave unproblematized and what they actively entrench) and how. Ackroyd's novels are decidedly polyvocal and like the dissociative personality (as represented in popular film at least) the voices are not necessarily in concert, and, in fact, often act at cross purposes. In more specific terms, Chapter A examines

pastiche, a characteristic style-modality associated with postmodernism that nonetheless predates the phenomenon. (And pastiche, just like the others already briefly discussed here, has a history as well—one that tells of mixed critical reception and a gradual slide into déclassé critical status.) It is Ackroyd's utilization of modalities of pastiche in The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde, Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem and Milton in America that both cements and situates his historical representation. Pastiche, considered through the critical work of Jameson, McGowan and Hutcheon, is discussed as a characteristic Ackroydism, one that serves multiple purposes, achieves conflicted effects and so comes to produce an instability that heightens the tension between traditionally "probable" and quasi-factual historical fiction effects and other, blatantly imaginary though politically significant ones.

With their contemporary settings, the novels examined in Chapter B, "The Presence of the Past: Comedic and Non-Realist Historicism in The Great Fire of London and First Light," cannot be described as historical novels of a conventional stripe. Yet throughout, they express concern with the past as its weight presses on the present, and, moreover, their narrative progression terminates at a point of direct interface between present and past. If the predominant thematic of the novels concerns both the pastness of the past and its undoubted perpetual presence, their comedy effectively alters the deliberation and so constructs a place for history (as well as the question, "What is the significance of history?") that is by no means secure. Camp, a particular form of humour associated with both English theatrical and homosexual culture, is introduced as Ackroyd's chosen comic kind. Chapter B narrows its focus to examine how these novels exhibit "camp historicism," and how such an unorthodox form functions vis à vis the established norms and expectations of historical fiction. As with pastiche, Ackroyd's idiosyncratic use of comedy is demonstrated to persistently confound the genre expectations of critics and to produce a textual tension that refuses resolution.

The third chapter considers the four novels for which Ackroyd has been given most acclaim, and which have come to take a central place in critical work about his fiction. While all of Ackroyd's novel are concerned with history and invariably feature musings about the significance of the past, Hawksmoor, Chatterton, English Music and The House of Doctor Dee literalize that Ackroydian thematic: in each of these novels, chapters set in the past are juxtaposed to ones with a contemporary setting. What is more, the novels feature pivotal fugues of sorts in which the conventionally incommensurable distances between discrete historical epochs and mentalities are seemingly and permanently overcome. For Susana Onega and other critics, these novels represent the quintessence of Ackroyd's philosophy of history and historical awareness. My concern is with the core ambiguity of these fugues and how this fundamental excess of interpretability affects their deployment of "the significance of history"—both within the narrative proper and from without. My concluding chapter, "Those Conventional Concluding Remarks: The Plato Papers, History and Politics," offers a brief account of Ackroyd's latest novel, The Plato Papers. Though set close to two thousand years in England's future, the novel nevertheless insistently focusses on humanity's imperfect understanding of the past. The Plato Papers is also typical insofar as it incorporates such authorial tropes as comedy and pastiche for specific effects. The novel serves as a site for an overview of my delineation of Ackroyd's fiction, especially in terms of how the novels coincide and come into conflict with readings that situate author and artistic product alike in the categorical enclosure named "postmodern fiction." Finally, this novel provides a point of consideration for some future endeavour of (my) scholarship: the nature of "nation-state"—the England and its Englanders—the fiction introduces. In his first published critical essay, Notes for a New Culture, Ackroyd called for a revivification of English cultural work through a "modernism" that would stand against the "humanism" which has been the "false base" (146) upon which English national culture has rested.⁵⁸ The condition of what and who gets revived with his fiction

⁵⁸In "Conclusions" he explains: "I have attempted to describe the impoverishment of our

(and of course his biographies of London, Eliot, Pound, Blake, More, Dickens and any day soon Shakespeare) is intriguing, suggesting a potentially Leavisite political programme whose ideological tendencies require close scrutiny.

national culture and I hope to have demonstrated that, from the beginning of this century, it has rested upon a false base. The 'humanism' which the universities sustain, and which our realistic literature embodies, is the product of historical blindness. It has been associated with a sense of the 'individual' and of the 'community' which stays without definition, except in the work of some literary academics who appeal to the literary 'tradition' (146).

Part II: Novel Re-situations

- A. Moulding History with Pastiche in
The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde,
Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem
and Milton in America

1. Historical Novel Traditions Revisited

A novel can tell a truth otherwise hidden: fiction is a way of knowing.

Avrom Fleishman, The English Historical Novel

That medieval style offends me, it is all artifice. What is it you painters say?
Pasticcio. It is all pasticcio. For me poetry must be direct and it must be
inspired. It will be simple and it will be true.

Peter Ackroyd, Chatterton

Enlightenment through responsible instruction is the basic motivation claimed by or else attributed to the writer of the traditional or “classical” (non-costume, non-romantic, non-kitsch) historical novel: with its cautious re-creation of a past era, the novel instructs and informs; and through that skillful reconstruction readers come to comprehend better heretofore lost culture and, presumably, their not insignificant relation to it. As mentioned in Part I, such an understanding of the historical novel’s pedagogical function is presumed by Avrom Fleishman, whose influential The English Historical Novel was the first full-length study dedicated to specifically English fiction. In his Preface, Fleishman defers to the wisdom of Mary Renault, whom he evaluates as “one of the most under-rated of modern authors” (xii). Fleishman extracts from Renault’s 1969 essay, “Notes on The King Must Die,” three principles which he believes “make historical fiction a continuing and an estimable tradition in English and other literatures” (xii). While these principles—“realist responsibility,” “universality of vision” and “imaginative sympathy with the men of the past” (xii)—may seem to stumble upon their own definitional vagueness (non-realist non-responsibility? imaginative antipathy?), they are sufficiently specific for Fleishman. His sole addendum, itself the mere iteration of widely disseminated and tacitly accepted “unspoken assumptions” (3), states that the historical novel must be set two generations or forty to sixty years in the past and include a number of historical events and at least one

actual historical figure. When all these factors are in place—a moment that is arrived at via judicious deliberation of evidence extracted from historical sources—a masterpiece of the genre is all but assured. Once captured, Fleishman's much valued "sentiment de l'existence," the "feeling of how it was to be alive in another age" (4), enables readerly communication with some previously obscured epoch.

Fleishman's foundation of undeclared assumptions—that which he dwells upon but never really discusses—is instructive. The incomplete if not altogether fragmentary nature of historical knowledge is, for instance, taken as a given. And therefore—proponents of postmodernism's unique vanguard skeptical insights to the contrary—History (the field of study) and historiography and their unshakeable, rigorous scientific methodology are understood to form an ever only partial epistemology. They cannot, in short, speak of that for which there is no material evidence—whether the thoughts of a tobacco plantation slave or Napoleon's battlefield conversations. Fleishman views the traditional historical novel, on the other hand, as "a way of knowing" precisely because it is not stymied by such strict methodological considerations. Through desirable—and tacitly obligatory—qualities like "accuracy," "responsibility" and "sympathy," the "probable" inventions of the historical novel act as supplements to History proper; the historical-novel-as-supplementarity⁵⁹ simultaneously announces the gaps and thereby inadequacy of historical knowledge, the imperfection of the historical record (and, for that matter, the limitation of the record

⁵⁹Barbara Foley's discussion of the historical novel asserts a similar point, though it subordinates the novel's invention as so much embroidery of established fact. Nor does she mention the genre's tacit critique of historiography. Foley notes the "confident empiricism" of the historical novel "tends to simplify the epistemological relation between fact and generalization," and then asserts—"The historical novel's 'facts' appear to anchor the text's analogous configuration in historical actuality by proposing that particular corroborative data bear an unmediated reference to the public historical record. Actually, however, these data function to validate a posteriori the text's particular ideological construction of its referent. Documentation in the historical novel is intrinsically tautological; rather than confirming the text's assertions about social reality, it corroborates a reality assumed to be self-evident"(1986 146).

Foley adds: "This documentary practice was bound to recoil upon itself," and looks to the "profound epistemological skepticism characterizing the modernist documentary fiction" (146) as proof.

keepers), the pliability of that supposedly concrete historical record and the special position historical fiction holds vis à vis the creation and dissemination of cultural knowledge. Extrapolating from Fleishman, it is possible to contend that in the service of attaining otherwise unattainable knowledge, the historical novelist disregards that contentious (Platonic, Stendhalian) line between invention and truth. And freed from the strictures of available evidence, the historical novel's unique speculation-as-(quasi-)historical-fact in turn serves the interests of cultural edification: its "way of knowing" instructs readers with the intent of enlightenment—with an interested eye directed toward the ongoing march toward civilization, of course.

(Fleishman and other scholars of the historical novel do not address the shadowy authors of "irresponsible" historical fiction for any significant duration. Such novels are apparently beneath consideration because, it is implied, in intentionally failing to keep accord with the specific facts of the historical record their authors have also chosen to refuse responsibility—and so act in consummate bad faith. Whether dismissed wholesale as "Kitsch" (Fleishman) or "mere costumery" (Lukács), these discredited historical novels are presumed to provide an "entertainment" which stands at odds with the serious literary intent of their "responsible" counterparts. Just as Zajotti and Stendhal expressed dismay about the historical novel genre in general, advocates of "estimable" historical novels appear to worry that this mere costumery will (a) by association tarnish the reputation of the superior product and/or (b) promote category breaches—though instead of obscuring the line between truth and fiction they obscure the distinction between probable and improbable representations—that will in turn mislead and confuse readers and so diminish the civilization-building pedagogical function of estimable works.)

Interestingly, in the decades following Fleishman's study, both the old-fashioned concept of a masterpiece and the equally traditional belief that a novel can instruct and

enlighten have remained largely intact while much⁶⁰ subsequent scholarly work has effectively demolished the apparent neutrality of the words that Fleishman utilizes with no qualm. The new historical novel championed by proponents of experimental fiction, metafiction, surfiction and finally postmodernism has come to be judged masterful exactly when it clearly undermines the relentless authority of the historical record and calls into question a different set of “unspoken assumptions”: the whats and whys and hows operating on what Foucault eloquently calls “a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times” (1977 139). Generally, fiction in this light comes to be seen as a challenging and unsettling form as well as a thing that never confirms the ostensible objectivity and truth-telling of historiography;⁶¹ inversely, historiography is viewed as a field of vested interests, veiled ideology and, on occasion, outright obfuscation in which what is not mentioned becomes as telling as what is. Unlike the apparently straightforward kind of “moral commitment”

⁶⁰But not all. The advent of theoretically-inclined writing on literature would suggest that the contemporary old-school historical novel—so antique, so outmoded—would be laughed off the stage or at least relegated to the most obscure of conference plenary sessions. Yet scholars like McEwan, Gasiorok and Cowart hold on to the traditional form as a still reasonable guide to history. Without a single reference to Derrida or Foucault, Barthes or Saussure, Harold Orel asks in his 1995 study, The Historical Novel from Scott to Sabatini: “Is it not enough—is it not more than sufficient—to have available for our reading pleasure no less than for our edification well-crafted recreations of past eras, stories involving believable characters, stories told from a consistently interesting perspective” (4)? His question is rhetorical, of course. Assiduously side-stepping questions prompted by his own terms, such as “pleasure,” “well-crafted,” “edification,” “recreations,” and “believable”—and avoiding concerns expressed for at least two centuries (before postmodernism, after all, there were vocal opponents—Manzoni, James, Zajotti to name a few)—Orel then examines a number of nineteenth- and twentieth-century historical novels in order to chart changes in genre fashions between 1814 and 1920.

⁶¹In this sense, such fiction runs parallel with an influential historiographic project like that of Hayden White, whose remarks lead one to ask what exactly the historical picture is that is being dismantled, is it so unified and inviolate in the first place? When Hayden White observes “[w]hat historical discourse produces are interpretations of whatever information about and knowledge of the past the historian commands” (1999 2), he is asserting the ontological quicksand of popularly-conceived as factual (if in fact putative) historiography. And when he claims in a 1976 essay, “[Nineteenth-century historians] did not realize that the facts do not speak for themselves, but that the historian speaks for them, speaks on their behalf, and fashions the fragments of the past into a whole whose integrity is—in its representation—a purely discursive one” (1978 125), he is undermining the scientism (and attendant objectivity claim) so much a naturalized component of historical discourse.

(xiv) Fleishman confers upon masterful historical novels (that common-sensical allegiance to responsibility, elucidation and truth-telling), the postmodern historical novel as outlined by Hassan, Hutcheon, McHale and others is infused with disavowing scepticism. This critic-approved novelistic questioning, whether announced by foregrounded textual self-consciousness, forceful ruptures of established historical fact or visible seams of ontology, is thought to produce questions regarding the reader's worldview; in Amy Elias's equation, by posing a "challenge [to] the conceptual model of history implied in novels of the traditional genre" (1991 75), postmodern historical fiction reorders the hierarchy and privilege inherent to conventional renderings of history. Elias argues that the "postmodern historical novel presents history as an 'open work'" (1991 72). As such, she contends, it has a "dangerous" aspect because it aims to "write history anew" (73): the ultimate result of such radical fiction, "is also, within limits, liberating, a positive recasting and defamiliarization of the entire spectrum of history (not just certain characters within it, as in the traditional historical novel)" (74). Nonetheless, and despite its deployment of a could-be subversive quasi-historiographic method, such novels are still interpreted as being founded on a will-to-instruct. Instead of teaching about a never unexpected sentiment de l'existence, the newly transfigured historical novel is understood to teach how there may be purposeful gaps in the history we know, and so often substitutes a true bizarrerie of events and persons for the usual progressive tales of pageantry and plots. In both cases, however, the project of cultural amelioration—novelist playing instructor, novel providing a valuable lesson, reader taking the student role—is viewed as the contract in operation. The foregoing "lesson" in literary history describes a movement from faith to suspicion with regard to history-telling and our ability to truly recover past historical moments as well as—oddly—a parallel one exhibiting faith in the novel to reveal truth(s) to its readership. If, the principal story runs, traditional historical novels accepted the recoverability of history as a matter of "more or less" (Fleishman 4) probable invention fused to cautious archeological methodology and unproblematically promoted their own special status as

adequate ~~quasi~~-historiography, then its descendant, “chancy, paradoxical, and anarchic” (Elias 1991 75) postmodern historical fiction, maintains the family affinity for telling stories of history while rejecting its forebear’s good faith in science and rationality as well as its unspoken and quite possibly unacknowledged ideological investments. Narrated from the present day, the story suggests a fable: naive and hopeful (yet also imperialistic, overbearing and presumptuous) parents whose smart and knowing children decide to disinherit themselves in part from the family fortune. Each generation is, however, certain of its facility for enlightenment.

2. Situating *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*,
 Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem and
 Milton in America

Genre typologies like the ones portrayed above work well as sweeping critical gestures, more helpful perhaps as means of understanding developments in literary history and innovations within traditions than methods by which to categorize definitively a given novel or stylistic modality. It may feel somehow satisfactory or comforting to classify Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* as a postmodern historical novel and Renault’s *The Persian Boy* as a classical one even though as a critical endeavour such an action has questionable value. Moreover, as most critics well know, borders are porous: “Some artists also tend to work concurrently within several traditions,” as postmodern architectural historian Charles Jencks (1986 36) notes. Critical pigeon-holing may be particularly fruitless in the case of Peter Ackroyd—this despite the critical predilection for assigning him to a postmodern camp. Ackroyd himself has rejected the “postmodern” tag for his work, and upon closer inspection elements of modernism, realism and postmodernism are easily visible intermingling in his novels. As broadly historical, in addition, Ackroyd’s novels are never (exactly) here or there; Fleishman, Renault and company would certainly not admire his cheek. And, as the following discussion of historical pastiche in three of his novels indicates, the novels regularly confound critics with their apparent refusal to perform the educative role expected of them. As with the camp elements considered in the next chapter,

Ackroyd's historical pastiche follows no singular function. It contradicts itself, now approximating the ontological contour of "estimable" traditional historical fiction, then becoming irreverently mannered, stagey and artificial and then again exhibiting a seemingly postmodern highlighted self-consciousness.

While considerations of history are present in all Ackroyd's novels, with The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde, Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem and Milton in America, he comes closest to matching the architecture of the traditional historical novel. In accordance with Fleishman's axiomatic typology, they are wholly set more than sixty years in the past (circa 1900, 1880 and 1660, respectively) and feature recognizable historical characters and events. Their realistic settings, "more or less" accurately drawn, would seem to place them securely in Fleishman's implicit ethos of literary responsibility and cultural enlightenment. Yet while it could be said that in McHale's terminology these Ackroyd novels disguise their "ontological seams," it is only ever to a relatively minor degree. Whereas McHale associates the urgent (if unconscious) acts of disguising with a Victorian realist ideological investment in what has come to be known as (Lyotardian) "grand narratives" of uniformity and totality built on a refusal of fragments and partiality, the historical guise worn by these Ackroyd fictions more closely resembles a mask: something self-evidently marked-as-artificial or constructed and worn over something else, and which is always understood as such. Masquerade that continuously calls attention to the fact that it is a disguise, the "historical" narrative renounces its own status even as it continues to be worn. (Just as one would not mistake me for Jean Chretien if I wore a mask identical to his face.) Though the novels do not represent figures or past historical societies in a largely unfamiliar⁶² manner

⁶²The matter of recognition or familiarity presents its own concerns. First, since we know, say, "John Milton" only through textual traces (portraits of him, his various writings, biographies about him, work dedicated to him, etc.), how recognizable he is, remains wholly contingent on the admittedly blurry picture of him. If we look at Blake's or Wordsworth's paeans to the poet, for example, or else Arnold's and Eliot's assessments of him, a conflicted or discontinuous representation of him would emerge. Thus a "more or less" accurate version of "John Milton" is itself a fiction: since it is wholly contingent on what can only be divergent source material, a uniform or unified image is achieved with suppression or elision.

(like England under George II in Jeanette Winterson's Sexing the Cherry, for instance) or patently anachronistic ones (à la the cell phones in Derek Jarman's Edward II) and so do not violate genre rules as delineated by Lukács or Fleishman, their very tableaux emphasize their status as fiction, "more or less inaccurate" invention. When a very credible Oscar Wilde speaks in The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde, for example, it is through a previously unknown journal. The speech uttered and letters written in Milton in America come from a John Milton in a geographic context any historian would refute. Moreover, though mimicking the appearance of "historical artifacts" (letter, journal, trial transcript), the texts are never promoted as such. For instance, neither writer nor publisher makes an attempt to breach category or convention; in short, the novels are sold as fictions. While it might be intriguing to imagine the critical and "public" response if The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde had been presented as Wilde's authentic lost journal, it is a purely academic diversion because the non-fiction/fiction line was in fact never crossed.

Those "dangerous" qualities Elias attributes to much contemporary postmodern historical fiction are already always safely contained so long as the text's epistemological status as "a novel" remains secure. So, yes, the situations appear not improbable, and the voices seem appropriate to the times and the figures, yet the forms are blatant in their falseness: Oscar Wilde is not known to have written a diary in 1900; John Milton did not travel to New England in 1660; and while Dan Leno, George Gissing, Oscar Wilde and Karl Marx all lived in London, they were never implicated in any series of ritualistic

The matter of familiarity brings up another pertinent question: audience. Since "John Milton" is in fact always an interpretation based on the reading of diverse bits of source material, readers' understandings of Ackroyd's "Milton" are equally based on how much of the source material they themselves know. A student who has read Wordsworth's "London, 1802" (but has never taken a course on English history) and a reader who knows "Milton wrote Paradise Lost" (yet has not read it) has no means by which to measure the "accuracy" of Ackroyd's portrait. Without full access to and comprehension of the extant textual Milton, in other words, there is little qualitative difference for the non-specialist reader (i.e., most readers) between the "Milton" of Ackroyd, Wordsworth, Eliot, Blake or "the popular imagination" (an answer to a Jeopardy-like game-show question: "Who wrote Paradise Lost?"). For all intents and purposes, then, there is no one Milton, but a series of distinct signifieds all referring to an ostensibly unified yet absent sign.

murders. Then are these literary acts anything other than a “virtuoso literary exercise” (Sunday Times), the product of a “brilliant” mind? Even granting that they may indeed be brilliant, the matter of what effect these virtuoso acts of pastiche mimicry produces nonetheless remains unanswered. It is with these defamiliarizing ventriloquistic performances that Ackroyd’s work collides with the other, explicitly “ethical” categories of Fleishman’s genre typology. Even if the novels cannot be said to have dangerous qualities in any seriously politically transgressive sense, their refusal to comply with traditional literary rules runs them afoul of Fleishman, and, interestingly, many other contemporary critics who pursue points the elder critic would make. Those typological requisites of “realist responsibility,” “universality of vision” and “imaginative sympathy with the men of the past” (xii) may have lost some of their cachet in academic circles, but they still serve as critical touchstones—even if critics do not strictly accept Fleishman’s tenets, they can still prompt such valuable questions as, “If not realist responsibility, then what (and why and to what effect)?” and “What forms might ‘imaginative sympathy’ take beyond the customary and expected ones?” Since through the frequent utilization of pastiche each of the three Ackroyd novels under consideration here enacts some estrangement from historico-biographical norms, it is necessary to pursue the delineation of pastiche forms. If there is a politics of literary pastiche (in general and in Ackroyd’s novels)—and that assertion is by no means assured or self-evident—then this chapter aims to extract and evaluate what it may be in relation to a wider critical debate about the role of pastiche under the regime of postmodernism. Yet before any such evaluation can proceed, my outlining and situating of Ackroyd’s novels can provide the necessary background for informed dialogue.

i. Aspects of the Novels

(a) The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde takes the form of a journal written largely by Wilde in the Hotel d’Alsace in Paris from August 9 to November 24, 1900. (Wilde’s friend Maurice Gilbert transcribes delirious speech from the five final days of the author’s life.) Perhaps the most apparent element of Ackroyd’s second novel results from the diaristic

presentation of Wilde; such ventriloquistic simulation and pastiche of Wilde's recorded words bears a similarity (frequently commented on) to the "authentic" Wilde. Beside imitating and supplementing Wilde's cadence, style, wit and textual thematic preoccupations, the journal entries fulfil a variety of functions. In them, Wilde records the ignominy of his quotidian life: loneliness and isolation, poverty, alternating infamy and anonymity, creative failure and physical pain. It is also replete with what might be called pseudo-Wildeana—his conversations with friends, recollections, dreams and fantasies, examples of new children's tales and ideas for new dramas. Additional functions overlap and intersect. In his inaugural journal entry Wilde states:

Now that I have seen my life turn completely in its fiery circle, I must look upon my past with different eyes. I have played so many parts. I have lied to so many people—but I have committed the unforgivable sin, I have lied to myself. Now I must try to break the habit of a lifetime. (3)

From that statement onward, Wilde pursues his past; in doing so he commits to paper an autobiography that begins with his birth in Ireland and concludes with his exile and death in Paris. More than a strictly autobiographical narrative, Wilde's conveys his impressions of Victorian England, both in terms of well-known sites and events and mores. Wilde's "apologia" (5), furthermore, is shaped to answer a vital question: "There are some artists who ask questions, and other who provide answers. I will give the answer and, in the next world, wait for the question to be asked: Who was Oscar Wilde?" (5). Wilde's answer to his own question is by no means a simple one. Thematic motifs such as Wilde's outcast status and the "dark thread which runs through [his] life" (30)—that is, the fatedness that results from his being an illegitimate child—strongly mould the autobiographical narrative. In addition to the self-fulfilling dimension of Wilde's story, there are innumerable pronouncements that Wilde makes about himself and his past behaviour as well as Victorian London and his paradoxical central-yet-liminal position within it. While "master[ing] the past by giving it the meaning which only now it possesses for me" (75), he discourses, for instance, on "that coventional [sic] demeanour which the world forces

[people] to adopt” (39). Repeatedly, he returns to himself: like in De Profundis, the diarist is fascinated by his fate and consumed by the need to describe the meaning of Oscar Wilde to the world, as though in impersonal hindsight—

For what did I, who should have been a great poet, what did I become? I became a symbol of modern society, both in its rise and its fall . . . I lived in a worn-out society, theatrical in its art, theatrical in its life, theatrical even in its piety. But I could no more escape from my period than a bird can fly without wings. I sought for visible rather than intellectual success; I wrote quickly and without thought; I mimicked the pleasures of the age and made light of its pain. (97)

While The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde is comprised of Wilde-like phrases and thematics, it also contains playful elements that insinuate that not only is the speaker himself (i.e., the “Oscar Wilde” the world knows) prone to self-serving invention, but that the text through which the narrator communicates is itself little other than inventive pastiche. The Wilde presented here acknowledges his testament has been written with an audience in mind and with an openness to publication. As such, its status as “truth” is compromised and uncertain: it becomes “The Oscar Wilde Story,” and one that has been already shaped by literary models such as melodrama, confessio, apologia. Histrionic Wilde, in short, performs and presents his life in a literary way, an emplotted tale complete with symbolism, allusions and themes (not to mention a beginning, middle and end). Moreover, on occasion Wilde himself points to his own confused lapses of memory (“I fell back upon the floor and knocked my ear against the plank bed. No, that is not right. I fell upon the ground in the exercise yard. Have I not described this already?” (90)) or else pointedly records the accounts of those who take offense at his inaccuracies. For instance, a conversation with Frank Harris serves to further indicate the unreliability of Wilde’s testimony—

You cannot publish this, Oscar. It is nonsense—and most of it is quite untrue.
What on earth do you mean?
It is invented.
It is my life.
But you have quite obviously changed the facts to suit your own purpose.
I have no purpose, and the facts came to me quite naturally to me.

There was a time when you distrusted nature, and rightly so. For example, “in the little theatre in King Street, the young men wore green carnations”. Oscar, you were the only person who wore a green carnation. And this, “I was vain and the world loved my vanity”. Nobody loved your vanity, Oscar. Surely you know that by now. (160)

Alfred Douglas adds: “It’s full of lies, but of course you are. It is absurd and mean and foolish. But then you are. Of course you must publish it” (161). With words that closely mimic Wilde, the pseudo-autobiography of The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde lets readers see a subject whose own grasp of the truth (and its distinction from fiction) is never secure. The testament, then, whether that of “Wilde” or an author imitating Wilde, quietly announces its own forged nature in the midst of its otherwise determined appearance as authentic artifact.

(b) The discernment of authentic history is of course an Ackroydian trope, and not one restricted to The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde. By representing late-Victorian London through an assortment of narratorial modes and pastiche (pseudo-)documents, Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem raises questions about the retrieval of a past epoch even while its narrative effect tends to encourage a bypassing of those questions, if not a nullifying of them altogether. Utilizing a complexly stratified narrative (first glimpsed in The Great Fire of London and developed more fully in Chatterton), Ackroyd’s eighth novel features roving omniscient narration, trial extracts, first-person autobiography, diary excerpts, newspaper articles and one recorded⁶³ conversation between a prisoner and a chaplain. What the novel’s American title (The Trial of Elizabeth Cree) makes clear is that though multi-faceted, the principal narration follows the life of (fictional) Elizabeth Cree and her arrest, trial for murder and eventual hanging on April 6, 1881. Through her diary excerpts and statements to the police, readers discover that both Cree’s talent and criminality spring from childhood roots in Lambeth Marsh with a sexually abusive mother (and missing father). The unwanted child of an evangelical Christian abandoned by “some

⁶³Oddly, the conversation between Elizabeth Cree and Father Lane is presented à la the trial extracts as if it were a direct transcription.

masher, some fancy man who had got her in the family way" (11), Cree comes to loathe her sex and dream of life in the music-hall that represents "some world of light" (20) to her as a disadvantaged youth.

In parallel with Elizabeth Cree's picaresque autobiography, the supposed diary of John Cree ("now preserved in the Manuscript Department of the British Museum, with the call-mark Add Ms. 1624/566" (24)), Elizabeth's husband and namesake, reveals a recognizable Victorian type: the apparent central player in what Judith Walkowitz calls a "Ripper narrative" (191). John Cree, a journalist for a theatre paper named *Era* and a self-proclaimed "artist" interested in marking his "entrance upon the stage of the world" (28), takes his inspiration as much from Thomas De Quincey's essay on murder and other literature celebrating criminality as from his expected belief that "these days standards are crumbling altogether" (24). In keeping with the intratextual echoes and coincidental meetings of Dan Leno, Cree's discourse on crime (as art, as theatre, as philosophy, as symptom) interacts with other statements made by other characters on the vast playing stage called London. And in addition to the true detective and true confessions narratives of the novel, there are thematic considerations of London as a nexus for overlapping and not infrequently oppositional cultures—for criminality as well as comedy, for philosophy that produces emancipatory political tracts and murderous acts. A diverse array of historically actual characters—including George Gissing, the impoverished parents of Charlie Chaplin, Karl and Eleanor Marx, Dan Leno, Oscar Wilde, Bernard Shaw, (and the specular though no less important presence of William Blake, Charles Babbage, Thomas de Quincey and Charles Dickens)—remark on the murderous activities that occur in their midst. Furthermore, such related topics as "hidden connections" (68) and "tokens of the invisible world" (66) within the "ancient city of London" (68) form a thematic topos tidily summarized by Babbage's observation that, "The air itself is one vast library, on whose pages are for ever written all that man has ever did or woman whispered" (243).

Beside acting as stabilizing markers of historical veracity (and so valorizing the ontological legitimacy of both the historical novel tradition and the historiographic narrative that lends its here unchallenged legitimacy) the walk-on roles by historical figures in unfamiliar contexts—Karl Marx wandering the music-hall (or writing the fictional epic poem titled, The Secret Sorrows of London), George Gissing visiting prostitutes in Clare Market (and fragments of whose never-written essay, “Romanticism and Crime,” appear in the text)—contribute to the novel’s ongoing philosophical discussion about the nature of time, history and knowledge. Moreover, a web of coincidences—Marx reads de Quincey and his friend Solomon Weil is one of the murder victims; Marx’s daughter, Eleanor, having “inherited her father’s innate theatricality” (93), takes a role in Wilde’s early drama Vera, or the Nihilist, and later plays a maid in Elizabeth Cree’s melodrama; Dan Leno reads de Quincey, knows one of the murder victims and is questioned by detectives; Cree sits next to Wilde in the British Museum and reads an extract from Wilde’s essay (“Pen, Pencil and Poison,” his famous celebration of the poisoner and aspiring writer Thomas Wainewright)—buttresses the novel’s theme of “occult” interconnection. With evident approval, the narrator-historian notes that Richard Garnett, Superintendent of the British Museum’s Reading Room, “had remarked, very sensibly, that the occult was simply ‘that which is not generally admitted’” (138), and then adds: “Mr Garnett might even have speculated on the coincidence of this particular September morning, when Karl Marx, Oscar Wilde, Bernard Shaw, and George Gissing himself, all entered the reading room within the space of an hour” (138-139). The Occult Society (269) is, incidentally, also visited by Marx, Gissing, Leno and John Cree. Further elaborating a connection between cause and effect(s)—and reversing any notion of an “anxiety of influence”—the novel’s Limehouse murders lead to The Picture of Dorian Gray, a series of paintings by Whistler, some writings by Somerset Maugham; and so on.

The antic tableau of Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem—the barrage of ironic “in facts,” stagy coincidences and “curious factors” (201), innumerable metaphors and images

concerning acting, performance and theatre, the pointed setting in and behind the music-hall, the melodramatic and grotesquely comic murders, and the discussion about reality, artificiality and invention—implements metacommentary on the novel itself as another kind of melodrama, complete with genre traits. When Inspector Kildare remarks to Dan Leno, “But the odd thing is that the murderer must have studied [“On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts”] before he killed your friend. There are too many resemblances for it to be entirely natural” (204), he appears to be speaking as well of the manic falsity of the story that contains him. (And as though to emphasize the fact in scarlet, the story closes with a dramatic-mishap during a presentation of “the theatrical sensation of the hour” (278), Gertie Latimer’s The Crees of Misery Junction—itself a re-write of Elizabeth Cree’s Misery Junction, which is in turn a melodramatic reworking of John Cree’s socialist play about poverty in London. Inside the Bell Theatre gather all the principal characters of the novel, including “Elizabeth Cree,” played by Cree’s former servant and nemesis, Aveline Mortimer. Marx dismisses the play as “cheap melodrama,” exclaiming, “Truly the playhouse was the opium of the people,” while critics for the Post and Morning Advertiser remark that it is “pantomimic” and “unreal” (280). Gissing adds a like (if decidedly unWildean) epigram: “It is not that human beings cannot bear too much reality, it is that human beings cannot bear too much artifice” (280). And Wilde himself takes a lesson from the theatrical reenactment of Cree’s hanging (despite Kildare’s observation that “details of the execution were not entirely accurate” (281)) to such a degree he is said to be inspired to write in “The Truth of Masks” that, “Truth is independent of facts always, inventing or selecting them at pleasure. The true dramatist shows us life under the conditions of art, not art in the form of life” (281). On stage, and like Cree herself, Aveline Mortimer is hanged—an accident of staging leads to her death by hanging. Watching from the wings, Dan Leno improvises a finalé in “his best mammoth comique manner” (282): he impersonates Cree, saying “here we are again” (282), reiterating Cree’s own statement (“Here we are again!” (2)) just before she was executed. Relief follows terror as comedy

follows tragedy ("Tragedy and comedy is all one. Don't take it to heart" (241), Gertie Latimer tells Cree upon the failure of Misery Junction). Of course, such self-knowingness diminishes the novel's realist properties; the stylization moves it closer to the "unreal" and "pantomimic" modes that the novel's Victorian critics detect in The Crees of Misery Junction.

Finally, a predominant narrative mode that oscillates inexplicably between the omniscient mode conventional to historical novelists and another featuring a knowledgeable yet interrogative and lecturing historian, supplies yet more documentary instability to the novel. Why the voice's omniscience varies—and even whom the voice belongs to—is never disclosed. Speaking in the first and second chapters this narratorial voice describes the hanging of Elizabeth Cree with a panoptic view: the voice relates Cree's execution, adding as well the prurient detail of the medical surgeon dressing himself in the gown Cree had worn when she was hanged. The voice, elsewhere, is inquisitive and interrogative, rhetorically asking, "Who now remembers the story of the Limehouse Golem, or cares to be reminded of the history of that mythical creature?" (4). With the histrionic air of a tour operator ("Could it have been . . . ?" "But perhaps . . . ?" (7)), the voice presents a mystery it will of course solve—"The secret of how it came to be revived in the last decades of the nineteenth century, and how it aroused the same anxieties and horrors as its medieval counterpart, is to be found within the annals of London's past" (4). The lecturer, like the historical novelist apparently, has access to places where no evidence could exist. And in addition to its interested queries, the voice expresses an affinity for drawing conclusions and editorializing on numerous subjects, and—in juxtaposition to theatrical tropes and narrative modalities discoursing on performance, artificiality and illusion—in effect concretizes (in the final word) its choice of subjects. Such op-ed discourse proliferates throughout Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem. Referring to a statement by Charles Babbage, the voice notes, for example, "It was one of the most wonderful sentences of the nineteenth century" (116); about a joke, the voice concludes—

But it did suggest the extent to which Londoners of the period were eager to see the more forward or lecherous females punished for their behaviour. It would not be going too far to suggest, in fact, that there was some link between the murder of the prostitutes in Limehouse and the ritual humiliation of women in pantomime. (171)

Still elsewhere, the voice lectures that “in the intellectual culture of the period, science, philosophy and social theory were more readily joined” (113). Despite the novel’s stratified narration technique, this narrative mode works to moderate or control the discussion flow about the “real” nature of late-Victorian London society.

(c) Like Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem, Milton in America is comprised of various narrative techniques that dismantle formal unity as well as the authority of a singular voice. A vaguely documentary preface discloses the novel’s ensuing mise en scène: “[John Milton] had no choice but to escape while there was still opportunity to do so. And where better to flee than New England, where he would be assured of a joyful welcome from the Puritans who had already settled there?” (Preface). Following that explanatory episode come: first- and third-person accounts, dialogue, a “maritime chronicle” (37), excerpts from journals written by two men, letters written by Milton to Reginald Pole⁶⁴ and a series of passages counterpointing first- and third-person narration. Voices are also often mediated, and so pose questions of reliability of narratorial veracity: in his letters to Reginald Pole, for instance, Milton may be more interested in self-representation than objective chronicle; Goosequill’s story-telling to his wife, like Wilde’s own confession in The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde, is now and again challenged by another character. In Goosequill’s case, his attraction to tall tales and penchant for drunken recollection diminishes the believability of his account.

So far as plot is concerned, Milton in America is an archetypal linear progression, one circumscribed succinctly by the novel’s two sections, “Eden” and “Fall.” Since

⁶⁴Though Milton’s “beloved brother in Christ” (80) would appear to be fictional, it may be an Ackroyd insider joke that he shares a name with the former near-Pope and arch-bishop of Canterbury (and still later heretic) who died in 1558.

“Milton believed himself to be a man forsaken” (Preface) by nation, government and citizenry, he flees an England to which Charles II is soon to return. On route to his ship he gains acquaintance with an impoverished but literate (both “poor and credulous” (80) and “wayward and superstitious” (82) by Milton’s account) youth he calls Goosequill, who soon becomes his servant and amanuensis. Immensely fond of grandiose pronouncements, Milton foreshadows the events that will soon take place in the New World: “I leave England in order to save England” (29). Judging himself as the embodiment of English values and serving “only the king of kings” (32), Milton sets sail for New England in April of 1660. Shipwrecked and, by Milton’s assessment, bereft in a literal and symbolic “wilderness” (64), the two arrive in New Plymouth. Soon after, they move to land with greater fertility which the Puritans rename New Milton in his honour. In that place, Native Americans (“vagabond sweepings of a former race” (95)) and Catholics—“What are these Papists, in truth? To our purses and goods they are a wasteful band of robbers, making perpetual havoc and rapine. To our state they will prove a continual hydra of mischief and molestation, a very forge of discord and rebellion. They threaten uproar and combustion” (234-235)—from a festive, well-near carnivalesque neighbouring settlement called Mary Mount add impetus to Milton’s own vision of himself as a prophet and scourge. What is more, after a fall in the forest, Milton is given care by a Native band, with whom he experiences a sexual and perhaps spiritual epiphany—for a brief moment, in any case, Milton is no longer blind: “The blind man, swinging from the rope meant for the deer, can see. From morn to noon to dewy eve, watching the colours deepen as the day advanced. I can see” (159). When he returns to New Milton once again blind, his violent anger and concomitant suppression of the wilderness experience leads to his waging war against the land and its inhabitants—that which he comes to call “the voices of Pandaemonium” (242). Only Goosequill recognizes that Milton “grew apart. Something happened” (268) following his brief captivity; yet along with Native and Catholic leaders, Goosequill is killed during the battle that concludes Milton in America. Wandering through the carnage,

Milton can claim only pyrrhic victory. The novel's final point of view returns to Milton's captivity, his repudiation of native ways and renewed blindness: "The blind man wandered ahead and, weeping, through the dark wood took his solitary way" (277). Milton is alive but spiritually dead; it is implicit he will return to England to write his later canonized poetry—which of course will be reflective of his awful experiences in the New World.

ii. Critical Reception

Observing the claims some critics make for an art form (danger! paradox! subversion!) and the response the same form may receive from journalist-critics, it is remarkable that such a large chasm can exist. Interestingly, for all the pronouncements any number of scholars have made regarding the deeply destabilizing and dismantling properties of postmodern historiographic fiction in general, for instance, there is no accompanying Klaxon warning issuing from newspaper or periodical reviews; certainly, too, the silent reader response would suggest that rather than unmaking worldviews and destroying verities, such works are gauged according to out-of-fashion but none the less popular criteria as "I enjoyed/didn't enjoy the plot" and "The author evoked the past with amazing/awful/so-so skill." While scholars have thus far paid little heed to Ackroyd's novels, what little there is stands in marked contrast to the critical appraisal in newspapers and magazines. If scholarly critics regularly include his novels in their discourse on postmodernism (and then, accordingly, as part and parcel with its apparently subversive questioning of received values), book review journalists are much less uniform, praising, dismissing, complaining and commending the novels on multiple grounds. Despite the kaleidoscopic viewpoints, there are a few themes that develop throughout the critical discourse about Ackroyd's novels. Most salient here for our purpose is his use of pastiche to represent distant historical times and his philosophy of history.

(a) Like his first novel, The Great Fire of London, Ackroyd's follow-up, The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde, received scant critical attention in England and drew virtually no reviews in North America. The single North American review—William French in The

Globe and Mail—claims to elucidate Ackroyd's purpose: to exhibit how "Wilde was a very different man after the humiliation of being convicted of gross indecency than before it" (E15). In French's view, Testament is "the autobiography Ackroyd believes Wilde would have produced had he been able"; it is "an apologia, an explanation, a justification and a melancholy lament" that is both "brilliant" and "uncanny." French conveys concern about Ackroyd's "rationalization of Wilde's homosexuality" that leads to his concluding equivocation:

Ackroyd's attempt to reconstruct and perhaps fabricate the circumstances of Wilde's conviction demonstrates again the dangers of this kind of novel, in which the line between fact and fiction is blurred. But when it's done as well as this one is, it becomes easier to justify. (E15)

Andrew Hislop's review in Times Literary Supplement also reveals a deeply qualified admiration. Hislop states the novel "is, without doubt, a remarkable achievement," but then adds, "What is less certain is what it has achieved" (375). He observes that Ackroyd "rewrites Wilde—employs, mutates, promotes, even mutilates his writings, sayings and actions," to limited range: "He continually uses Wilde to justify his use of Wilde, though often it is not exactly Wilde but pseudo-Wilde or just plain Ackroyd who, very witty in a Wildean way, never matches the rhetoric of the original at his most majestic" (375). Hislop concludes with the hope that Ackroyd would "show more of himself" in his next novel—"But then if Wilde's opinion that 'Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation' is correct [sic], he might well wish to rewrite himself" (375). In London Review of Books Tom Paulin admires Ackroyd's talented mimicry, though he complains that Ackroyd "adds to his imitation of Wilde's prose an explicatory earnestness which leaves nothing to the imagination." (20) For Paulin, Wilde in Testament emerges only as the "victim of several melodramatic situations." As for Ackroyd's invention, Pauline remains equally perturbed: Ackroyd "wastes this [i.e., a conjecture about the true rationale for Wilde's trials] provocative narrative opportunity by devoting only a few sentences to the scandal he has so

tantalisingly manufactured,” and takes exception to other “inauthentic moments” (22). Paulin’s summary ultimately expresses discontent: “the result is another exercise in Victorian pastiche, a genre which deserves to be neglected for a century or two” (22). As ambivalent, Mary Montaut detects in “Mr. Ackroyd’s pseudo-sophisticated resurrection of Oscar Wilde” a “slightly-patronizing” attitude as well as “real affection” (137) for Wilde. Taking note of a troubling “morally tidying up [of] his hero” (138), Montaut ultimately wonders why the author “finds in writing a means of convincing himself . . . that the business of fiction is reassurance” (138).

Scholarly attention to Ackroyd’s second work of fiction, moreover, by and large focussed on Hawksmoor, Chatterton and English Music (as will be discussed Chapter C), often expresses as little interest as journalistic sources. While Allan Massie in The Novel Today unhelpfully offers that Ackroyd “showed his talent for pastiche” and “showed his ability to get outside himself” (52) with his portrayal of Wilde, John Peck in “The Novels of Peter Ackroyd” peremptorily categorizes the novel as “minor,” explaining that “there seems to be little point in considering [The Great Fire of London and The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde] here as neither adds much to a sense of the questions prompted by the four subsequent novels” (443). Hermann Josef Schnackertz’s single comment is that Ackroyd’s “speculative pseudo-autobiography” reflects “the method he uses when dealing with the past” (495). Which is to say: “Ackroyd’s historical fictions never pretend that they are anything else but fictional constructions, subjective versions, reinventions and rearrangements of a cultural past that can only be made accessible through a staging of various textual voices” (495). Steven Connor merely mentions the novel’s “literary replications” (1994 79) as part of a list navigating tendencies in contemporary postmodern fiction. In Peter Ackroyd, Susana Onega notes the novel “consciously blurs the boundaries between biography and fiction” (31); she pointedly passes on Mary Montaut’s critical assurance that the book is “painstakingly researched” (32)—though she does not mention that Montaut’s assessment is qualified—and then admires both the “surprising exactness”

and the “wonderfully accurate”⁶⁵ effect produced by the clever stylistic imitation” (32). But what captivates Onega is not the reincarnation of Wilde so much as the novel’s acting as a testament to another artist-in-the-making. From the narrative’s progression, she extracts “the lesson Oscar Wilde teaches Ackroyd” (33)—

From Wilde’s aesthetic viewpoint, the artistic (or textual) world created by Peter Ackroyd, entitled The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde[,] would become the very higher plane of being towards which Wilde has managed to make his transcendental escape. Thus, by imagining Wilde’s migration to an abstract and absolute World of Art made up of the total of the voices, styles and visions of the artists and thinkers in the Western canon, Ackroyd manages to suggest the possibility of transcendence without having to postulate the existence of a metaphysical plane of being above or beyond the artistic (or textual) realm itself. (33-34)

According to Onega, such teachings refuse the enticement of Platonic transcendentalism in favour of the “human plane of imagination” (33).

(b) Though widely reviewed, Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem drew no less divided criticism. Iain Sinclair (whose poem Lud Heat Ackroyd pays gratitude to in Hawksmoor) expresses no small degree of cynicism: he inserts his review of the novel parenthetically between another, much longer one for P.D. James’s Original Sin: “The real Ackroyd, Peter, it is felt, has also peaked at the right time, in cabbieing alongside James into riparian London for this season’s retrieval” (21). By Sinclair’s account, Ackroyd’s novel “has, among other sources, filleted De Quincey” and is a “page-turner [that] only sports with mysticism” (21). Sinclair remarks—

⁶⁵Onega’s use of words like “exactness” and “accurate” would seem to contradict her own implicit ideological position taken in her critical project with Ackroyd. Exactitude of reclamation invokes the rigours of science and the archeologic possibilities of historical fiction so clearly held up for admiration in the work of Fleishman, Renault and McEwan. Since, as she sees it, Ackroyd’s work is dedicated to post-structuralist deconstruction of ostensibly stable reference points, it is odd that she would be so admiring of a novel that according to her so skillfully disguises its own ontological seams.

Nor does she spend much effort probing the novel for effects any of its inaccuracies might produce. For instance, Wilde’s use of the term “homosexual” (113) contradicts the OED, which states that the term’s very first appearances was in a translation of a psychoanalytic text in 1913. Wilde’s apparent comfort and familiarity with the concept suggests a self-identification as “homosexual” that has less historical veracity than thematic appropriateness. See also: Moran (1999) for an overview of the novel in relation to contemporary examinations of Wilde’s sexuality and aestheticism.

Ackroyd doesn't burden his narrative with the tedium of a convincing topography, or nostalgia for the lost decencies. He's busy, with this Post-Modern Sweeney Todd, reviving the shilling shocker—which, thanks to the confusion of the current publishing scene, appears between hardcovers and is reviewed in all the best places. The glory of Dan Leno is its relish for music-hall, the London crowd: stinks and shocks and songs. (21)

In the TLS Peter Keating complains of “the outrageous use of coincidences which is rapidly becoming a staple of Ackroyd's idiosyncratic type of speculative historical fiction” (21). This “modern pastiche of the Victorian Shilling Shocker” with elements “all jumbled promiscuously together to make up one huge entertainment” produces little other than vexation in Keating—

The trouble with this kind of ludic narrative, and especially the toying with fact and fiction, is that it encourages the reader to ask questions which the narrative itself doesn't answer and is probably incapable of answering. It may be dramatically apt to have an elderly Karl Marx sitting in the British Museum reading Workers in the Dawn, George Gissing's first novel. Whether or not it actually happened is of little importance. (21)

David Sexton in The Spectator complains of Ackroyd's “wearying” themes, as well as his “endless revenant style [and] love of pastiche” (33). As for Ackroyd's occultism and professed interest in temporal circularity, Sexton dismisses it outright: “But perhaps the real explanation is simpler. It's all just ‘a bit of a game en travesti’, as the murderer says here. Ackroyd likes nothing better than to get some kit on and cut a caper” (35). On the other hand, Valerie Martin in New York Times Book Review admires the utter believability and probability of the novel (7) and takes aim at Ackroyd's critics—

Mr. Ackroyd's insistence upon peppering his historical scenes with events that did not occur, or could not have occurred, should no longer be a source of concern to his critics. He is an accomplished novelist and so thoroughly acquainted with the world he re-creates that he is entitled to the pleasures of such invention. (7)

James Wood in The New York Review of Books, however, holds reservations, observing that his “pastiche offer an essentially literary notion of the [the past], and a familiar one at that” (50). And so he wonders “whether a writer is likely to produce anything interesting if

he is merely exhausting the possibilities of the known" (50). Wood surveys Ackroyd's novels and finds that even though they are "natural teachers," instructing readers that "history is a process of eternal recurrence," their lesson finally falls flat—

Ackroyd's eternal recurrence is translated into literal appearances, and it is thus no more mystical to us than what goes on in a bank after closing hours. The past exists for Ackroyd as an uncomplicated presence He treats the past as if it were the food on someone else's plate, always more interesting than one's own. He does not want just to make use of the past; he tries to be in it, and without irony about the oddity of doing so. (50)

Likewise, in Time Paul Gray complains: [u]nfortunately, this mélange of fact and fiction is longer on intellectual pleasures than emotional resonance [t]he intricacies of his plot seem ultimately to trace vectors rather than lives" (43). In addition to providing a faithful summary of the novel, Onega emphasizes a "mythical interpretation" that sees "Leno embodying the comic or 'white' emanation [of Adam Kadmon, the Universal Man figure], and Elizabeth Cree the tragic or 'black' emanation of 'perpetual, infinite London'" (70). She reads the conclusion as evidence of catharsis: for Onega Dan Leno's art—"comparable to the drug-induced trances of the Sphinx of Delphi, or of tribal 'medicine men'"—works to put an "end to the cycle of evil absorbing the Limehouse Golem and transforms it into a humorous and harmless music-hall transvestite character" (72).

(c) Characteristically, Milton in America received divided critical responses. Trev Broughton in TLS admires Ackroyd's "wonderful creation," "the latest in a succession of Ackroyd heroes treading the fine line between prophet and performer, shaman and showman," and notes in the novel "the lessons are there to be learned, by the reader if not the pilgrim himself" (23). Broughton acknowledges that "the avalanche of allegory does not prevent the narrative from lacking conviction and pace" but then complains that "Ackroyd's characteristic play with form seems redundant in so densely allusive a work" (23). While the New Statesman review found it "a hard book to judge," the reviewer highlighted that Ackroyd "has vanishingly little sympathy for [Milton's] doctrinal certainties" and that Milton is essentially a "tedious" and poorly-drawn "cartoon" (Clute

60). In the New York Times Book Review, moreover, Tony Tanner dismisses the “pointlessness” of Ackroyd’s “counterfactual” fiction. (14). He detects in Ackroyd’s “blunt and coarse” “frontal assault” the “cheap and easy” effects of a “heavy-handed” writer. Tanner laments: “It comes across as pointless pastiche—or rather, pastiche with one purpose: to make Puritans and Puritanism appear as mad, cruel and all-around hateful as possible” (14). Tanner ultimately cannot accept the novel as anything but purblind ideology; faced with the “reductive and schematic dichotomizing of Puritans and Catholics [that] has all the simplified crudity of a child’s drawing,” he can only ask, “But to what end?” (14). Onega’s discussion of the novel is far more descriptive than analytic. Though she places Milton in America in the tradition of the “American historical romance that goes back to Charles Brockden Brown’s Wieland, ‘the first of many American tales to record the story of the new American Eden and the fall that took place there’” (73), Onega does not analyze how if at all it varies from that tradition. She concludes on a note that effectively collapses the Milton of literary history with the Milton Ackroyd represents—

Milton’s condemnation to wander in solitude is an adequate punishment for his sin of individualism. As a Puritan, he believed in the unique significance of the individual calling towards God and in the doctrine of justification by faith alone. These beliefs justified his refusal to listen to others or to take into consideration beliefs and ideas differing from his own. But it should not be forgotten that, from a Catholic perspective, these cornerstones of Protestantism were heresies that had caused Martin Luther to be excommunicated. (77-78)

It is not clear from her discussion above whether the Milton she is speaking of and makes generalizations about is the version represented by Ackroyd or by historical artifacts.

3. “allusions that lead nowhere” (Onega 1998 12) / “the culture of pastiche” (Connor 1994 80)

There was a time when denying the reality of the outside world could be seen as a bold gesture of resistance, a refusal to acquiesce in a coercive “bourgeois” order of things. But that time has passed, and nowadays everything in our culture tends to deny reality and promote unreality, in the interests of maintaining high levels of consumption . . . postmodern fiction, instead of resisting this coercive unreality, acquiesces in it, or even celebrates it.

Brian McHale, Postmodern Fiction

And in the most famous “historical novel” of the eighteenth century, Walpole’s Castle of Otranto, history is likewise treated as mere costumery: it is only the

curiosities and oddities of the milieu that matter, not an artistically faithful image of a concrete historical epoch.

Georg Lukács, The Historical Novel

Eliot employs the language of ballads, direct quotation, pastiche, generalised commentary and narrative, and even rag-time. . . and each variety of language is given an autonomy, a proper life that exists beyond the customary Anglo-Saxon context of connotation and meaning.

Peter Ackroyd, Notes for a New Culture

From the publication of his first novel,⁶⁶ the word “pastiche” has been—as disparagement, as compliment—prominently associated with Ackroyd’s literary style and modus operandi. Indeed, it is a very rare review, overview or scholarly article that does not describe Ackroyd as a pasticheur or his work as utilising (or in fact exemplifying) contemporary pastiche technique. Malcolm Bradbury and Allan Massie are only typical when they so encapsulate the novelist. While Bradbury categorizes Ackroyd as “a playful user of fiction, well aware of all the contemporary devices in the postmodern novelist’s repertory: pastiche, parody, punning, intertextuality” (1993 436), Massie duly notes his “talent for pastiche, a characteristic mode of post-modernist fiction” (52). In keeping with a critical tendency rapidly becoming codified into a critical truism, Susana Onega places pastiche amongst a series of practices belonging mostly to “the generation of the 80s [sic] stricto sensu” (1993 50)—a group whose English practitioners includes Graham Swift, Julian Barnes, Rose Tremain, Jeannette Winterson and Peter Ackroyd. (50) As Bradbury hints (and Massie and Onega state) it is not Ackroyd alone but an entire generation of writers who (are seen to) employ this “device.” Categorized, then, Ackroyd stands for a typical postmodern novelist. Moreover, enlarging the scope of this discussion to encompass contemporary literature, it is worth noting, as Ingeborg Hoesterey agrees, that pastiche is routinely viewed as a touchstone in critical debates about the contours and value

⁶⁶And before, in fact. The TLS review of The Diversions of Purley—a compilation of Ackroyd’s 1973 and 1978 volumes—complains that “most of the poems . . . are merely pastiche Ashberry, and it’s disturbing that Ackroyd never acknowledges the joke” (Ford 1276).

of postmodern literary works—along with such other characteristics as “intertextuality” and “decentering,” the detection of “pastiche” in a given text can warrant its inclusion within the postmodern canon. Thus discussing the use of pastiche as disparagement or compliment becomes valuable because it cuts to a core argument in the debate about the politics of postmodernism. And furthermore, as mentioned in Part I, Ackroyd’s peculiar acts of pastiche contribute largely to the proliferated polysemy apparent throughout his novelistic oeuvre. Yet in order to rail against its presence in art forms (Lyotard, Jameson), simply record it as a recognizable trait of the arts of postmodernity (Massie, Onega, Bradbury) or celebrate it (i.e., Jencks’s⁶⁷ “double-coding” resulting in “irony, ambiguity and contradiction” (Docherty 1993 288)), there must be a clear understanding of the device itself as well as the use(s) people find for it. Upon examination, though, it is evident that as with the term “postmodernism” (and indeed like the term “camp” discussed later), pastiche has not only a history of contradictory utility but continues to be interpreted in radically differing manners. And so, returning to the level of specificity, what it means to attribute pastiche to Ackroyd or an Ackroyd novel is contingent on how the term has been understood or applied in the first place. Seemingly banal but true: if Mr. Critic A. ideologically opposes pastiche as a technique, then he is likely to censure its appearance in a literary work.

In tracing a history of pastiche, things begin easily enough. The term itself⁶⁸ is defined in carefully neutral terms⁶⁹ by Margaret Drabble in the Oxford Concise Companion to English Literature (1996):

⁶⁷Jencks’s (1986) influential text, stemming from a 1985 conference paper, calls postmodernism a “philosophical and stylistic” “movement that starts roughly in 1960 as a set of plural departures from Modernism” (22). Pastiche, which Jencks places in the “straight revivalism” (23) category in his “Evolutionary Tree of Post-Modern Architecture” (between “historicism” and “neo-vernacular”) is aligned with Disneyland and The Madonna Inn on the one hand and the classicism-inflected work of Robert Stern on the other.

⁶⁸The OED lists “pasticcio,” and “pasticheur” in addition to “pastiche” (as verb or noun), and all stem from pasta, or paste. The terms have a lengthy history of usage. Hotchpotch, medley, pot-pourri and jumble were the original meanings (from opera and cuisine). Nineteenth century writers used the term with flexibility, ranging from a grouping

Pastiche, a literary composition made up from various authors or sources, or in imitation of the style of another author; or a picture made up of fragments pieced together or copied with modification from an original, or in professed imitation of the style of another artist: the imitative intention is now the most usual meaning. (442)

Within the breadth of Drabble's definition, however, can be found considerable space for the interpretation of politics: phrases like "copied with modification" and "professed imitation" are richly suggestive; it is not difficult to imagine how with pastiche the apparent postmodern interrogation of long-standing metaphysics (origin, tradition, presence) could develop. Away from the disinterested definition of dictionaries and Drabble, the varieties of responses to pastiche are tied to differing understandings of the word—not to mention divergent notions of the social purpose of the art form utilizing the device. The range,⁷⁰ incorporating the extremes of conditional admiration and unconditional suspicion, frequently settles at the mid-point exhibited in newspaper book reviews: a tempered acceptance of it built on a foundation of mild scepticism about its continued usage. At the affirmative pole,⁷¹ Mark McGowan argues in *Postmodernism and Its Critics*,

together of elements to an indifferent mixing of elements borrowed from finer works. There is a distinct progression in the *OED*'s tracing of the terms: the definition of pastiche takes on a negative connotation as it approaches the present day.

⁶⁹In her "Glossary of Post-Modern Terms" (1992), for instance, Pauline Marie Rosenau takes sides (with Hassan, apparently): "pastiche—a free-floating, crazy-quilt, collage, hodgepodge patchwork of ideas or views. It includes elements of opposites such as old and new. It denies regularity, logic, or symmetry; it glories in contradiction and confusion" (xiii).

⁷⁰Steven Connor (1994) notes that the entire idiom of the contemporary fictional acts of retelling—"reworking, translation, adaptation, displacement, imitation, forgery, plagiarism, parody, pastiche"—has tended to "produce two opposed critical responses": "[t]he first unconditionally celebrates the procreative abundance of a narrative able to replenish itself ceaselessly out of its own forms and energies. The second mourns the loss of normative stability in a world in which forms seem to slide frictionlessly over each other, proliferating a difference that is really indifference" (79).

⁷¹At which there are several positions. For instance, Bonnie Braendlin links pastiche to liberation, writing with regard to Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar*: "Pastiche finds a special place in the liberated and liberating spaces created by the postmodern moment, a time, as Edward Said reminds us, of 'opening the culture to experiences of the Other which have remained 'outside' (and have been repressed or framed in a context of confrontational hostility) the norms manufactured by 'insiders'" (65).

In like manner, Andrew Ross links pastiche to a mode of cultural reclamation: "For a while I thought 'simulation' was the appropriate word for this practice of appropriating the

... the characteristic postmodern genre is pastiche or parody, the recycling of already recognized cultural signs in altered contexts. Postmodern art's claims to novelty stem not from wholly new imaginative constructs or from assertions of independent thought, but from the rearrangement of the relations within which particulars stand to one another in a constructed order. (22)

The point, well elaborated throughout chapters of Linda Hutcheon (with whom McGowan shares unacknowledged points of view), is that the newly "constructed order" depicted through parodic pastiche suggests a rearrangement of traditional cultural pieties in tandem with a concomitant questioning of what went before as well as why. Represented in such a way, pastiche becomes a contrarian kin to another mainstay of the arts tradition, allusion. Though M.H. Abrams's guidebook to literary "terms and critical theories and points of view" (vii), A Glossary of Literary Terms (1993), does not list the word pastiche, it does state, "[a]llusion in a literary text is a reference, without explicit identification, to a person, place, or event, or to another literary work or passage," and notes that "[a]llusions of course imply a fund of knowledge that is shared by an author and an audience. Most literary allusions are intended to be recognized by the generally educated readers of the author's time, but some are aimed at a special coterie" (8). That recycling of cultural signs McGowan applauds works to problematize to a degree the stalwart figure of allusion and its attendant "fund of knowledge"—to a degree. Under McGowan's framing, pastiche refuses the standing-on-the-shoulders-of-giants continuity implicit in the act of allusion, while it does not refuse the possibility of "knowledge" altogether. In McGowan's sense

cultural practices of others, but on reflection I choose 'pastiche' as better able to encapsulate a certain double-voicedness that arises when a culture is simulated more in the spirit of poaching (i.e. to make the borrowed practices available for new uses) than that of plagiarism (in which already coded meanings are borrowed uncritically along with the practices themselves)" (1994 182-183).

In "Postmodern Pastiche: A Critical Aesthetic" Ingeborg Hoesterey traces the term's "humanistic relevance" (493)—"Today's pastiches... are allegories of culture as a process of meaning constitution, as system, as ideology" (502); "Pastiche structuration lends itself to exposing and rewriting cultural codifications that for centuries marginalized unconventional identities (507); and "Postmodern pastiche is about the archive of Western seeing that modernism in its search for the 'unperformed' (Whitman) had shut for good" (500).

pastiche is a form of allusion filtered through scepticism and irony: the thing to which the traditionally conceptualized allusion securely alludes is no longer quite so assured, the unimpeded transmission of “culture” now held up for a closer inspection.

Yet for other critics the current predominance of pastiche is an alarming indicator of crisis. In a sense McGowan’s notion of a politically progressive pastiche is still reliant on as canny and literate a readership as Abrams’s code-reading coterie of allusionists; without knowledge of, say, a tradition and how it is being reconstituted, pastiche could be read as little more than a medley⁷² of styles, images and signatures. And as such it would signify only some familiarity with historical imagery and might be valued perhaps as an indicator of the viewer’s putative cultural literacy. Worse, that same medley could be comprehended as active misrepresentation and vapid spectacle. This latter possibility might be the position assumed by the wellspring for the current negative evaluation of pastiche, Fredric Jameson. Jameson, however, expresses less concern about the reading of pastiche than the intent and effect of the very practice; for Jameson it is of no matter how literate the reader may be because the practice of the pasticheur is so profoundly flawed that regardless of the readership’s acuity, only discord can prevail. Imbricated in Jameson’s influential work on postmodernism stand his seminal if rather brief statements about the relationship between history, pastiche and postmodernism; that references to or discussions of pastiche invariably invoke Jameson as the critic to whom one way or the other deference must be paid provides a strong testament to Jameson’s institutional might. Like McGowan, Fredric Jameson calls pastiche (the “omnipresence of pastiche” (1991 18), in fact) a standard characteristic of the postmodern arts. Never explicitly defining the word—he relies on the

⁷²For instance (March 14, 2000). There was an oil painting by James Chou—called “Relationships”—on display (and for sale: \$350.00) at Melriches coffee shop on Davie Street. The painting is a pastiche of recognizable (arguably trite) images from Art History: Klimt, Matisse, Van Gogh. It would take an argument of considerable genius to convince anyone (let alone me) that there is any particular value expressed by the painting—let alone critical insight. “Relationships” reproduces a section from several easy to recall paintings on one canvas. The edge of each image blends into the next, seamlessly. Pastiche here offers only a banal medley of images, and avoids “politics” in favour of somewhat accomplished stylistic mimicry.

commonplace understanding that equates it with styles and modes appropriated from past epochs—he none the less utilizes the artistic “device” to freely oppugn postmodernism’s cultural politics. Jameson claims that “[o]ne of the most significant features or practices in postmodernism today is pastiche” (Foster 113), and then through a widely-deployed series of essays and interviews (and, with New York City’s Whitney Museum as epicentre, well-attended lectures), proceeds to exhibit how that one significant feature is deleterious, a symptom of cultural decline and bankruptcy. Along with the emergence of “the simulacrum,” Jameson (1991) links pastiche to the contemporary enervation of artistic practice and the culture-wide, capitalism-fuelled adherence to “surface” (at the cost of forfeiting “depth”). With a prophet’s unassailable yet populist voice he warns—in near perfect opposition to a celebrants like Rosenau, Hassan and McGowan—against pastiche, linking it to “the crisis in historicity” (22), the “waning of our historicity” (18), the loss of “real historical time” (21) and the “derealization of the whole surrounding world of the everyday” (34). Speaking with Anders Stephanson (1988), Jameson explains,

The increasing number of films about the past are no longer historical; they are images, simulacra, and pastiches of the past. They are effectively a way of satisfying a chemical craving for historicity, using a product that substitutes for and blocks it. (18)

Jameson both implies that humans have an innate sense and need for historicity and that while once upon a time film (or painting or fiction) was “historical”—a supplier of the authentic and essential nourishment called historicity—it can no longer claim to be so. During the interview, he concludes that this “eclectic use of dead languages” deployed with such abandon in postmodern “nostalgia art” presents a problem because it

gives us the image of various generations of the past as fashion-plate images that entertain no determinable ideological relationships to other moments of time: they are not the outcome of anything, nor are they the antecedents of our present; they are simply images. (18)

“[H]istoricism”—the “random cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion” (1991 18)—is what Jameson identifies as a key postmodern

artistic technique, one which stands in opposition to “genuine historicity” (19). Though “cannibalization” produces inflammatory imagery without providing much clarity, Jameson’s use of “random,” implying as it does something without agency, intention or direction, reinforces his contention that postmodern culture has become an “insensible” (20) one. Interestingly, Jameson here echoes Lukács (whom he elsewhere labels, “the greatest Marxist philosopher of modern times” (1981 13)) lamenting Marxist formulation regarding the inadequacy of the (European) historical novel: decades before Jameson, Lukács had described the genre as a debased form for which it is the “curiosities and oddities of the milieu that matter” rather than “an artistically faithful image of a concrete historical epoch” (19). Jameson in turn laments a latter-day North American society “bereft of all historicity” in which the past exists as a virtually meaningless “vast collection of images, a multitudinous photographic simulacrum” (18). In such an imprisoning Platonic cavern false signs are accepted as true, just as partial meaning is accepted as whole; and the enslaved culture, building upon that limitless, Disneyesque falsity, drifts further from what Jameson might call actuality into a depthless realm of consumeristic identities dictated to by the malignant caprice of late capitalism.

Central, unacknowledged (if not elided altogether) factors operating in these opposed understanding of pastiche are understanding of audience or reader and intention. In addition, because both critics are portraying broad social trends with broad strokes (after all, as is by now self-evident “culture” and “postmodernism” are inexact terms), they tend to reduce the scope of their topic or at least calcify its meaning in an “all or nothing” manner—just as McGowan leaves no space for the trite or facile instances of pastiche that must surely exist, Jameson cannot envision moments of vitality or active critique in pastiche. Jameson, for instance, whether analyzing John Portman’s Bonaventure Hotel or George Lucas’s American Graffiti, only ever finds the work of exhausted and directionless practitioners who speed the decline of their culture. As he observes it, “with the collapse of the high-modernist ideology of style . . . the producers of culture have nowhere to turn but

to the past: the imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture (1991 17-18). And since “producers of culture” are by (Jameson’s) definition vanguard, Jameson implicit judgement is that the countless other citizens (mass consumers of culture?) are incapable of critical thinking of any distinction; they merely graze, so to speak, on whatever the avant garde has planted. They either do not or cannot comprehend the difference between, say, the spectacle of reality on the screen with its surfeit of mismatched “cannibalized” signs and another media form that has been “[n]ourished with history in the more tradition sense” (21). Together, producers whose sole intention is to make product at any cost and ovine consumers incapable of distinguishing the two will build, participate and live in a culture strongly out of touch with “reality.”⁷³ McGowan, in contrast (and closely aligned with Ackroyd’s own aforementioned delineation of the artistic *modus operandi* of T.S. Eliot), presumes the necessary existence of something akin to a Fishian interpretive community—one knowledgeable as well of the strategies of postmodern artists, whom he credits with an admirable subversive or at least sceptical intent. Thus when McGowan writes of the “the recycling of already recognized cultural signs in altered contexts” (22), his model rests on the assumption of the stable existence of communally recognized signs that will, furthermore, be understood as having been reordered from their traditional context. If the signs are not recognized as such in the first place, then meaning, however transformed,

⁷³Despite an ostensible Marxist populism, Jameson’s vehicles of transmission (Whitney Museum lectures, keynote addresses at high profile conferences, publication through important academic journals and presses and of course as Director of the Duke Center for Critical Theory, Duke University) and in-text art case-study examples are resolutely high-cultural. The implication is that “lesser” art forms (consumed by “lesser” citizens?) do not even warrant inclusion because they are beyond the pale, artistically speaking. Like with Hutcheon, Jameson does not come close to addressing in detail the significance of the dreaded cannibalized signs in less rarified environs. Their assumption would appear to be that unlike the putatively purer architecture of Frank Gehry or painting of Andy Warhol, the examples of pastiche visible in, say, 7-11 buildings are always already corrupt. And if the consumers of Gehry or Warhol or Doctorow are adversely affected by that high-cultural work, it would seem that the vast majority of others who do not attend the Whitney or know about the distinction between Van Gogh’s “A Pair of Boots” and Warhol’s “Diamond Dust Shoes” are effectively lost causes.

cannot be construed from them. Rather than simply negating wholesale an artistic intention-to-meaning as Jameson does, or discrediting the critical capacity of culture consumers, McGowan works from the liberal humanist assumption (which is inherent as well to the operation of allusion as defined by Abrams) of “generally educated readers” and a community-shared “fund of knowledge” that may nevertheless require a renovated meaning within contemporary culture.

Clear from both McGowan and Jameson as well is that their art-form hermeneutic emphasizes pedagogic function. While aesthetic pleasure may be a possibility in McGowan’s schema, it is nowhere considered in Jameson’s critical purview—for Jameson, art (whether film, architecture, literature or the myriad forms displayed in galleries) acts as a vehicle for instruction; with a distinct echo of Fleishman, Jameson accepts as axiomatic that art instructs and so is, ultimately, in the service of consciousness-raising and civilization-building.⁷⁴ The implicit structure of Jameson’s model suggests that good or effective art teaches the proper lessons and leads to an enlightened citizenry who can construct a progressive civilization. When, for example, Jameson asserts that a historical film like Polanski’s Chinatown or a novel like Doctorow’s Ragtime “gives us the image of various generations of the past as fashion-plate images that entertain no determinable ideological relationship to other moments in time” (1988 18), he is relating if nothing else his firm belief that the whole point of such art is to teach its audience about

⁷⁴Certainly not Jameson’s terms. See: The Political Unconscious (1981) for his more expansive views on literature and “the priority of the political interpretation of literary texts” (17). Nevertheless, two extracts for consideration of relevance here—
(i) “Pluralism means one thing when it stands for the coexistence of methods and interpretations in the intellectual and academic marketplace, but quite another when it is taken as a proposition about the infinity of possible meanings and methods and their ultimate equivalence with and substitutability for one another. As a matter of practical criticism, it must be clear to anyone who has experimented with various approaches to a given text that the mind is not content until it puts some order in these findings and invents a hierarchical relationship among its various interpretations” (31).
(ii) “Only Marxism can give us an adequate account of the essential mystery of the cultural past, which, like Tiresias drinking the blood, is momentarily returned to life and warmth and allowed to speak, and to deliver its long-forgotten message in surroundings alien to it” (19).

those momentous “determinable ideological relationships” underpinning history and culture. Just as Lukàcs criticized Walpole’s Castle of Otranto for treating history as “mere costumery” accessorized with “curiosities and oddities” (19), Jameson’s disdainful detection of “fashion-plate images” in contemporary artwork serves to substantiate his point that (American) culture has grown slack thanks in large part to its increasingly adamant refusal of “authentic” historicity; in the absence of any indication of relationships and ideologies a historical representation instantly becomes ineffectual, a mere image—without cause, without context, without meaning—on some screen. Worse still, as exemplified by a beneath-consideration Hollywood spectacle like Mankiewicz’s Cleopatra (1963), art actively functions as dissimulation. Whereas Jameson might want its millions of viewers to learn of gender norms, economic systems or class hierarchies during the seventeen-year reign of Egypt’s last Ptolemaic ruler, Cleopatra’s emphasis on star power, glittering clothing and styles of cosmetics, romance and (generic albeit timeless) political intrigue results in a rather different quality of education. There is obviously no room for work of this ilk in Jameson’s republic.

At one pole, then, the current surplus of pastiche in the postmodern arts stands for blankness, exhaustion, depthlessness and even subterfuge: historical pastiche diminishes, confuses-(or evacuates meaning from) the long line of recorded historical actuality. Instead of providing insight about the present by discussing complex relationships between the institutions and individuals of past cultures, pastiche is understood as actively avoiding those relationships (and so politics) in favour of the spectacle of the isolated image. For Jameson pastiche is dangerous: not so much irreverent or playful as manipulative, it truly serves the interests of hegemonic capital while putting on a distractingly good show. Ideologically opposed to Jameson and implicitly refuting his avowal of seemingly unmediated “real” historicity, a critic like McGowan extracts from pastiche a technique of recuperation; the underlying assumptions of depth, continuity and fullness of a tradition are questioned though not overthrown. In like manner, Ackroyd himself admires Eliot’s use of

language (including pastiche) for producing “a proper life that exists beyond the customary Anglo-Saxon context of connotation and meaning.” (1976 52). The rearrangement is thought to open the possibility of fissures that in turn enable the entry of new material—previously absent or repressed voices and points of view—and so presumed to encourage a fresh perspective (if not a full reassessment of the cultural order).

4. Ackroyd's Acts of Pastiche

I am not sure that even with them I was not playing a part. I was so much the master of my period that I knew how to adopt effortlessly all its disguises.

Peter Ackroyd, The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde

In my excitement I echoed one of the phrases from The Northholt Tragedy.

Peter Ackroyd, Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem

Any relation to real people, either living or dead, is entirely coincidental. I have employed many sources in the preparation of Hawksmoor, but this version of history is my own invention.

Peter Ackroyd, “Acknowledgments,” Hawksmoor

In examining the modalities of pastiche in Ackroyd's novels, even returning to the authorial source is not without its difficulties since Ackroyd has himself been less than illuminating about its usage. For instance, he has described his basic intent as being that of an irreverent entertainer who writes books that provide “a bit of slap and tickle” (McGrath 47). Then again, one year before, in 1987, he explained to Walter Ross that his technique was a limited, and therefore passing, fad: “It can become something of a trick—you can do it too often; then it becomes simply pastiche . . . so I'll probably never do it again” (Ross 3-4). And more:

My own interest isn't so much in writing historical fiction as it is in writing about the nature of history as such. It's a different thing. I'm not so much interested in writing costume dramas or anything of that kind; I'm much more interested in playing around with the idea of time. But even that might be said to be a temporary pre-occupation, because the novel I'm writing now [i.e., First Light] has no connection with English history except in the very loosest sense. It's set in the contemporary period, not in the historical past in any sense . . . (3)

Evident from these statements is the distinct possibility that Ackroyd's puckish interview performance is a mixture of blatant falsehood, hyperbole and self-consciousness that effectively obstructs the extraction of absolute truth claims about his understanding and use of pastiche. So too in his statements to Patrick McGrath. In response to McGrath's question, "If you're not reading [Thomas] Hardy, how can he creep in [to First Light]?" Ackroyd replied—

Well, these things happen, you know. Even when you think you're not doing it you're doing it. This is probably what got Professor Bloom. For example, in Hawksmoor, somebody said I was pastiching Eliot. The idea never crossed my mind! I completely forgot about Eliot as soon as I'd written that biography. Haven't thought about him since. So these things creep in without one being aware of it. And somebody said that in Chatterton I was pastiching de Quincey! Of course it was that last thing in the world I was thinking of. But if they're there, they're there. (45)

With a decidedly anarchic undertone he explained to Susana Onega nearly a decade later that "everything is open for recreation and manipulation," provocatively referred to "so-called truth and so-called facts" and disclosed the existence of his "obviously counterfeit" (1996 214) then-unpublished novel about Milton. While Ackroyd himself uses the term "pastiche" disparagingly on a number of occasions, he also acknowledges it as a technique he employs, one that remains useful insofar as it enables him to explore the nature of time and historical process.

While it is unusual for criticism addressing postmodernism not to mention pastiche (most often in passing and as just one of the characteristics of the genre), the functioning of pastiche in Ackroyd's novels remains largely under- or unexamined even though critics routinely identify it there. For example, despite the chapter "Long Live Pastiche" in his study *Authors* (1989), Karl Miller does not spend much time discussing pastiche beyond the confines of what is self-evident. He acknowledges that "Peter Ackroyd is all of the formidable pasticheur that he is praised for being" (86) and that his novels are both "brilliant" (85) and "tours de force" (92). Yet beside outlining the plots of Hawksmoor and Chatterton, however, Miller establishes only that Ackroyd apparently remains "very

interested in copies" (87) and expresses "steady concern with imitation and interpretation" (89) without ever touching on what those interests may signify. Ackroyd's thematic preoccupations lead Miller to his broad profile of man and book, where he wonders "what it is the writer intends us to think that he thinks about things"—

He would appear to believe in an invented truth, an invented reality—a Rortyan reality, one might be inclined to call it at times. He believes that a writer will often find himself through exposure to some other writer. And it is apparent that Ackroyd has found himself in this manner—through exposure to Wilde, Eliot, and now Chatterton. This brings with it the corollary that it is not always apparent whether the beliefs he expresses are Ackroyd's or those of the writer to whom he is exposed, or both. Interpreters must therefore be wary, a little, in doing what they are normally allowed to do. (89)

Miller's tepid conclusion—"Ackroyd, too, is his own man. For all his standard procedures, I don't think he is actually imitating anyone" (95)—serves less as an examination of the Ackroydian novelistic raison d'être than as an introduction to problems his fiction may inspire. In like manner, Susana Onega establishes that pastiche operates in Ackroyd's novels, yet does not spend much effort expounding on the nature of its operation. In her relatively in-depth overview of Ackroyd's poetry, fiction and biographies, Onega observes that homage, appropriation, pastiche, allusion and echo are key principles in operation. At one point, she describes his earlier work as "simply a self-conscious and imitative linguistic palimpsest, whose only meaning is to suggest the free play of language and meaning" (10). Remarking in particular on Ackroyd's poetry, she claims it is built on an "accumulation of intertextual echoes," and that "Ackroyd goes on to use the same technique in the writing of his novels" (10). The effect, as Onega claims, is to refute a New Critical truism that "every poem is a complete, autonomous whole, whose form and content are inextricably united in order to create an internal structure of meaning" (10). Onega sees in Ackroyd's early poetic technique evidence of the transgression of conventions and the emphasizing of the basic "emptiness" and "arbitrariness" of linguistic patterns (11) on the one hand, and, in later work, a contrasting, rather conventional yearning for order, value and connection. In short, such Ackroydian characteristics as his

“allusions that lead nowhere” (12) are for Onega “expressing only the autonomy and self-sufficiency of language” via an “arbitrary concatenation of self-referential signifiers” (13). This early rebellious phase is, according to Onega’s synopsis, largely subsumed by Ackroyd’s later interest in creating meaningful cultural connections via history and imagination. Despite the psychological mapping of Ackroyd and his work, Onega pays no attention to whether pastiche and those cul-de-sac allusions work on the side of convention or transgression.

As mentioned earlier, what critics generally note about each Ackroyd novel is that for better or worse it arrives replete with pastiche. Still, assuming that pastiche has uniform meaning throughout the texts would seem to be an erroneous tack. It may be for that reason, perhaps, that while so many critics attribute pastiche to Ackroyd there is so much variance about what that pastiche actually signifies within the body of criticism. In the interests of providing an adequate discussion of pastiche without pursuing encyclopaedically each and every instance of Ackroydian pastiche in his ten novels, the following sections will examine two emblematic instances of pastiche, ones taken from The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde (1983), Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem (1994) and Milton in America (1996). As with the camp comedy of the next chapter, my strategy here rests on the argument that the structure of pastiche functions in much the same manner (although to varying degrees) throughout all his novels, and so the elements under discussion regarding the aforementioned novels could well be transposed to any other Ackroyd novel. Ackroyd’s intermittently acknowledged wholesale importation of textual bits—“I have employed many sources in the preparation” (“Acknowledgments” Hawksmoor); “The scholarly reader will soon realize that I have appropriated passages from Thomas Brown, Thomas Malory . . . and many other English writers” (“Acknowledgements” English Music)—supports the notion that his fiction is a tissue of effects produced through pastiche, even though it does not signal the significance generated by the action. And like the camp comedy discussed in the next chapter, the non-singularity

of the textual tendency creates diverse, often cross purpose effects. Rather than argue à la Jameson that Ackroyd's pastiche spectacle has no meaning beyond being symptomatic of cultural ill-health or à la McGowan that it provides exquisite instances of cultural critique (or like Onega: that in Ackroyd pastiche is tied directly to his ongoing quest for a non-Modernist, non-transcendental means of "conferring meaning on the present and of achieving self-identity" (1998 23)), my reading of Ackroyd allows for its indisputable multiformity. It is inaccurate and critically unproductive to argue that pastiche—evidence of whose operation is abundant throughout Ackroyd's oeuvre—acts in any singular or uniform way. Instead, and perhaps fittingly for novels by an author whose personal interview performances are so schizoid, pastiche lends an element of cacophony to the novels of Ackroyd. It is distinctly possible, then, to locate episodes which would doubtlessly give Jameson pain as well as to detect moments of transgressive discourse that McGowan might applaud. Represented via polysemous pastiche techniques, the figures and culture of past epochs become from a Fleishmanian perspective destabilized, the acuity of the image rendered ambiguous, the requisite mirroring of the "sentiment de l'existence" uncertain. Yet, such a positioning does not necessarily guarantee the work as postmodern—or as "dangerous" (Elias), "subversive" (Hutcheon, Lee, et al.) or merely symptomatic of decline (Jameson). If the resultant polyphony constructs a text that is never especially open to a neat critical profile, it does however offer the benefit of demonstrating the shortcomings of an either/or critical strategy as well as displaying a delineation of Ackroyd's fiction that does not disguise potential critical loose ends (seams?) in the interests of symmetry of argument.

(a) Wilde Versus Milton: Figural Revisions

In his novels Ackroyd impersonates through his style of pastiche ventriloquy the voices of figures obscure and celebrated in English (literary) history—from John Dee, the notorious magus of Elizabeth I, in The House of Doctor Dee and William Hogarth in English Music to Christopher Wren in Hawksmoor and George Meredith in Chatterton.

This list of figures could be enlarged several fold; in English Music alone Ackroyd represents through the eyes of its protagonist a strange continuum of real, mythological and wholly fictive historico-literary figures, from characters taken out of Alice in Wonderland, Great Expectations and The Pilgrim's Progress to Charles Dickens, Daniel Defoe, Henry Purcell, William Byrd, William Hogarth, Thomas Gainsborough, William Blake and Merlin. In quantitative terms, Ackroyd's close-to-conventional historical novels The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde and Milton in America offer impersonations of figures from English (literary) history for unprecedented lengths. Therefore, if for no other reason, they serve well as being emblematic of the modalities of pastiche locatable in Ackroyd's novels. Situating the two novels within the critical binary represented by Jameson and McGowan, it is not difficult to argue (as I am doing here) that the pastiche in the novels establishes varying and possibly contradictory broadly "political" effects. While inserting Milton in America into a Jamesonian hermeneutic or The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde into one conveyed by McGowan would be simple enough, such a gesture can only be achieved via the suppression of incongruous elements. For example, if a critic in a McGowanian position wanted to argue for the valuable revisionary effects pastiche achieves in Milton in America, she would have to studiously ignore aspects of its satiric impulse, the delirious comedy and the undoubtedly facile characterization. Likewise, a critic making an argument in Jameson's vein could criticize Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem for its failure to draw "deep" intra-cultural relationships or to pay attention to historical causality, and so would be ignoring its decidedly non-Marxist version of London history and its sympathy for London's many downtrodden citizens.

(And yet before proceeding to a discussion of the workings of pastiche as evident in these novels, it is important to reiterate the ontological status of the books. Their presentation is fundamentally as fiction and as falsified documents, and I would suggest those defining terms diminish their putative political convictions. Structurally emphasizing its falsity, each novel cannot be said to dismantle in any serious manner the historico-social

status of the figure it represents or the historical era he lived in. If, as Alison Lee contends, “[p]ostmodern fiction, then, plays (seriously) with the structures of authority” (xii) by utilizing while subverting realist technique (and its associated ideologies), Ackroyd’s opening gambit—his displacement of the text’s ontological ground—in effect highlights play over politics. If this literature “teaches any lesson” (as liberal humanist critics from Fleishman to Hutcheon would frame the matter), its first lecture might be one accentuating the fact that it is foremost irreverently playful fiction. When Ackroyd refers to Milton in America as “obviously counterfeited” (Onega 1996 214) he underscores his inability and/or refusal to distinguish between truth and fiction—as well as to complicate any reading of his effort as the result of singular intent. While his statement also calls into question the very nature of the historical Milton (and by association all of our knowledge of the past) and thumbs a nose to conventional high-literary (historical novelistic) notions of authorial responsibility and respect—and so invokes “political” gestures of a sort—it also retracts or retards inquiry simply by establishing the novel’s counterfeit status as unequivocal, a bit of slap and tickle. On the other hand, the grounding effects produced by his pastiche representations place the text in conflict with itself, so to speak, because the mimicry works to eradicate the “counterfeited” or “pseudo” or fictive aspect of the historiography: it sounds like Wilde, it looks like Wilde, so what if it arrives in a package labelled “forgery”?)

Milton in America and The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde utilize the biographical archives and impersonate the literary styles of celebrated English literary figures in order to represent recognizable (and so “legitimate” in a Fleishmanian sense) simulacra which are channeled through spurious media—the clearly forged journal, the patently imaginary travelogue. A “wonderfully accurate” (Onega 1998 32) portrait set in an “obviously counterfeit” frame, each novel additionally fixes on particular aspects of these figures, resurrecting him, so to speak, in order to resituate him. Yet resituating an author in the canon is complicated exactly because the canon itself is amorphous, subject to change and

of import to a smallish audience. A potted history of a someone like John Milton is instructive. Currently a “major figure” in/of literary history, if he reaches into the current popular imagination at all it is as the author of Paradise Lost (itself another “name”—integral to “cultural literacy” but no doubt read selectively). As a figure, then, Milton is best known in relatively rarified high-literary and poetic-scholarly circles. Within that largely imagined community, Milton has long been held in high esteem. In the obscure, late-Victorian Great Books (1898), for instance, Frederick W. Farrar exclaims that “Milton was not only one of the world’s mightiest poets, but also a supremely noble man” (237). Citing Milton’s apostrophization by such eminent figures as Tennyson, Wordsworth and Dryden, Farrar preaches about the “high lessons” that “one of the noblest of England’s sons” can teach readers (288). Here, Wordworth’s pure-voiced “Star” becomes a moral exemplar nonpareil.⁷⁵ Then again, a generation later T.S. Eliot’s influential 1947 Henrietta Hertz Lecture, “Milton II,” charts a brief history of critical responses exposing “antipathy toward Milton the man” (148), and suggests a vast shift in cultural attitudes toward Puritanism in general and Milton’s rectitude specifically. Passing through a trail of aversion blazed by Samuel Johnson and John Middleton Murry, Eliot speculates that “of no other poet is it so difficult to consider the poetry simply as poetry, without our theological and political dispositions, conscious or unconscious, inherited or acquired, making an unlawful entry” (148). Toward the poetry itself, Eliot expresses less generosity: his 1936 essay “Milton I” concludes, “it is from [the standards of language and poetry] point of view that we can go so far to say that, although his work realizes superbly one important element in poetry, he may still be considered as having done damage to the

⁷⁵Some twenty years before in “A French Critic on Milton,” Matthew Arnold had taken note of the inherent difficulty English critics might face in assessing John Milton (as well as their ‘naturally’ advantageous position): “A completely disinterested judgment about a man like Milton is easier to a foreign critic than to an Englishman. From conventional obligation to admire ‘our great epic poet’ a foreigner is free. Nor has he any bias for or against Milton because he was a Puritan,—in his political and ecclesiastical doctrines to one of our great English parties a delight, to the other a bugbear. But a critic must have the requisite knowledge of the man and the works he is a judge; and from a foreigner—particularly a Frenchman—one hardly expects such knowledge” (401).

English language from which it has not wholly recovered" (145). The point here is not so much that the fortunes of any past literary figure modulate from generation to generation as that because the figure/work is always subject to interpretation, there is no originary position from which to judge the supposed accuracy of the representation. Being fundamentally palimpsestic, the figure itself and, more importantly, the cultural and political meaning attached to it are subject to the leanings of the audience/reader/critic/writer. In other words, Wilde, Milton, Dee, Chatterton and so on cannot be revived without also being repositioned; and that authorial act of repositioning carries broadly political significance.

Dependent on audience knowledge, Ackroyd's fictional representation serves as an introduction (to the "general" reader), that also acts as a reduction—a parodic critique or resituating of a "Star" canonical figure. Pastiche—in the form of resuscitated (seeming) language of reanimated Puritans (and of course Milton)—mimics Milton's voice via the language of Milton's poetry and prose. Furthermore, the concomitant narratorial valorization of "native wisdom" and Catholic catholicism further clarifies the political stance of the novel. That said, it is worth remembering Tanner's review of Milton in America, which accused Ackroyd of revising history with the precision of a child's drawing. The reviewer's position prompts a pertinent question: "Of what value or legitimacy is Ackroyd's representation of Milton or Puritanism if in fact it is so markedly biased?"⁷⁶ Pastiche serves to ground and thereby legitimize Ackroyd's portrait—however

⁷⁶It is interesting to consider the case of Charles Babbage with regard to audience, cultural literacy and representation. The historical Babbage (1791–1871) is still "known" because of his mathematical skills and his experimental "difference engine." He holds less fame as the inventor of the heliograph and the ophthalmoscope. Babbage is, moreover, the author of, among others, A Comparative View of the Different Institutions for the Assurance of Lives, Observations on the Decline of Science in England, The Economy of Machinery and Manufactures and The Ninth Bridgewater Treatise: A Fragment. The latter (1837) work, an omnibus of speculation, features chapters discoursing on the origin of evil, explaining the coexistence of fossils and Creation and providing a scientific basis for miracles—all directed by one guiding principle: to "show that the power and knowledge of the great Creator of matter and of mind are unlimited" (ix). It is due to his notion that the "air itself is one vast library," apparently "part of Babbage's 'Advertisement' for an edition of his Ninth Bridgewater Treatise" (Ackroyd 1992 117) that he stands as the

much the novel's *mise en scène* is "obviously counterfeited." In doing so it conveys a radically mixed "message." On the one hand its quasi-realism (recognizable historical figure, Miltonic language and conceits, concrete "probable" setting) encourages a conventional interpretive response hinged like Fleishman's historical novel typology on accuracy, imaginative sympathy and ethical responsibility. What Fleishman calls a novel's "knowledge" (a supplement to the established historical "facts") then works to produce a historiographic analog which—imagined yet built on a degree of probability—reads like historical chronicle. Utilizing the strong narratorial constitution of the historiographic mode—founded on an evident rationalism and quasi-empiricism—the fiction's own narrative takes on the persuasiveness of fact: "the reader" remains convinced of the authenticity of the portrait because it simulates what is already more or less known about the subject. It has the power to convince exactly because it conforms well enough to historiographic "facts." And through that conduit, the historical pastiche of Milton in

thematic matrix of Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem, effecting both Dickens and Gissing and reflecting the interconnection of people and time the novel exhibits.

Like Milton and Wilde, the use of "Charles Babbage" inspires peculiar questions. Since Babbage is only ever an extremely fragmentary or partial representation (i.e., to readers and characters alike he is mostly spectral—Dickens apparently read a few sentences he wrote, Gissing apparently interviewed him about his difference engine, and some readers of Ackroyd's novel may know him (like the OED) as an "English mathematician, inventor, and pioneer of machine computing")—it is no challenge to situate him as one instance of Jameson's "fashion-plate images." Readers learn nothing of significance about the historical Babbage or about his relationship with Victorian ideologies, politics and culture; the figure exists merely to add local colour and to serve as the central illustration of a point which is by no means representative of his own corpus. In short, Babbage (the historical author, inventor and so on) is manipulated, condensed and strategically presented in servitude to the novelistic narrative that contains him. Since the utilization of historical figures conventionally works to legitimate the novel's *mise en scène* by grounding it in recognizable "real" time and space, the novel's appropriation of Babbage and re-presentation of "Babbage" is less a matter of exhuming an obscure but important historical player than a convenient place from which to base a thematic conceit. What becomes evident is that while Babbage remains subordinate to authorial designs (and hapless before authorial whim), his historical actuality still assists in establishing the novel's validity as historical-fiction-as-adequate-quasi-historiography. And though the novel may be using a strategically configured version of Babbage in order to introduce a notion of historical relationships that is outside expected ones, there is no doubting that the figure has only surface qualities. Ackroyd could have used an imaginary quotation from Charles Darwin or Algernon Swinburne to much the same purpose and effect.

America principally constructs a satiric representation of “1660” that is fundamentally critical of Milton (man, poet, politico, all inseparable) and Puritan ideology and which also judges Catholic and Indian alike sympathetically.

On the other hand, Ackroyd’s own comment about his novel’s ontology-as-obviously-counterfeit status would support Jameson’s regard for the postmodern historical fiction-as-so much spectacle—though not necessarily with the Marxist’s dismissive and alarmist tone. Much of Jameson’s anxiety seemingly results from his idealistic belief in art as the privileged site of valuable cultural transmission and consciousness-raising morality; it is when art does not perform those tasks that it becomes decadent and moribund. Since Ackroyd does not apparently share Jameson’s notion of art, his spectacle of Milton in America cannot be understood as pretending to be anything other than the “bit of slap and tickle” literary entertainment he claims of it. Yet situating the novel as merely high-brow entertainment would seem a touch disingenuous. Questions still remain about why the figure of Milton is appropriated at all if he is of no consequence: why not instead a story about an invented Puritan who travels to New England? The purposeful inclusion of a figure of Milton’s institutional stature cannot be disregarded as mere trifle because the fact of his appearance suggests a politicized wrangling with and revising of an unarguably significant figure in English literary history. Rather than being the product of reckless or indifferent decision-making, Milton in America renders through speculation—“If John Milton had fled to the New World and taken a leadership role in a Puritan settlement, how might his personality have moulded it?”—a by all accounts condemnatory fictive tract. And though fiction, it does prompt (mild) questioning of this figure in the context of literary study and cultural and national “greatness.” But lest we forget, there is of course the Ackroydian retraction: though the technique of Ackroyd’s reanimation employs tradition historical novelistic means to legitimate the “ground” of the hostile representation (and hence its ideological position)—in particular via the pastiche reincarnation of Milton’s textual remains—the clearly-marked-as-forged frame acts to delegitimize that technique of

legitimation. Offering a discomfiting and suspensive “I retract my contention (sort of)” statement, the text’s radical re-situation of John Milton remains curiously embryonic or unresolved.

In like manner, Ackroyd’s pastiche-assisted resurrection of Oscar Wilde serves distinctly cross purposes. While it might be tempting to celebrate the novel as the sort of revisionary literary work that resituates well-known historical figures by highlighting those characteristics officially unacceptable to and suppressed by their culture (i.e., in the case of Wilde, his artistic decadence as well as his pederasty and homosexuality), there is much evidence to suggest such a valorization might be misapplied. If, for instance, we even briefly consider the spate of Wilde biographies (Hyde (1975); Kronenberger (1976); Sheridan (1976)) that closely predate The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde (1983), it is impossible not to observe their familiarity and comfort with these ostensibly outlawed and transgressive elements. In advance of Ackroyd’s fiction, too, the biographers are well versed in the dramatic qualities of Wilde’s life. In fact, like Ellmann (1987) after him, Kronenberger expressly charts Wilde’s life with the mythic arc of an Icarus narrative: he presents his biography in three sections, “Upward,” “Onward” and “Downward.” Sheridan notes, in agreement with a 1937 comment by Alfred Douglas, that Wilde’s is a story⁷⁷ full of human and dramatic interest—

The story of Oscar Wilde has usually been told in terms of hubris—Oscar as the child of the gods, lavishly endowed with every talent except that of restraint, who they destroyed because that’s the kind of things gods do. In fact, there is a more prosaic explanation of Wilde’s theatrical triumphs and his social collapse: he was a child not of the gods but of the Victorians, and his tragedy was that he allowed himself to remain one. Like all children he failed to recognize or to estimate the moment at which the grown-ups would stop laughing. (9)

⁷⁷Or stories, maybe. Surveying books about Wilde, Sheridan observes a trend—“Oscar-writers were divided into two main groups: those who saw him as a great betrayed genius and those who saw him as a raging and tiresome ‘old queen’ who got what was coming to him and none too soon” (10).

If, then, Ackroyd's ersatz journal—a pastiche of Wilde's own words and recognizably Wildean bon mots—does little more than present now-standard biographical fare in the guise of autobiographical musing, can it be said to achieve anything beyond establishing its author as a pasticheur and mimic par excellence? Certainly, through the structure of autobiography the novel dissects Wilde's tragic fall as well as anatomizing Wilde's less-than-saintly behaviour and the hypocrisy of select Victorians (which would place Ackroyd in Sheridan's "great betrayed genius" (10) category of "Oscar-writers"). And in accordance with the critical proclivity of a Jameson (Fleishman or Lukàcs), its pseudo-autobiographical quest for answers establishes connections and relationships between society, social structures and individuals. As with Milton in America pastiche in this fiction works to build a realistic model of a well-known historical figure albeit through a marked-as-fictive medium. In contrast to his Milton, though, Ackroyd's model does not diverge significantly from representations already constructed by numerous biographies—Wilde does not, for instance, travel to Biarritz and establish a commune of homosexual aesthetes. If the poetic prophet of Blake and paragon "Star" of Wordsworth is transformed into a death-dealing and delusional autocrat in Milton in America, then the complicated, hypocritical and witty victim constructed by himself and numerous biographers becomes . . . much the same figure in The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde. And so, politically-speaking, in recuperating the formerly unspeakable reputation of Wilde, it adds another voice sympathetic to Wilde and, perhaps, expresses some interest in further assuring his inclusion in that institution called the literary canon.

There are exceptions to that generality, however. In addition to presenting a relatively sympathetic pseudo-autobiography, The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde promotes views which have no currency in biographies. Here, pastiche functions to give credence to a view for which there is no "real-life" support. If, as Fleishman claims, historical fiction creates a peculiar kind of knowledge then what new knowledge Ackroyd's fiction imparts may indicate one strain in the working of pastiche. Through Wilde's voice in Wilde's

Parisian journal readers are exposed to his “dark thread,” which is, Wilde explains, that his father was not William but Smith O’Brien, “an Irish poet and patriot who had died many years before” (30). His mother’s guilty confession leads Wilde to link his illegitimacy—“The illegitimate are forced to create themselves, to stand upright even when the whirlwind engulfs them” (30)—to his creativity as well as to his life’s fated trajectory (“I, too, ranked among the outcasts” (30)). Here Ackroyd’s literally inventive explanatory paradigm, relayed through Wildean pastiche, serves as the anchor of Wilde’s self-understanding. For readers already familiar with “the story of Oscar Wilde,” the supplement is provocative (or at least something encouraging a frantic rush to biographies: has any previous biographer doubted or even speculated about the legitimacy of Wilde’s paternity?). And for those unfamiliar with Wilde, moreover, his illegitimacy might seem as probable as anything else in his stranger-than-fiction life. The in-text fact of bastardy stands for Wilde as the originary, ontological sin that marks his life. It is also, for Wilde and readers alike, poetically apt: as the trials proved, Wilde’s subjectivity was illegitimate in contrast with the normative ethos of late-Victorian culture. Yet as “knowledge” related via pastiche Wilde, its political significance remains ambiguous. For readers, the pseudo-autobiographical “fact” reframes Wilde (as an illegitimate child) and Wilde’s self-understanding (that he can attribute his life’s fatefulness to his mother’s tryst), and so extends the circumstances behind his behaviour, motivations and decisions. Creating an altogether new basis for Wilde’s fateful trajectory, the fiction suggests a need for a factor external to the various knowns of the historically established figure: as though to say that what is known does not sufficiently account for his manner and so there must be something more. Providing a kind of cold comfort to the textual Wilde himself and, for readers, a possible rationale for Wilde’s outlandish modus vivendi, the illegitimacy presents an intriguing reading of Oscar Wilde (assuming of course that the status of the pastiche medium—the always foregrounded and so indisputably fictional quality of The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde—is wholly overlooked). Like Milton in America,

Ackroyd's second novel tentatively posits facts about a renowned figure of English literary history. Yet the structural gesture of retraction or disavowal modifies the potentially subversive nature of these facts so that they become less contentious because denatured.

(b) The Marxs, Gissing, Babbage: Historical Bit Players

This sounds like a mere melodrama from the London stage, something that might be performed on the boards of a 'theatre of sensation' like the Cosmothka in Bell Street, but it is a true story—the truest story George Gissing ever completed.

Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem

It is a Grand Guignol melodrama within another melodrama when an ill-fated production of The Crees of Misery Junction takes place at the conclusion of Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem. On and behind the stage and in the audience sit or stand the principal (historical) characters of the novel, excepting, of course, the fictional Elizabeth and John Cree, both of whom have been killed. George Gissing and his companion Nell sit nearby (fictional) Inspector Kildare and his companion George Flood; Karl Marx, whose daughter plays a part in the Misery Junction, sits nearby with his friend Richard Garnett, the British Museum's Reading Room Superintendent; Oscar Wilde attends the "sensation" (278) with other arts journalists. Gertie and Arthur Latimer, proprietors of the Bell Theatre, stand backstage with Aveline Mortimer (playing "Elizabeth Cree") and Dan Leno. The novel's finalé is suitably theatrical, closing as it does a novel which contains any number of the elements being replayed in Misery Junction. Yet other than metafictional play and ironic or uncanny echo, how does the final layering of pastiche (pastiche historical figures in pastiche Victorian London all within a pastiche melodrama frame) signify? While it is doubtful that the novel's theatrical pastiche historicism provides the substantial cultural revision a critic like McGowan champions or unique, extra-historiographical "knowledge" of London circa 1880, it does promote an overarching model of historical processes. Throughout the novel characters have discussed the tissue of interdependencies (between individuals, culture and historical time), the "hidden correspondences and signs" (66), "hidden connections" (68) and "coincidences . . . so much part of this, or any, history"

(165) as though to emphasize a thesis repeatedly presented by the historian-narrator, whose selections of musing by Charles Babbage (which, we are informed, significantly influenced Gissing and Dickens) prove his point—

[Babbage] had once declared that “the pulsations of the air, once set in motion by the human voice, continue into infinity”, and he went on to speculate about this constant movement of atoms. “Thus considered” he wrote, “what a strange chaos is this wide atmosphere we breathe! Every atom, impressed with good and with ill, retains at once the motion which philosophers and sages have imparted to it, mixed and combined in ten thousand ways with all that is worthless and base. The air itself is one vast library, on whose pages are for ever written all that man has ever said or woman whispered.” (116-117)

If the historian-narrator imparts to his audience knowledge of the “workings of history” in which “tokens of the invisible world” (66) are manifest only when one has the vision to perceive them, it might be said that the narrator’s philosophy of history—which is buttressed by the various ancillary narrative points of view in the novel—has its foundation in the ineluctable connectedness of things, real and otherwise. Time, then, and space are rendered-if not meaningless at least relative: De Quincey informs Wilde and Marx and Cree; Babbage connects to a nameless historian-narrator as well as Dickens and Gissing; and Wilde and Dickens, of course, lead to Peter Ackroyd and to the readers themselves. In Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem at least, the pastiche of Victorian London and its Londoners illustrates a truth that may ultimately be more poetic than factual: whether on stage or off, world, text and spirit are profoundly entwined. That entwinement, in turn, is inseparable from the complex cultural activity centred in London—a vast place of light and dark, good and evil and so on.

At the same time, much journalistic criticism laments what it views as the novel’s facile approach to a past era in a manner that aligns closely with Jameson’s “spectacle” and “fashion-plate imagery” position. Keating, for instance, discounts Ackroyd’s “modern pastiche of the Victorian Shilling Shocker” (21), and Sinclair merely notes in the single paragraph his review dedicates to the novel that “this season’s retrieval,” is a “reviv[ed] shilling shocker,” and it gets “reviewed in all the best places” thanks to current publishing

scene confusion (21). In such criticism, the histrionic aspect of Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem is judged to supplant the more conventionally realist historical foundation, and so dissolve the narrative's believability. For all the "documentary-effect" or "reality-effect" figures like Gissing and Marx and specific, recognizable locations such as Limehouse and Lambeth Marsh produce, the representation is rightfully regarded as improbable and stagy. With the names acting as little more than commonplace metonyms—"Oh, yes, there is Marx speaking. Naturally, since he is the author of The Communist Manifesto, he would talk about the poor in London, and whisper 'Truly the playhouse was the opium of the people!' (280) because that is the sort of thing he wrote⁷⁸ about regarding religion"—the context of their historical actuality essentially becomes nullified, ultimately the same species as that negative paradigm of history-telling, Cleopatra. As portrayed in Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem, London is a teeming metropolis in which reside various strata of citizens, many of whom are named and instantly recognizable because their speech usually replicates the wit or epigrams or sage maxims they were then and are now known for.⁷⁹ Cemented in place with the glue of pastiche (and so in unquestioning support of the regular conventions of historiographic fact establishment), these known-as-historical figures supply a reality-like grounding for the London setting. Yet the narrative's sheer undeniable staginess works against that grounding, the figures themselves too numerous and too facile to support in-depth

⁷⁸And since Marx (like Babbage) is ever only an absurdly partial representation (and one subordinate to an overarching theme), the originating context of his famous remark—as a prefatory comment in A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right (1844)—makes no difference. This "Marx" is the popularly-conceived version, that is, the father of The Communist Manifesto, the great theorist of communism, etc. Asking why he might repeat his famous phrase (written, after all, nearly four decades before the setting of Dan Leno) is in a sense to grasp at straws—it does not matter because there is no significant investigation of Marx or his thought within the novel; he is there as a famous Victorian who lived in London. Like with Babbage, Marx is interchangeable: another celebrity with a famous aphorism could have stood in his place with no marked change in the novel's state.

⁷⁹Those who are not known and who are in fact fictional—Elizabeth Cree or Aveline Mortimer or Inspector Kildare—remain nonetheless familiar in large part because they are familiar types, pastiche creations based on or else known from Victorian novels and history, and later versions (especially film and stage) of Victorian cultural mainstays.

consideration of their psychic or cultural synchronicity. The poetic quality of the novel's associations mentioned earlier, in short, does not hold up well under the scrutiny of an examiner searching for historical veracity. Like with the television program that brings together Sappho, Virginia Woolf and Elizabeth I, for instance, to discuss the lot of woman throughout time, it is the thematic conceit rather than the realism of the event that resounds. Poetically apt more than historically actual in the traditional sense, its vision of the historical era (in accordance with Gertie Latimer's or Dan Leno's of Elizabeth Cree life) ultimately becomes theatrical and pantomimic—a fiction of history that runs by the working of its own logic.

Still, if the novel's implicit model of historical connectivity is not wholly jettisoned by critics, it is viewed as either unacceptably trite or cartoonishly simplistic. Weary of Ackroyd's mystical "crudeness," Wood, for example, poses a question—"But what, beside giving us a tutorial in postmodern skepticism, does Ackroyd want us to learn?"—and then answers it with peremptory precision:

It is, apparently, that history is a process of eternal recurrence. History renews itself but remains essentially the same. The dark wheel goes on turning. We can only update our ancestors' malevolences (he has much less to say about the longevity of benevolence). He batters us with this in every book he writes.
(50)

The critical point stands out clearly: his novel does not have the advantage of being an original shocker (or even original Ackroyd); it is warmed-over, rehash that gets noticed only because Ackroyd has the advantage of being a brand-name author marketed by an important literary brand-name publisher (Sinclair-Stevenson). In a manner that Jameson would likely approve, Ackroyd's historical pastiche is routinely castigated. Unlike the critical audience of The Crees of Misery Junction who complain that the "cheap melodrama" is "pantomimic" and "unreal" (280) but who also recall the wonderful moment when Dan Leno announced "here we are again" (282), a majority of critics can only hold their focus on the disappointing qualities of what they deem another cheap melodrama. The idiosyncratic network of connections proposed in Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem

does not find support with critics in large part because the representations of historical figures, places and events are obvious in their lack of depth—because the linkage between, for instance, Marx and Wilde is not illustrated to have much more substance than being the reflection of the arbitrary or capricious decisions of an authorial organizer. While the cultural authenticity pastiche lends manages to create a semblance of a reality-effect for the narrative, the minimal effort to secure the pastiche elements in a realistic matrix of accuracy, probability and mimetic adequacy simultaneously dismantles it. The “neither/nor” quality of the historical mise en scène of Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem results in a suspensive narrative which, as the following chapter on comedic historicism indicates, is a structural fact that Ackroyd fictions repeat with significant variations.

B. The Presence of the Past: Comedic
and Non-Realist Historicism in
The Great Fire of London and First Light

1. History Through a Comic Frame

Ackroyd is a dandy, self-conscious, elegant and witty. His work is marked by an extreme artificiality. It is always at some remove from life, and he never leaves the reader in any doubt that he is reading a novel. Despite naturalistic passages, often extremely effective, his inspiration generally appears to be literature rather than life.

Allan Massie, The Novel Today

You know what they say, Flo. Tragedy in the past, mystery in the future, but comedy in the present. Comedy in the present. Shall we go now?

Peter Ackroyd, First Light

Comedy: The least controllable use of language and therefore the most threatening to people in power.

John Ralston Saul, The Doubter's Companion

Literary scholars holding positions traditional (Lukács through to Fleishman) and self-consciously innovative (Brian McHale, Linda Hutcheon) would both appear to reach consensus that an essential characteristic of the historical novel is its attentiveness to the goings-on of a remote epoch. As we recall, a scholar like Fleishman (synthesizing the tentative consensus previous writers had reached about historical fiction) concludes that along with the centrality of identifiable figures and events from the historical record, temporal distance (of “forty to sixty years” (3)) is a strict requirement should a novel be categorized as belonging to the “historical” genre. And, as mentioned too, the political underpinning of Fleishman’s definition rest on notions of the literature’s social responsibility and quasi-scientific precision: a historical novel can be gauged artistically successful and pedagogically productive only after it has demonstrated sufficient truthfulness—in regard to subjectivities and recognized events—to the times it chooses to represent. Some two decades after Fleishman, Brian McHale (1987) argues that the

defining characteristic of the newly-printed variant of the historical novel is its being implicated in the pronouncement of "some violation of ontological boundaries" (16). These contrarian fictions are viewed as forms constructed purposefully unlike the tradition historical novel, a genre—according to influential, latter-day critics—eager to avoid contradictions and to adhere to status quo (i.e., conservative) social norms as well as to "suppress these violations, to hide the ontological 'seams' between fictional projections and real-world facts" (McHale 17). While critics constructing a profile of contemporary historical fiction acknowledge the persistence of its traditional precursor (retrograde, old fashioned, if still popular), they contend that some more progressive contemporary fictions ("postmodern" ones) are unconcerned about disguising their seam-full construction, and in being so consciously act to variously critique "our Western cultural heritage and capitalist economies" (Elias 1995 105), or to "consolidate and transform" established historical narratives (Connor 1996 133), or to "problematize[] the very possibility of historical knowledge" (Hutcheon 1988 106), or to risk "ontological offense" with their violation of "the real-world/fictional-world boundary" (McHale 1987 85). Nonetheless, in their surveys of these ostensibly transgressive novels, scholars of contemporary postmodern historical fiction focus on works whose settings recall Fleishman's norm of "forty to sixty years." The crucial distinction, though, comes with the various strata of text-situated inquiries—variform but focused on the adequacy of language to represent the past, of authors to wield that language effectively and/or responsibly and of historiographic modes to neutrally or objectively yet fully record past actualities (not to mention that age-old problem of fiction posing as credible quasi-historiography). As a general economy the fiction effectively destabilizes its own authority, and by addressing unfamiliar or defamiliarized historical pasts is thought by critics to question the tacit conventions and, moreover, truths of history-writing proper. Whereas faith-in-realism remains the lingua franca of conventional historical fiction (mimicking the conventions of objectivity of history-writing itself), ironic critique and parodic interrogation of received history and the

ontological claims of historiography are construed (by Hutcheon, Elias and Lee especially) as could-be radical real-world political strategies.

While there are aspects of Ackroyd's fiction that make it amenable to inclusion in the canon of ever-amorphous postmodern art forms—with Hawksmoor in particular critically positioned as exemplary postmodern fiction—Ackroyd's novels do not necessarily function to play seriously with the structure of power, to critique the cultural investments of history-writing nor examine the insidious workings of capitalist economies; to implicate his work in such politicized discourse may speak much more of the needs of critics than of actual textual tendencies. (If it is a leap of faith to accept that literature in general has the requisite cultural weight to accomplish the political tasks regularly ascribed to it by academic critics, it is even more so the case with Ackroyd's novels.) That stated, the characteristic comic elements evident throughout those novels nonetheless suggest certain effects, and, just as the narrator of The Great Fire of London observes, "certain things follow from other things" (169). Using First Light and The Great Fire of London as case-studies, this chapter will consider a specific modality of comedy prominent in Ackroyd's oeuvre—camp. In a pair of Ackroyd's novels such comedy stands in obvious juxtaposition to the non-comic, the serious. The non-comic thematic, related through conventionally realist narration, concerns a complex of historico-philosophic existential quandaries linked to inheritance, identity, knowledge of the past and cultural transmission. The intermittent albeit persistent comic intrusions disrupt and in varying degrees undermine the 'reality' effect the narration maintains. If the realist "dominant" (to deploy McHale's term) establishes a tone which in turn supports a philosophical disquisition into, for instance, the nature of human inheritance of ancestry, then the linkage to it of a not insignificant "recessive" (not McHale's term) comprised of campy and farcical events and characters produces a narrative whose own authority continuously self-destructs. Such an undermining alters the very nature of the dominant investigation of history, and reveals a form whose intrinsic instability is permanently foregrounded

2. Situating *The Great Fire of London* and *First Light*

Two of Peter Ackroyd's ten novels are set in contemporary England. Strictly speaking, then, they do not comply with the conventions of historical novel typology. Yet each novel actively develops broadly historical themes, and remains permeated, on several levels, by a preoccupation with the weight of history on present day actuality; not historical novels per se, they are novels about history, "historicised fiction . . . about its own historically relative construction of history" in Connor's words (1996 142-143). In the narratives of these novels, history can be found everywhere; whether found in the shape of neighbourhoods or the architecture of buildings (or even under the buildings themselves), reflected by television programs or in advertising, or experienced by individual characters through their own pasts, history and consciousness of its dynamism saturates the human environment. At the same time and contrary to its seeming ubiquity, historical modalities are imperfectly known or realized: along with the presence of the evident stuff of history comes the fact that this stuff is always misperceived or partially understood or clearly misunderstood. In *The Great Fire of London* and *First Light* history plays a fundamental role in both individual lives and evolving cultural forms and institutions even as its effects are ambiguous, partial and only ever half-remembered and semi-visible. The novels do not, however, sustain their sombre consideration of imperfect human knowledge and decayed cultural transmission. Accelerated farcical plots and outright comic interludes stand in juxtaposition with the "serious" elements, creating an effect, similar to pastiche as discussed in last chapter, which destabilizes or distorts the textual fabric to which it is joined.

i. Aspects of the Novels

(a) Despite a title signalling an apparently clear reference to the city's 1666 catastrophe, the titular blaze of Ackroyd's first novel, *The Great Fire of London* has no counterpart in any historical chronicle. The novel opens instead with a broad hint at the historical link between one act of imagination and another; it concludes with a present-day

(1983) act of arson on a film set (inside a disused prison wing) that eventually destroys “much that was false and ugly, and much that was splendid or beautiful” (165). Rather than portraying or even alluding to the seventeenth-century burning of a plague-plagued city, moreover, the principal point of historical reference in The Great Fire of London is in fact part of literary history: Charles Dickens’s tale of intermittent “preposterous fancy” (Dickens xxi), Little Dorritt, published in serial form between 1855 and 1857, a novel whose own narrative is set thirty years in the past and based on speculation much more than documentary research.⁸⁰ It is a woman believing herself possessed by Dickens’s Child of the Marshalsea who sets the blaze; and it is the director filming an adaptation of Little Dorritt that “speaks to the 1980s” (78) who perishes in it (he becomes “the first victim of what came to be known as the Great Fire” (165)). As though to emphasize one text’s uneasy or incomplete or inadequate interdependence with another—and so one historical period’s tie to another—the novel begins with a brief section, “The Story So Far,” which presents a brief (though inaccurate⁸¹) summary of “Poverty,” the first section of Dickens’s novel, and concludes thus—“This is the first part of the novel which Charles Dickens wrote between 1855 and 1857. Although it could not be described as a true story, certain events have certain consequences . . .” (3). The conceit of The Great Fire of London, then, is of a “not . . . true story” written by a long-dead Victorian leading to

⁸⁰In his Preface to the novel’s “Charles Dickens edition,” Dickens writes of his discovery of remnants of “extinct Marshalsea jail” (xxiv): “Some of my readers may have an interest in being informed whether or not any portions of the Marshalsea Prison are yet standing. I myself did not know, until I was approaching the end of this story, when I went to take a look. I found the outer front courtyard, often mentioned here, metamorphosed onto a butter-shop; and then almost gave up every brick of the jail for lost” (xxi–xxii). Yet when he finally happens upon “the rooms that arose in my mind’s-eye when I became Little Dorritt’s biographer” (xxiv), he sees that his novelistic representation conforms to objective reality.

⁸¹Reviews of The Great Fire of London were equivocal about the novel’s inaccuracies. Sutherland’s reading of the novel’s opening gambit is unclear. He writes, “The Great Fire of London’s preface is a scenario based on Little Dorritt but falsified by an inauthentic sentimental climax” (19), but does not clarify whether he applauds or condemns the apparent falsity and inauthenticity. Strawson, himself erroneous when he notes “two errors of fictional fact,” does not speculate whether the mistakes are intentional, but concludes they are harmless none the less because “most fiction is made from altered fact, and can be made from altered fiction too” (105).

another story, a fictional history describing the genesis of a great—if imaginary and surely not what its own title suggests—fire, written a century and a half later. Art built upon art, the novel's apparent titular reference to a documented historical event inaugurates an investigation of historical inheritance in which pathos occurs in tandem with the wholly bathetic.

More than a direct “consequence” of Little Dorritt, The Great Fire of London is manifestly Dickensian⁸²; that is, in addition to being filled, as John Sutherland notes, with “[v]arious Dickensian look-alikes,” “Dickens’s novel, and his fiction generally, echo disconcertingly through Ackroyd’s” (19). Telling a story of intertwined Londoners, the novel develops a more modish thesis centred on the “idea of cultural irrecoverability” (Sutherland 19). In consecutive chapters, Part One introduces a cast of profoundly alienated figures who, through a series of events of foregrounded coincidence, become enmeshed in one another’s actions. What is different from Dickens, though, is the degree of ontological insecurity apparent in the novel’s characters; often as not any given character can at any given time transform from being seemingly realist (i.e., psychologically sound, historically grounded) to being agents of comedy, enacting farcical plot elements arbitrarily and inconsistently. Adding to the sense of identity instability, London, the cultural well-spring as well as birthplace for its inhabitants, is itself stratified with ambiguous historical signifiers, of both “genuine” and “simulated” kinds. For every time a character announces in a quasi-philosophical tone, “There’s a lot of history around here” (32), there is some kind of illustration that the meaning of “lot of history” is so vague and subjective as to be entirely elusive. Time and again, ostensibly self-evident markers of historical verities are displayed as anything but secure—as re-formed, twisted, falsified and re-written as they are, the matter of origin(al) and copy/simulation is perpetually pushed to the forefront. The Edwardian Eatery, for instance, is described as exhibiting a “false nostalgia” (16) as

⁸²**OED:** “[R]esembling or reminiscent of the situations, poor social conditions, or comically repulsive characters described in Dickens’s work.”

though it had been designed as a set for an American television series. Another pub, “like a waiting room in some forgotten railway station” employs a woman “dressed in an approximation to Victorian costume” who sings a “fake Victorian tune” (68). Or else, more pointedly, no one has any actual knowledge of the past, only vague recollection of partially-remembered history book images: characters repeatedly make inquiries that serve to relate their lack of historical awareness. When Audrey Skelton asks, for instance, “All those boys begging down by the station—wasn’t that a Victorian thing, too, all that?” (55), her query is generic rather than idiosyncratic. At that same restaurant where Audrey makes her speculation, a historian examines photographs of street fairs and urchins and considers writing an essay on Debord’s Society of the Spectacle—

A kind of hopelessness hovers in the air as pervasively as the smell of the prison itself, that sense of futility that arises from an oppressive environment which cannot now be altered or destroyed. Such places will always exist—once the Marshalsea, now here. Only a small time—an historical moment—separated the two; and they represented the same appalling waste of human life. Nothing had really changed in a society which had such places. (57)

While the academic’s authoritative hypothesizing stands in contrast to Audrey’s uncertainty, neither character has textual advantage over the other. Finally, even the erstwhile ur-text of the novel, Little Dorritt (and perhaps the ur-author too), refuses to gel. While Dickens’s novel/character is referred to as “little porridge,” “little forehead” and “little what?,” Dickens and the significance of his novel are bandied about: between a Derridean Cambridge academic and a socialist one, a quixotic screenwriter, a pragmatic producer and an indecisive filmmaker (not to mention Audrey’s possession), no one definitive representation is accepted or foregrounded. Brought together, the single line of similarity would be difference: what people see in Little Dorritt and Charles Dickens is what they want to see.

Character identity, too, remains incomplete and mobile, even as each one is introduced in the standard realist fashion—given a name and body shape, a history and a purpose. The characters express a desire for fixity and lament impermanence even as they

slip and slide, ontologically speaking. The dwarf proprietor of an amusement arcade microcosm called Fun City, "Little" Arthur Feather, who stopped growing when he was eight, is marked as a damaged man: a "carapace had formed between him and the world of ordinary feeling" (5), and he has fallen into a world dominated by fantasy and illusion. In the opening chapter, Feather receives a letter of lease termination which furthers his mental decline. Audrey Skelton ("Aud") is one of the game players at Little Arthur's amusement arcade. A switchboard-operator "mystery" (8) and chronic fantasizer who later comes to believe she is possessed by Little Dorritt, she causes disorder with her Dorritt-directed actions. Skelton's boyfriend, Timothy Coleman ("Tim"), plays games alongside her at Fun City. He is portrayed as easily confused and at a perpetual loss for words. In an early scene with Little Arthur and Aud, Tim responds to Arthur with a typical uncertainty that comments metatextually on his own status: "Tim stared at Arthur as he had stared at the television: he did not know whether this was real, or something made up, a game. It was something in between, something he did not have the words for" (10). Timothy Coleman meets the "confidence trickster" (32) Rowan Phillips in the neighbourhood of the former Marshalsea. A Canadian-born lecturer of English literature teaching at Cambridge ("the whole place resembled a film set which had been left standing too long" (86)), Phillips adopts accents and aspects of personality to further his own goal, which is, he says, "freedom" (20), particularly of a homosexual sort. As the novel opens Phillips, having already written a literary thriller and a biography of Wilkie Collins, is researching a critical study of Dickens "for the 1980s" (19) as his publisher recommends. His personality, initially introduced as "trying to escape" (19), is protean; the scholar is "perpetually dissatisfied and ill at ease, continually wanting to escape from whatever bonds or responsibilities that held him" (125). Spenser Spender ("Shrimpy," "Little Shrimp"), the nominal centre of the story, is a director who had previously "made a film about an inmate, and how his freedom had destroyed him" (11). He returns to a place where he spent his youth in order to "find the key to a mystery, although he did not know what the mystery

was" (11); for him the place "seems dead" and "threatening," a situation which also "seemed to be the condition of the world" (11). Despite the dark portent, he ends up inspired to make a film version of Little Dorritt; his wife Laetitia ("Lettuce," "Letty," "Lettuce Leaf") is tired of her marriage and begins an affair with the theatrical Andrew Christopher. Finally, a spate of minor characters reinforce dominant themes established early in the novel. A unnamed red-haired vagrant, Pally (a downtrodden and later incarcerated former friend of Spender) and an angry group of homeless Londoners are suggestive of the disparities of historical progress, while the manic fluidity of Iain St. John Smart, Job Penstone and Sir Frederick Lustlambert further the comic ludicrousness endemic to the plot.

At the beginning of "Part Two," set six weeks into the filming of Little Dorritt, the characters have become fully interwoven. Little Arthur plots revenge in the very same jail that Spender has altered for filming (and which is meant to represent Dorritt's Marshalsea). While Coleman has become Phillips' lover, their relationship is confounded by the identity uncertainty of each; Phillips is writing the screenplay for Spender's film and adapting "Cockney" phrases and expressions from Coleman; Audrey/Dorritt, protective of her penitentiary (supposed) former home obtains information from Coleman about the filming schedule. Exhausted by the "emptiness and the pointlessness" (119) of her life, and seeing "the whole city was undergoing some fundamental deterioration which marked its inhabitants like the evidence of some ugly disease" (135), Laetitia attempts suicide. In response to his wife's despair, Spender imagines a fresh narrative: "two adults, redeemed by the power of love, a new life" (140). The "new start," he imagines, will resolve all conflicts: "They would wipe out the past" (141). What is more, as mirroring the design of the film (which made "cinematic virtue out of necessity by emphasizing the theatrical, almost caricatured, elements of the [novel's] plot" (106), plot elements of The Great Fire of London accelerate toward a wildly theatrical and violent conclusion: as the "general conflagration" (164) burns through London over two days, as Spender dies trying to save

a creation about which he had a day earlier felt disgust at its “hollowness and smallness” (159) and as Little Arthur releases his fellow inmates when the prison’s “system failed” (169), there is a bifurcated vision presented. The penultimate chapter promotes a near-mythic understanding of “what came to be known as the Great Fire” (165)—

It destroyed much that was false and ugly, and much that was splendid and beautiful. Some longed for it to burn everything, but for others a new and disquieting sense of impermanence entered their lives. Eventually, legends were to grow around it. It was popularly believed to have been a visitation, a prophecy of yet more terrible things to come. (165)

In contrast, the final chapter, its four pages largely a description of Arthur’s victory over “the system,” concludes on an ambiguous note: “This is not a true story, but certain things follow from other things. And so it was on that Sunday afternoon, that same Sunday when Spenser Spender had died in the Great Fire caused by Audrey, Little Arthur set the prisoners free” (169). Narrating the stuff of legends and a “not a true story,” The Great Fire of London’s suspensive vision of its own (story’s) status resonates with the themes of historical knowledge and cultural transmission it has raised throughout.

(b) Published seven years after Ackroyd’s debut novel, First Light hints from its title alone that it is concerned with quests for origins, historical and otherwise. Like The Great Fire of London, the novel features numerous considerations of missed connections, failures of certainty and associated existential quandaries about the place of human consciousness in the cosmos. The novel also shares a similarly Dickensian cast of characters whose soon-to-be interacting dispositions vary between troubled and introspective and exuberantly comic. Its more evident thematic focus is, however, knowledge, certainty and meaning. The eighty-chaptered First Light opens with “The Uncertainty Principle,” in which the metaphysics-focussed astronomer Damian Fall observes stars at an observatory in Holblack Moor and draws from them dire conclusions about existence. He wonders about the “[o]ther fields of force. Black holes. Patches of darkness. Uncertainties” (5) in the universe, and notes, “Once this region was thought to form the outline of the face in the constellation of Taurus . . . [b]ut the Pleiades contains

three hundred stars in no real pattern. Just burning, being destroyed, rushing outward" (4). If the novel opens with queries that prompt a sense of abandonment, its closing chapter, "The Uncertainty Principle," suggests the likelihood of security and continuity: "But they felt no fear. It was as they had always been told. No one is ever dead, and at this moment of communion a deep sigh arose from the earth and travelled upward to the stars" (325). Between the two extremes stand numerous 'compromise' possibilities of intermingling life and death forces.

Plot activity and thematic concerns at the beginning of First Light are centred on an ancient tumulus, a "sacred place" (7) which a forest fire has revealed in the Pilgrim Valley, Dorset. Mark Clare, the senior archeologist on the site and a long-time resident of Lyme Regis (residing in a flat above an antique shop in a historically palimpsestic town marked by Augustan house-fronts, Victorian archways and Georgian assembly rooms (25)), intuitively feels that his own investigation will result in the destruction of something sacred. Like Damian Fall, his mind returns frequently to the matter of origins; his range of thought runs from recollections from his childhood and the beginnings of his relationship with his disabled wife, the "brooding, melancholy, afraid" (31) Kathleen, to more intellectual puzzles related to the tumulus he is unearthing. His training as a scientist prompts him to explain to his fellows on the dig, the squabbling and arch Owen Chard, Julian Hill and Martha Temple, "Our goals include total recovery, objective interpretation and comprehensive explanation" (37), even as he feels that such comforting certainties are illusory. Clare's supervisor on the dig is Evangeline Tupper, a senior civil servant in the Department of the Environment. Introduced as a middle-aged woman with bleached hair, "short and somewhat narrow, with a thin mouth and sharp nose which made her look like a parrot onto whose face make-up had been hurled with great force, leaving it wide-eyed and bewildered" (9-10), Tupper's extravagant comic gestures and improbability on the site generate much comic incongruity. Though her public performance at the tumulus is always notable for being emphatic, histrionic and exaggerated, her private thoughts suggest another identity. At

home in London visiting her father, readers hear her pensive internal monologue: "So there was nothing whatever to say. I am so far away, she thought. So far away from myself" (23). Incongruous in a likewise manner, "a pair of large garden gnomes sprung suddenly to life" (20), the long-term residents of the Pilgrim Valley enigmatic Farmer Mint and his son Boy Mint, stand in secret opposition to the archeological team. Despite the profound "mission" of his family, Farmer Mint ("nothing could disguise the amount of hair which seemed to be sprouting from all over his face an head—hair struggling to emerge from beneath the cap, hair sprouting in torrents from his neck, hair writhing out of his ears, hair climbing from his eyebrows to his forehead" (19)) and his "almost completely hairless" (19) son supply comedy with their appearance and their nonsense utterances. The final set of figures to be introduced are Joey and Floey Hanover. Joey, formerly known as Joey Chuckles, is a retired stand-up comic who "seemed to carry with him the garish and sentimental aura of the [music] halls" (68). He is also an orphan haunted by a memory of his childhood. When he tells his wife, a woman already notorious for her insistent malapropisms, "I'm here for the sake of my days gone by. I'm a thing of the past, old dear" (64), he obviously signals his commitment a quest for an origin that he expects will provide secure historical grounding for his identity.

Like The Great Fire of London, First Light has a full company of marginal figures whose significance is tied to their comic function. In addition to the comedy-troupe sarcasm of Clare's archeological team, the ongoing antics of Evangeline Tupper and Floey Hanover's chronic—yet perfectly timed—malapropisms, there is also a small army of walk-on figures who provide levity, and consistently work to undercut the novel's sober thematic considerations of time, history and meaning. Nick-named "Baby Doll" by her romantic partner Evangeline Tupper (and "Tiger Skin" by her school friend, Floey Hanover), the "byword for masculinity" (88) Hermione Crisp, is a tough, hunting-clothes wearing woman who goes along with Tupper's insistence that she is the quintessence of hapless femininity. Meanwhile, effeminate Augustine Fraicheur ("Put me near a stage and I

yearn for tights" (70)) is a neighbour of the Clares and plans to put on a production of T.S. Eliot's The Family Reunion as a "very camp" (151) comedy. Lola Trout, an elderly member of the Mint family, is remarkable for her outlandish appearance and propensity for expletives. Various religious enthusiasts, moreover, from a woman named Corona who earnestly-intones, "Everything is female. Female is everything" (213) to an unnamed male who tells Evangeline, "In the beginning there is an end. In the end there is a beginning" (220), are equally positioned as figures of fun; while their sincere if unconventional spirituality distinctly echoes other thematic developments in First Light—and in fact could be said to mimic the thoughtful questions with parodic effect—it more properly functions as an additional layer of ridiculous slapstick: in the midst of a sober contemplation about the nature of time and history vis à vis human consciousness, figures determinedly oblivious to the gloomy weather of their environment clown and perform with abandon. When, over the two chapters "Corona" and "The Travellers," Evangeline Tupper interacts with the religious groups who have settled in the Pilgrim Valley, First Light resembles nothing so much as farce, defined by the OED as "a comic dramatic work using buffoonery and horseplay and often including characterization and improbable situations."

In much the same manner as The Great Fire of London, two conventionally incongruous elements are fused in First Light. The predominant element, expressed over and again throughout the text, is focused on knowability (of the individual self, of others, of the past), community, origins, meaningfulness, continuance and certainty. An undercurrent of figures, images and themes invoking chaos, darkness, solitude, emptiness and death form the opposing conditions in Ackroyd's Manichean schema. The suicide of Mark Clare's handicapped wife and Damian Fall's succumbing to madness mark the strength of that undercurrent, even as the temporary reprieve from it that comes in a minute segment of the novel's penultimate chapter insinuates that all is not lost: "But [the gathered cast of characters] felt no fear. It was as they had always been told. No one is ever dead, and at this moment of communion a deep sigh arose from the earth and travelled upward to

the stars" (325). What may be unexpected, then, considering the gravity of the themes outlined so far, is that First Light frequently incorporates broadly farcical structures, even to the point of concluding with comical hide-and-seek antics involving the ancient and sacred "'Merlin figure'" mummy. What effect that comic irruption—a characteristic element of Ackroyd's fiction—produces is interrogated closely in the following pages.

ii. Critical Reception

Any uniformity of criticism about The Great Fire of London and First Light is oddly situated: critics are in general divided in their evaluation of the novels, crediting Ackroyd with such desirable qualities as "intelligence," "talent" and "skill," while regretting (to varying degrees) his "cleverness," "irreverence" and "inconsistency." Criticism—as a rule, then, relies on such implicit, if familiar and literally old-fashioned, norms as uniformity, symmetry, consistency and moderation.⁸³ There is the unexpected shared resolve that so long as novelists are working in a tradition of realism, they really should stay true to that tradition's touchstones if they expect to receive warm critical embrace. In The Novel Today, Allan Massie states a version of this sentiment most baldly (and, perhaps, with a most remarkable unselfconsciousness) when he asserts a possible limitation of Ackroyd's otherwise fine fiction. Still, Massie's complaint—that Ackroyd's "work is marked by an extreme artificiality . . . always at some remove from life"—begs only obvious, examination-like questions: "What sort of writing is less artificial than Ackroyd's, and why?" or "When is fiction ever not at some remove from life, and how can that distance be measured?" Given the book's brevity and his own critical self-assurance, Massie never takes time to examine the questions his own writing (is it artificial?) prompts. Nevertheless, his critical position stands out as a kind of caricature replica of much of the critical response to The Great Fire of London and First Light: it is most comfortable when

⁸³After all, Alexander Pope was already harkening back to his Roman forebears when he discussed like notions in An Essay on Criticism (1711).

the novels conform to conventional notions of what transforms a novel into “great” literature.

(a) The Great Fire of London has received scant critical attention. Upon its publication it was noticed in British print media exclusively; what little scholarship has been expended upon it has also relegated it to “minor” status. Newspaper reviews in England expressed, moreover, only qualified affirmation for the novel: their consensus might be best summarized by the ambiguity of the word “promising.” Though The Great Fire of London was reviewed favourably upon publication for its versatility, precision and acuity, some, like John Sutherland in the London Review of Books, were concerned that Ackroyd “seems reluctant to surmount his favourite level of bitchy caricature and off-hand smartness” (21). Francis King in the Spectator admired the “descriptive economy” of Ackroyd’s “tidily succinct novel,” but felt it “suffers from a mysterious failure of realisation”:

This ability to ‘realise’—to create a world, however gimcrack and cockeyed, that the reader instantly accepts as a paradigm of the real one—is one which many unintelligent writers command with ease and many intelligent ones with difficulty; and Mr Ackroyd, most intelligent of writers, sometimes finds it slipping from him. (20)

Galen Strawson, in his review for the TLS, considers The Great Fire of London an amusing “tissue of allusion,” yet notes the novel’s “distracted but attentive manner”; Strawson judges it “lacks a strong design” and is “curiously perfunctory in its details”(105). Interestingly, the thematic preoccupation with history and origins was observed without much comment, apparently deemed apropos for a contemporary novel.

Ackroyd’s debut novel fares less well under the scholarly gaze. For instance, John Peck’s English Studies article, “The Novels of Peter Ackroyd,” does not discuss Ackroyd’s first novel in much detail. In his brief analysis of First Light, however, Peck includes a parenthetical aside: “(There are two earlier novels, The Great Fire of London . . . and The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde, but there seems little point in considering them here as neither adds much to a sense of the questions prompted by the four subsequent

novels)” (443). Massie’s reduction of the novel to “a twentieth-century gloss on Dickens” (52) is so vague as to be meaningless. Likewise, William Pritchard’s consideration of First Light refers to The Great Fire of London as “his first and weakest effort” (39) without elucidating the nature of that weakness. Only Susana Onega’s discussion avoids such dismissive critical relegation. She states Ackroyd’s novel reflects the continuance of what she argues is the characteristic Ackroyd theme: “the feeling of ‘transhistorical connectedness’” (30) juxtaposed to a notion of the novel as free play—

To sum up, in The Great Fire of London Ackroyd writes his own overtly literary and fragmentary version of Little Dorritt and attempts to unify it, presenting London as a transhistorical mythical city gathering together the wisdom of the English race at large. Incapable, however, of making the crucial act of faith in a transcendental Absolute Logos, Ackroyd, in a characteristic metafictional twist, eventually destroys the painfully built illusion of transcendence, revealing the textual nature of the mythical London just created, thus condemning himself with his characters to the isolation and seclusion of the ‘prison house of language.’ (31)

Admittedly synoptic (and in pursuit of a singular critical line), Onega does not address the incursions of the comic or the faults exposed by other critics—who found in The Great Fire of London a generally encouraging debut marred by a cavalier attitude, inconsistency and, more damaging to them, a tendency toward comic caricature, lack of respect and irreverence toward character-building or “realisation.”

(b) First Light, published following the prize-winning, best-selling successes of Hawksmoor and Chatterton, was much more widely reviewed than The Great Fire of London.⁸⁴ Never the less it shares with that earliest work divided criticism. The novel’s admixture of farcical slapstick and realist sobriety, in fact, provoked a widespread evaluation that doubles as a kind of metacommentary about what is and what is not acceptable to “the critical community” in a given novel. Through this—dispersed, imaginary—dialogic fray emerges general critical expression of puzzlement, and even irritation, about the perceived-as-invalid incongruity of Ackroyd’s text. In The New

⁸⁴No reviews of Ackroyd’s first novel, for example, appeared in North American publications, while First Light was reviewed in the major print media sources, including Time and Newsweek.

Republic William Pritchard finds in Ackroyd a writer “playfully at odds with traditional realistic narrative” (39). Subtly underscoring what he sees as Ackroyd’s endemic histrionics, he admires “a performance of much skill and ingenuity” (39), and finally enjoys Ackroyd’s “highly intelligent entertainments” (41). Pritchard’s enjoyment is qualified, however. He admonishes Ackroyd for his “portentous style,” which leads to “the reader’s mind glazing over” (40) and dislikes it when “the novel threatens to gather into wisdom-like formulations” (40). He remains equivocal with regard to Ackroyd’s persistent foregrounding of intertextuality, saying it is “pleasing,” yet complains, “there are moments when the new book feels too clever, too patently made-up, too knowing about how fictions aren’t life, words not truth, nor the signifier twinned unshakably to a signified” (41). In the New York Times Book Review, John Crowley complains that there is too much that is “ready-made,” “unexamined” and “facetious” (16) about the novel: “in the weightier or more tragic parts, the slapdash match of fictional and common reality is enough to untether the whole enterprise” (16). Michael Wood in the London Review of Books comments that while the novel features “plenty of complication and suspense, and a fine climax,” its “haziness,” and “jerky and predictable” characterization that readily leads to “caricature” (19) are irksome. After establishing the new literary maxim that “star gazing produces notoriously bad prose,” Amanda Mitchison’s New Statesman review then asserts that First Light is “no exception” (36) to her own rule. Mitchison ultimately concludes that “it is hard not to suspect that First Light, with its gasping lyricism and neat metaphysical ending, is not simply a bad wilful joke on the reader” (36). Claude Rawson coins the term “Ackroydland” in his TLS review. In that place, Rawson writes, books entice people and direct them to ruination. Books in this case are those of Hardy in particular, which Rawson sees “echo[ing]” throughout Ackroyd’s “allusive” and “literary” act of pastiche (453). Rawson’s view emphasizes the novel’s “comic suspense,” “inventive exuberance” and “considerable pathos” (453). By Rawson’s account Ackroyd (a “high-profile raconteur”) is “probably the funniest reporter of both male and female camp now in business” (453). But

his reportage, reflecting "an essentially authorial idiom of loony and unpredictable artifice," becomes problematic. Though "accurate and funny in a knowing way" it nonetheless "suggests collector's items wittily displayed in the verbal equivalent of a glass case" (453). Taken together, the criticism, which casually (or unselfconsciously) elides the distinct between author and text, constructs a picture of Ackroyd as a writer who has a brilliant if undisciplined or wayward intelligence. In addition, there is little consensus about the source of the problem. The novel's comedy, to cite only one example, is regarded variously as out of place, facile, insensitive and funny.

Two academic critics take diverging stances on First Light. Onega, consistently on the trail of a singular reading of Ackroyd, explicates the novel with scant regard for its oft-cited jumble of elements. For her, First Light has a strictly controlled, almost mathematically pure, structure that in turn reflects its purity of theme. Onega situates the novel (set, she notes (1998 49) in tones ripe with portent, where Ackroyd once lived and vacationed) as providing further evidence of Ackroyd's ongoing concerns, particularly, "the same overriding concern with time, with the constructedness of reality and with the myth of origins" (49) that is present in all his novels. She plausibly contends that the three narratives lines and the character sets that belong to them are "obsessed with the myth of origins." She then explores them as three "complementary ontological levels" (50)—earth, land and sky. The schematic characters, moreover, conform to English types (Fall as mystic; Clare as empiricist; Hanover as comic) as described by Ackroyd in interviews. The modern-day quests echo from another millennia before: that of Old Barren One buried in the Pilgrim Valley, whose efforts, Onega emphasizes, resulted in a "unitary cosmos" wherein time stood still and good and evil were held in perfect balance. Onega focuses much of her account of the novel on Damian Fall, whom she sees as a modern-day counterpart of Old Barren One, and a man whose only solution to an age-old dilemma is "to accept Blake's contention that the human imagination has a transcendental capacity, that the human representations of reality are true" (53). Seeming to disregard or suppress her

own earlier-stated observation that Ackroyd produces complex work dense with “red herring allusions” (12), “meaningless linguistic patterns” (22) and “allusions that go nowhere” (12), Onega produces an all-encompassing hermeneutic for Ackroyd which apparently serves to explain the full significance of his novel:

It is only within this transcendental logic that the many metafictional and intertextual allusions that suffuse the novel acquire their true dimension: they are not realism-undermining mechanisms but, on the contrary, the very guarantee of the novel’s truthfulness and reality. (53)

Following her reading of the novel’s theme of myth and transcendence, Onega concludes her discussion with a seeming digression. She puzzlingly suggests that the novel’s “list of intertextual references could be extended ad infinitum, for First Light is a Borgesian Library of Babel, a derivative and self-conscious textual world peopled by cardboard characters, capable of dreaming themselves into immortality by virtue of Peter Ackroyd’s magus-like act of imaginative creation” (55). Until this sentence, Onega has discussed First Light as though it is a contemporary of William Golding’s The Inheritors, a realist account of prehistorical humanity suffused with mythopoeic flourishes. The sudden shift into “cardboard characters” and metafictional technique, while clearly referring to Onega’s own critical inscription of Ackroyd’s writerly tendencies, stands at odds with her position stated sentences before. And because she does not elaborate on her late-developed point, it is uncertain how—if at all—the two views intertwine. Onega, finally, does not remark on the comedy of the novel except to incorporate it into her system: she notes that the Mints, with their “clownishness and their inborn acting capacity,” are embodiments of the ““monopolylinguist””⁸⁵ [sic], something, she notes, “Ackroyd considers to be a specifically English sensibility” (54).

⁸⁵Onega is referring to “Confessions of a Monopolyloguist,” an interview with John Walsh in 1992. There, Ackroyd discusses the “English race” (5) and the “exclusively English” comic “monipolyloguist.” He defines his term as “one man doing several voices” (5)

In opposition to Onega but in line with many of the newspaper reviews of Ackroyd, Peck's survey of Ackroyd's fiction is generally ambivalent regarding its literary merit. Peck is largely dissatisfied with what he sees as a chronic "uneasy mixture" of elements, for "set against the representativeness of his work [i.e., its similarity to the novels of other contemporary writers] is its eccentric quality" (442). Employing unacknowledged critical norms, Peck detects "extremes" in the fiction which trouble him—the "experimentation of foreign fiction" next to "familiar literary history" as well as the juxtaposition of "the incongruous and the commonplace" (442). He mentions Martin Cropper's The Daily Telegraph's assessment of First Light as "ludicrous solemnity conspiring with grating frivolity" (447) as though to place his own evaluation within a larger community of like-minded critics.

Though Peck evidently approves of Ackroyd's "familiar" qualities and his not atypical contemporary authorial concerns (i.e., "[p]utting together an interest in the past and an interest in literature" (442)), he expresses less admiration for what he characterizes as an Ackroydism: "the veering between seriousness, even attempted profundity, and the most crass effects" (443). The result, in First Light: "a novel of journeying and discovery seems to be clashing with schoolboy smut" (443). He notes, further, that the "comic characters fail to fuse with the larger concerns of the novel"; he regards the novel as a "very uneasy mixture" and, later, "a complicated mess" (448). It is rather unexpected, then, when Peck ultimately modifies his stance, arguing instead that "uncertainty is the strength of First Light" (447). The suddenly subversive First Light becomes, *contra* Onega, a novel of quests for origins that "sabotages the pretences of the romantic quest," a topos Peck regards simply as "a male narrative form" in which "the man shrugs off the demands of domesticity and journeys in pursuit of an obsessional goal" (449). For Peck, the comic "use of women characters," in fact, has "the effect" of mocking "the pretensions of significance and significant pattern" (449). He does not consider male comic characters or comic plot structures. The digressions, untidiness, diffusion, fluctuations, sprawl,

overlappings and dissolution Peck detects, which had heretofore been regarded with suspicion, are now celebrated: “[w]e are teased by the possibility of meaning, but then everything dissolves” (449). There are, in short, no keys since it “seems far more likely that a game is being played around the very idea of interpretation” (449-50). If the novel “sways between the weightiness of myth and the vulgarity of crude comedy in an almost random manner” (450) and causes readers and critics to exercise control over the text by, say, drawing parallels with Thomas Hardy’s Two on a Tower, then it serves as a testament to readerly investment in conventions of novelistic interpretation. Peck concludes his essay with a double valorization of First Light. In stark opposition to the “comfort” he views as being offered by the versions of literary history exhibited in Hawksmoor, English Music and Chatterton, the very bleakness of First Light acts as a bracing tonic—

First Light presents characters lost in the modern world with nothing to sustain them except old myths and old stories. Repeatedly, we feel the gap between the pretensions of ‘significant’ journeys into the past and the reality of the world where sex has, for the majority of characters, dwindled into nothing more than a grotesque or dirty joke. The novel nags with its sense of the difficulty, perhaps the impossibility, of a productive or creative engagement with the present. Indeed, it is the one Ackroyd novel so far where the author really seems to challenge the value of the major props to his own existence both as a novelist and a biographer. (452)

Peck then appends his own conclusion with less grandiose critical insight: “The important point about First Light, however we might label the novel, is that it does push into new and disturbing areas” (450).

3. Camp Comedic Historicism⁸⁶

The world had been transformed into a pantomimic creation, but that did not mean it was any the less effective or any the less moving . . . This was the

⁸⁶Such characteristic comic modes as caricature, camp and farce pervade all of Ackroyd’s fiction. Indeed, a contention upon which this essay rests is that such modes perform structurally identical functions in all of the novels, though with varying intensities. Comic-relief characters—from the Sir Frederick Lustlamberts and Evangeline Tupperts discussed here to Harriet Scrope in Chatterton, Gertie Latimer in Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem and Preserved Cotton in Milton in America—persist in their antic behaviour with no apparent awareness that these tics stand in marked distinction to the proceedings that surround them.

kind of performance he had been giving all his life: strident, vivid, colourful, simplified beyond the range of 'character acting'.

It had been part of his skill as a comic to understand that everything had its own form, an inner truth or consistency which was not revealed to those who insisted on some distinction between the real and the unreal.

Peter Ackroyd, First Light

i. The Comedy Effect

If you test drive (as I did not so long ago) the term "comedic historicism" to friends during an impromptu serial telephone game of word-association, chances are the mate for the term—which only comes tentatively suggested following a pause and (sometimes) an exclamation about the incongruity of the juxtaposed words—will be something like A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum or The Life of Brian (or Cleopatra, that less intentionally funny but nonetheless laugh-inciting film starring Elizabeth Taylor and a cast of thousands). If these polled responses illustrate anything at all it is the commonplace associations that exist between the telling and writing of history and seriousness. Or, conversely (and re: Cleopatra), that if any narrative set in a remote past is presented or perceived through a comic frame, it does not necessarily exhibit an interest in discussing the chosen period as anything more than a colourful decoration—a past historic actuality, instantly transformed into what Fleishman derisively calls a "spectacular . . . in the Cecil B. DeMille style" (xvii) and which Jameson categorizes as "a set of dusty spectacles" (1993 75), provides very little indeed in the way of education. That uneasy pairing inherent to comic historicism, in short, diminishes what might be called (after Fleishman and McEwan) the adequacy of the representation, and so the pedagogical use-value of the term or practice. Seemingly by its very nature, then, the comic element is understood as disruptive⁸⁷ or inappropriate to the narrative's putative purpose. This point does not have

⁸⁷Hence comic relief. Abrams notes that comic interludes, "almost universal in Elizabethan tragedy," work generally to "alleviat[e] tension and add[] variety"; in "more carefully

the immediacy of late-breaking news. Nevertheless, the point of intersection or juxtaposition is important for our purposes here: if the 'natural' technique for the (fictional) representation of history is de facto realism what happens when the narrative that contains it also incorporates comedy? Does it then simply become mere facile spectacle or are there additional roles that it can be seen to play? (And, whether tacitly understood or explicitly theorized, the modus vivendi for historical fiction remains realism—verisimilitude is apparently achieved via serious realist intentions exclusively. Though modellers of the traditional historical novel form (from Lukács and Fleishman to Foley, Hutcheon and White) would no doubt find themselves at odds if they participated in a panel discussion about their shared interest, they do reach a kind of agreement about their assumption that seriousness (and not comedy) plays the lead role in the narrative form they delineate. Comedy is tantamount to mockery, and so becomes viewed as standing in direct opposition to the insight seriousness is thought to bring to the text.)

There is no arguing that comedy does not take a pivotal part in Peter Ackroyd's fiction. Like the persistent investigations of history and inheritance in the novels, comic tableaux are narrative traits that can be labelled "Ackroydian" without fuss. And to say that comedy merely mars the gravity of his historical inquiry or to complain that the incongruity of excessive comic element distracts from the fiction's central thrust may be to miss the point altogether. That comedy is simply there is not debatable; its form and function, however, requires some explication. Ackroyd himself has remarked that the true purpose of his novels is to "give people a bit a pleasure, a bit of slap and tickle" (McGrath 47). But upon further study, of course, slap and tickle, laughter, and that broad heading "the humorous" are rather more complex than they might initially appear. Even the most cursory study of comedy reveals a genre rich with (critically annotated) significance. In A Glossary of Literary Terms, Abrams defines "comic" as "any element in a work of literature,

wrought plays," however, such moments "are integrated with the plot, in a way that counterpoints and enhances the serious or tragic significance" (31).

whether a character, event, or utterance, which is designed to amuse or excite mirth in the reader or audience" (218). He lists Romantic Comedy, Satiric Comedy, Comedy of Manners (incorporating New Comedy, Old Comedy and Restoration Comedy) and Farce in his typology. It is possible, Abrams notes further, to distinguish "high" and "low" varieties within each category—the latter "has little or no intellectual appeal" while the former, as George Meredith claimed, "evokes 'intellectual laughter'" (30-31). Still other varieties abound—black comedy, absurdity, jokes, surreality, the ludicrous, wit, the ridiculous, parody, farce, slapstick, vaudeville, screwball, pantomime, wit, gallows humour, puns, irony. In short, the comic field is a large, variform one, for which, as Christopher Herbert contends in "Comedy: the World of Pleasure," scholarship "has failed to reach even the beginning of a consensus on [its] defining properties" (401). Though other, more detailed, studies of the general functioning of comedy supply further models of its psychology and sociology, their elaborations also act to proliferate comedy's significance. In The Thread of Laughter (1952), for example, Louis Kronenberger links comedy's pessimistic concern with human imperfection to cultural critique. Though Kronenberger views it as "a way of surveying life so that happy ending must prevail" and "a belief in the smallness that survives as against the greatness that is scarred or destroyed" (3), comedy's consistent focus is mishap and missed quotas: it is "based on misunderstanding" (8), a quintessentially human circumstance, by Kronenberger's reckoning. Yet comedy also criticizes "because it exposes human beings for what they are in contrast to what they profess to be" (5-6). And that is, according to Kronenberger's litany, petty, vain, small, fatuous, foolish, self-deluded, complacent and full of folly. And while Kronenberger speaks vaguely of comedy's liability to "changes in fashion and taste" (10), Mikhail Bakhtin (1965) in social historian mode charts a generalized historical shift between roughly Renaissance views of laughter and those developing in the seventeenth century. The former culture holds that laughter and hence comedy is "one of the essential forms of the truth concerning the world" (66) and is consequently replete with a "positive,

regenerating [and] creative meaning" (71). The same view was not held in later years, which Bakhtin designates as the time of "laughter's degradation" (101). Bakhtin's conjecture leads him to the advent of (European) rationalism, classicism and absolute monarchy, developments whose tenets state in effect that "the essential truth about the world and about man cannot be told in the language of laughter" (67). For Bakhtin, the intrinsic irreverence of humour—outlawed in "official spheres of ideology" (73) from early Christianity onward—is a considerable "folk" slap in the face to vitality-draining, rationalistic dominant culture. In contrast to Kronenberger's easygoing discussion and Bakhtin's socialist folk championing, Elder Olsen's The Theory of Comedy constructs—following an encyclopaedic survey of historic speculations about comedy, from Plato's "evil" and Aristotle's "species of the painlessly or harmlessly ugly or base" to Kant's "strained expectation reduced suddenly to nothing" and Freud's "suppressed infantilism" (6)—a psychological model, all the while noting that such related (ambiguous) words as "ridiculous," "serious" and "laughter"⁸⁸ function as a Pandora's Box for the

⁸⁸ On the ambiguity of laughter, for example, Olsen finds himself in a seemingly infinite proliferation of possibilities. "[L]aughter is only a symptom, and not a very reliable one," Olsen writes, summarizing the problem the symptom causes: "Laughter is not a single emotion; indeed, it is not an emotion at all. It is rather, as Spinoza says, a physical affliction of a certain kind; and it can proceed from all sorts of causes, most of which do not concern us: for instance, from external stimuli, such as tickling; from certain substances, noxious and otherwise, such as nitrous oxide, belladonna, atropine, amphetamines, and alcohol; from certain morbid physical conditions, such as encephalitis; from causes of a physical order, such as hysteria or madness; from a desire to dissimulate embarrassment, or to seem jovial, and so on; from contempt or malice and similarly unpleasant emotions, or the wish to signify these; from pleasure, mirth, and joy, or the anticipation of these, as well as symptomatic reactions to them" (10).

Scott Cutler Shershow, working the same field as Olsen, nonetheless manages to provide a clear-sighted reading of the modalities of the comic paradox. He draws a doubled history of comedy, one in which comedy is viewed as conservative and another parallel one that sees it as deeply subversive. Avoiding the pitfall of choice, Shershow then generalizes: "I believe it is in the nature of comedy to evoke these opposed interpretations of meaning and purpose" (30). These opposed responses exist because comedy reflects "the dilemmas of our social existence" (32): "Our comedies represent and reflect our duplicities, our intricate ways of naming ourselves. Human beings, like their comedies, are also self-divided, torn by oppositions of meaning and interpretation—between corruption and virtue, between the merely genteel and the truly noble, between a commitment to personal advantage and an unselfish devotion to the greatest good for the greatest number" (31–32).

details-obsessed academic mind. Olsen eventually comes to define comedy's objective as the "minimization of the claim of some particular thing to be taken seriously either by reducing that claim to absurdity, or by reducing it merely to the negligible in such a way as to produce pleasure by the very minimization" (23). Comedy relies on the "fulfillment or frustration of desire" (23) for its effect. It is likewise so in Northrop Frye (1957), whose seminal "morphology of literary symbolism" (vii), Anatomy of Criticism, produces an elaborate schema of comic modes, figures and "phases."⁸⁹ Whether discussing Old Comedy or New, Frye contends that the hallmarks of the forms are "integration of society" (43) and "the incorporation of the hero into a society that he naturally fits" (44), a development that involves "the theme of driving out the pharmakos from the point of view of society" (45). The comic trajectory, Frye notes, shares a structure with the rhetoric of jurisprudence:

The action of the comedy in moving from one social center to another is not unlike the action of a lawsuit, in which plaintiff and defendant construct different versions of the same situation, one finally being judged as real and the other as illusory. (166)

Dispensing with illusion and decay, comedy for Frye represents the replenishment of "the real," a movement that runs parallel with and is an allegory of the generational exchange of power: as the Father loses his vitality the Son gains it and modifies that energy for his own needs.

ii. Camp: c'est quoi ça?⁹⁰

⁸⁹The first (or "most ironic" (177)) phase, exemplified by Gay's The Beggar's Opera and Huxley's Crome Yellow celebrates the ascendancy of the comic society over convention, while the sixth, to which Huysmans's Against Nature corresponds, emphasizes the "collapse and disintegration of the comic society" (185).

⁹⁰ Since the publication of Camp Grounds, scholarship and commentary about camp has flourished; in Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject (1999), editor Fabio Cleto notes that critical writing on the subject currently exceeds 1000 items (xi). Cleto's and Moe Meyer's (1994) essay collections work to further politicize the functions of camp. Meyer—whose Introduction claims that camp is "queer" and so "indicates an ontological challenge to dominant labeling philosophies" (1)—gathers seven essays that complement and/or refute positions taken by the essays collected by Bergman. The collection's penultimate essay asserts what may be the least restrained of opinions about

To its opponents, postmodernism is synonymous with bad taste, blustering kitsch and the atrocious encroachment of camp.

Matei Calinescu (1987)

Englishmen are always supposed to be effeminate—well, a lot of them actually are. But effeminacy, or camp, if you want to call it that, is a definite part of the English tradition.

Peter Ackroyd (1988)

Because comedy is such a broad field it is not particularly illuminating to state that comedy in The Great Fire of London and First Light achieves and effects X or Y because “comedy” and its related effects can be viewed from so many positions. And while the option of applied criticism (a Fryeian or Bakhtinian hermeneutic) offers possibilities and has a certain appeal, I would like to turn here to camp, the comic mode that permeates Ackroyd’s novels with greatest vigour. If, as Rawson astutely observes in his review of First Light, Ackroyd is “probably the funniest reporter of both male and female camp now in business” (453), then fleshing out what he may mean becomes the first necessity; like

camp’s putative might. Margaret Thompson Drewal, observing Liberace and the Rockettes, concludes, “The hidden transcript contaminates and pollutes dominant discourse through the contagious power of metonymic conjunction. As a gay signifying practice Camp is by its very nature counterhegemonic; it confounds gender codes, overrules compulsory heterosexuality, and undermines the very foundations on which democratic capitalism was built” (177–178).

Strongly dismissive of what he contends is Bergman’s essentialism, Cleto gathers 26 essays that focus on politics and queer performativity (via Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick). Cleto concludes that camp is “provisional, performative and processual . . . and ends up being a queer (unstable, twisted, disorganic), nomadic, in(sub)stantial or ephemeral discursive architecture” (32). By Cleto’s reasoning, camp also shares traits with the carnivalesque as delineated by Bakhtin: “the two share hierarchy inversion, mocking paradoxicality, sexual punning and innuendos and—most significantly—a complex and multilayered power relationship between the dominant and the subordinate (or deviant), and finally the whole problem of how far a ‘licensed’ release can effectively be transgressive or subversive” (32).

Interestingly, neither Meyer nor Cleto include essays that specifically account for or address camp within literary texts, favouring instead its manifestations as live performance.

(And more locally, finally: Vancouver journalist Dave Watson’s dismissive regard suggests that not everyone is convinced of camp’s revolutionary counterhegemony. He writes: “Isn’t it odd how the word camping describes two such different activities? The most common meaning is ‘to wander off into the woods and live out an imitation of the lifestyle endured by our caveman ancestors’. The other definition involves men dressing up in gowns and flouncing about like divas or actresses” (33).)

virtually every term, “camp” has its own history as well as commentators with distinct interpretations. Camp, the word describing a style, a behaviour and a “fugitive sensibility” (Sontag 276), stems etymologically from the French camper, to pose or strike an attitude, and was given influential—if ambivalent—definition by Susan Sontag in 1964 as “a certain form of aestheticism” (277). Some associate it with cultural banality (Lyotard) or the *recherché*-rituals of marginalized groups, namely gay men and/or intellectuals. Matei Calinescu, for instance, momentarily considers “the curious camp sensibility” (230) in The Five Faces of Modernity (1987). With a rather hazy historiography Calinescu locates the birth place, time and parents of camp as “not long ago in intellectual (originally homosexual) circles in New York City”; then and there, apparently, “under the guise of ironic connoisseurship, [these groups could] freely indulge in the pleasures offered by the most awful kitsch” (230). For Calinescu camp is “hard, indeed impossible, to distinguish from kitsch” (230), and an ugly face of modernity which Calinescu programatically views with most unWildean sentiment, as “a specifically aesthetic form of lying” (229), the opposite of avant garde and something marking decline, decadence and cultural fatuousness: for him, camp/kitsch cannot be revolutionary because it refuses heroism: “by its very nature,” he claim, it is “incapable of taking the risk involved in any true avant-gardism” (231). Not only does he relegate camp to being something practised by largely irrelevant and insignificant cultural players, Calinescu also associates it with cowardice and weakness (and, implicitly, with femininity). Of Calinescu’s representation of modernity’s five faces, camp/kitsch has the honour of being the one exhibiting symptoms of moral stupor and intellectual vacuity.

More than two decades before Calinescu’s critical assurance, Susan Sontag opened “Notes on ‘Camp,’” her seminal 1964 Partisan Review essay, with a telling series of qualifying gestures and apologies:

Many things in the world have not been named; and many things, even if they have been named, have never been described. One of these is the sensibility—unmistakably modern, a variant of sophistication, but hardly identical with it—that goes by the cult name of “Camp.” (275)

Sontag positions herself as an observer drawn to and yet “strongly offended by” this sensibility whose “essence” is the “love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration” (275). She confides that she is seeking self-edification, and assures her readers of her appropriate guidance skills: since “no one who wholeheartedly shares in a sensibility can analyze it,” Sontag’s “deep sympathy” tempered by “revulsion” (276) apparently allows for neutral if not objective description. Partially eschewing her own tradition of critical solemnity, Sontag fills her essay with fifty eight notes that raise points ranging from camp’s history to camp iconography. Her “Notes” pertaining to my discussion of Ackroydian camp follow below—

1. Camp is a certain mode of aestheticism the way of Camp, is not in terms of beauty, but in terms of artifice, of stylization. (277)
2. It goes without saying that the Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized—or at least apolitical. (277)
3. Not only is there a Camp vision Camp is as well a quality discoverable in objects and the behavior of persons. (277)
5. Camp art is often decorative art, emphasizing texture, sensual surface, and style at the expense of content. (278)
10. Camp sees everything in question marks It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater. (280)
17. To camp is a mode of seduction—one which employs flamboyant mannerisms susceptible to double interpretation; gestures full of duplicity, with witty double meaning for cognoscenti and another, more impersonal, for outsiders. (281)
25. The hallmark of Camp is extravagance. (283)
26. Camp is art that proposes itself seriously, but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is “too much.” (284)
36. And third among the great creative sensibilities is Camp: the sensibility of failed seriousness, of the theatricalization of experience. Camp refuses both the harmonies of traditional seriousness, and the risks of fully identifying with extreme states of feeling. (287)
41. The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious. (288)
44. Camp proposes a comic vision of the world. But not a bitter or polemical comedy. If tragedy is an experience of hyper-involvement, comedy is an experience of underinvolvement, of detachment. (288)
52. Camp is a solvent of morality. It neutralizes moral indignation, sponsors playfulness. (290)
55. Camp taste is, above all, a mode of enjoyment, of appreciation—not judgment. Camp is generous. It wants to enjoy. It only seems like malice, cynicism. (291)

Despite the seeming celebratory tone, Sontag's explication is hinged on the "revulsion" she foregrounds at the opening of her essay; it is as though her essay enacts an allegorical journey, the tale of a priest steeped in an ascetic tradition who is yet drawn to (investigating) the frivolous irreverence of an exotic cult. With a technique which recalls but predates Hassan's index of modern/postmodern distinctions, Sontag deploys a series of binary terms—artifice/reality, surface/content, extravagance/temperance, duplicity/singularity, extremity/moderacy—in order to formally name, hesitantly celebrate, politically restrict and critically contain a subcultural sensibility.

Since its publication "Notes" has come under fire from a variety of critics,⁹¹ most often because of Sontag's statement (see her Note 2) about camp's alleged apoliticality, and, particularly, for aspects of her Note 52: "Homosexuals have pinned their integration into society on promoting the aesthetic sense" (290). Camp Grounds, a collection of essays that reflects prismatically on Sontag's essay, for the most part channels its collective energy into asserting the political weight of campiness—as gender subversion, as a parodic critique of the cultural norms inherent in the concept of "seriousness" (whether in life or art), as a strategy of coping; in short, as Scott Long claims, a "moral activity" (78). Critics have not only taken Sontag to task, but resituated what camp connotes. For example, after tying camp to Bakhtin's delineation of the carnivalesque, Bergman contends that camp is the "voice of survival and continuity in a community that needs to be reminded that it possesses both" (107). Long's polemical essay claims it as both a gay male private code "uniting a small company of the alienated or excluded or alone" (90) and a means by which

⁹¹For instance, D.A. Miller's lengthy review of Sontag's AIDS and Its Metaphors, "Sontag's Urbanity," charts what he sees as a disturbing homophobic trend in Sontag's writing that stretches back to her essay on camp. Marcie Frank's "The Critic as Performance Artist" interrogates Sontag's understanding of the critical act. Pamela Robertson in "'The Kinda Comedy that Imitates Me': Mae West's Identification with the Feminist Camp" engages in a provocative critique of the discourse about camp which, she says, takes for granted that "the only authentic form of camp is gay and generally misogynist" (156). Such an assumption "reifies both camp and gay male taste"; Robertson states her feminist goal is to "de-essentialize the link between gay men and camp" and to "underline camp's potential for asserting the overlapping interests of gay men and women, lesbian and straight" (156).

the camp individual “defuses by parody the devices of oppression” (79). For him, a camp occurrence “separates the beholder in a vertiginous moment from the whole encrusted body of cultural dictates and values” (79). Jack Babuscio predicates camp in a nexus of cultural disparity where, as he succinctly describes it, “heterosexuality = normal, natural, healthy behavior; homosexuality = abnormal, unnatural, sick behavior” (20). His typology of camp’s modalities lists “irony, aestheticism, theatricality [and] humor” (20) as its fundamental anchors, and wide-ranging critique of “cultural assumptions” (35) as its raison d’être. Like Babuscio, sociologist Esther Newton charts the foundations of camp—a “pre- or protopolitical phenomenon” (53) and “humour system” (53) that “signifies a relationship between things, people, and activities or qualities, and homosexuality” (46)—as being “incongruity, theatricality, and humour” (46) as well as being practices utilized by individuals with “stigmatized identity” (51). She notes with some ambivalence that though camp’s frequent hostility and sarcasm undercuts the “sting” of dominant culture, it may also be an ineffectual response. She states, “It is clear to me now how camp undercuts rage and therefore rebellion by ridiculing seriousness and concentrated bitterness,” but observes that as protopolitical its users agree with “the oppressors’ definition of who he is” (53). The sole contrary voice in Bergman’s essay collection, Andrew Ross examines the history of camp, and draws an important distinction in its significance before and after “gay liberation” in 1969. He then places this sensitive-to-the-historical-change “operation of taste,” a “story of unequal and uneven development” (55), in an unusual dialectic with “official culture” (64). On the one hand, Ross connects camp to dubious enterprise, as something that embraces the “throwaway world of immediacy created by the mass culture industries” (55) with an unselfconscious, apolitical vigour. Moreover, its very structure mimics the cultural ideology it aims to subvert: Ross regrets that “camp’s excess of pleasure, finally, has very little to do with the (un)controlled hedonism of the consumer; it is the work of a producer of taste, and ‘taste’ is only possible through exclusion and depreciation” (69). On the other hand, Ross’s promoting of “camp intellectuals” as those

who “symbolized an important break with the style and legitimacy of the old liberal intellectual” (65), stands in counterpoint to his earlier negative evaluation. For Ross, these new intellectual types “maintain their parodic critique of the properly educated and responsibly situated intellectual who speaks with the requisite tone of moral authority and seriousness as the conscience and consciousness of a society as a whole (i.e., as the promoter of ruling interests)” (64). Furthermore—

Unlike the traditional intellectual, whose function is to legitimize the cultural power of a leading group, or the organic intellectual, who promotes the interests of the rising class, the marginal (or camp) intellectual expresses his impotence as the dominated fraction of a ruling bloc in order to remain there (i.e., as a nonthreatening presence) while he distances himself from the conventional morality and taste of the growing middle class. (64)

Ross asserts that camp’s “‘liberating’” of “objects and discourses of disdain” (67) performs an essentially (if troublingly marginal) transgressive role: camp “is the re-creation of surplus value from forgotten forms of labor” (66). The problem is that it apparently lends itself to appropriation by similar “commercialized” economic forms too readily—which Ross situates as politically inappropriate and therefore of dubious worth.

Calinescu sees camp as a weak, enervated face of modernism. And for Sontag it becomes exotic, a “certain mode of aestheticism” that is also “disengaged, depoliticized—or at least apolitical” (277), and is really remarkable insofar as its very “anti-serious” (288) nature seduces her sombre, temperate critical faculties. Opposed to readings that detect in camp either the taint of decadence or rarified exoticism, current academically hegemonic counter-readings largely promote the sensibility as one which challenges authority—in an admittedly dispersed manner and to a limited degree. A peculiarly theatrical and ironic subset of comedy, the performance and/or outlook of camp (which it must be noted is almost always regarded as a sociological and not a literary phenomenon) is regarded as a decidedly political agent that dispels the solidity of the signs of status quo cultural imperatives. As a comic form whose surface playfulness belies a critical purpose, camp serves to offer a uniquely positioned performative mode for its practitioners as well

as asserting kinds of broadly political gestures and effects whose hyperbolism works as a solvent of quotidian seriousness.

iii. Reading Camp in
First Light and The Great Fire of London

Rather than fall into a critical dead end by attempting to prove⁹² categorically that camp is or is not an integral element in Ackroyd novels, I would like to skirt the issue, and work from the position that camp has indeed—like comedy in general—an indelible presence in his fiction. Such a movement frees me to consider the more significant matter of the possible role or effects of camp in the novels, and how the camp affects the historicism that is also integral to the novels. A central impetus for this section, then, can be seen as answering the broad if blunt question, “It’s camp, so what?” Evident from the onset is that the foregoing debate about camp has indicated that narrowly funnelling the scholarly discourse that annotates—or, in fact, codifies—it as an attitude, performance and sensibility is risky business. After all, should it be simply a matter of choosing sides—stating with ideological confidence that camp is either strategically apolitical (Sontag), or else protopolitical (Newton), politically radical (Bergman, Long, Babuscio), radically contradictory (Ross) or politically ambiguous, an aspect of the “polymorphous monster of pseudoart,” something that aims to “cultivate[] bad taste . . . as a form of superior refinement” (Calinescu 230)—and then applying that perspective to a given circumstance? And even granting camp a singular definition or standard calibrated effect, that ancient debate about the distinction between art and life requires addressing here as well: how can the camp of a living person practiced or perceived by, for instance, a

⁹²Though it could be done, of course. For instance, both Newton and Babuscio offer definitions of camp. Newton’s elements—“Incongruity, theatricality, and humour” (46)—as well as Babuscio’s—“irony, aestheticism, theatricality [and] humor” (20)—are readily found in any of Ackroyd’s novels. Homosexuality, that other necessary ingredient, is more difficult to critically situate or discuss. Though Ackroyd is himself homosexual, it is a critical misstep to simply inscribe his novels as “homosexual” because they are written by one. Nevertheless (and not having solved that particular dilemma), it must be noted that the camp figures and gestures in the novels are frequently associated with characters identified as homosexual.

marginalized gay male New Yorker circa the mid-1970s and the appearance of odd narrative events and strange character exorbitance in novels published in Britain in the mid-1980s be discussed in the same breath? Thankfully, while these queries about camp appear to be hugely complicated puzzles, satisfactory solutions are not difficult to assemble. To the overstated mutual exclusivity—the this or that intrinsic to the definitions of camp listed above—there is of course the inclusive “and” option: since camp is something both performed and observed, and a “thing” that resides in objects and actions, voices and physical gestures, then it is only sensible to accept that it must have multiple significations, contingent on such variables as intent, context (historical, social, etc.), audience and so on. In short, camp can be apolitical and radical, protopolitical and ambivalent if not at the same time, then throughout its history as a cultural phenomenon; such may be especially the case in consideration of the heteroglossic dynamism of the novel form (Bakhtin 272). And the vexing art/life opposition is summarily collapsed with the introduction of discourse as a rhetorical trope. If I am the critic or audience or reader finding camp in home décor or the antics of a stranger, and I am also a writer describing camp characters and narrative in a novel called First Light, my position in either case is that of the interpreter of a discursive trait or event. My reading, in other words, is the intelligence that activates or animates the event; as far as I am concerned camp-in-life and camp-in-the-novel are essentially textual occurrences by nature, and so discernible and/or readable as near identical functions.

In addressing Ackroyd's novels, it is important to first note that camp operates in them as a general economy. Unlike Peck, who sees the comedic agenda specifically in terms of parody and implementation of a critique of the masculinist romantic quest narrative, or Onega, who equates comic First Light⁹³ figures with Ackroyd's authorial

⁹³Both critics express no interest in formulating a general *modus operandi* for comedy in Ackroyd's novels. Since Peck does not discuss The Great Fire of London at all (except to dismiss Ackroyd's debut novel as insignificant), it is impossible to say whether his comedy-as-parody-of-masculinist-narrative theory can be applied beyond First Light. Likewise, though Onega links the comic antics of (some) characters in First Light to Ackroyd's stated belief in essential English traits, she never extends her observation into a general rule about the function of comedy in Ackroyd's novels.

quest for a continuum of English 'racial' characteristics, I would like to posit camp as what Forster derisively called a "tendency" (Forster 8). Unlike Forster's straw-figure, the maligned "pseudo-scholar," avid to explain (away) the object of critical study by relating a "book to the history of its time, to events in the life of the author, to the events it describes, above all to some tendency" while remaining unwilling to "struggle with the writer" (8), my own tendency to see a tendency for camp in Ackroyd's novels is not in the aid of containment-by-explanation (though, of course, that is there) so much as it is a technique for considering elements of style in Ackroyd's fiction that criticism has found disconcerting or "weak" and which the interpretive frames offered by scholars of postmodernism in literature do not give sufficient coverage. That unusual entwinement of camp comic tendencies with conventionally historicist ones produces a characteristic narratorial quality in Ackroyd's fiction. As with the use of pastiche, this camp quality does not 'explain itself,' and so stands in need of explication: does camp modify the "lessons" of the historiographic narration, and to what effect?

While The Great Fire of London and First Light are the only novels under consideration in this chapter, camp—with its attendant effects—is locatable throughout Ackroyd's novelistic oeuvre, whether within the Puritan New World of Milton in America, the Victorian London of Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem or the ethereal realm (circa AD 3700) of The Plato Papers. Along with the general, too, there is a particular: typical of comedy in general, camp events interrupt and disrupt the non-camp aspects of the narrative, both drawing attention to themselves as ridiculous irruptions within putatively serious narrative linearity—and through this very act highlight and thereby effectively disable the illusion of solidity or "reality" of the non-camp narrative; camp figures, meanwhile, operate in the novel as figures of fun (those who incite readerly⁹⁴ laughter).

⁹⁴Interestingly, the camp performances are not noticed by fellow characters, as though they are merely mundane experiences. The improbable behaviour, expressions and situations are not remarked on within the story's place. For instance, in The Great Fire of London, serious Spenser Spender meets the hysteric identity of Sir Frederick Lustlambert with no comment; Chatterton's Charles Wychwood's visit with leopard-skin

Their antics serve to dismantle the solemnity of fellow characters and their associated “serious” goals—at a narrative level (and so for the reader and not the novel’s world) since these sets of characters/behaviours do not in fact significantly interrupt anything within the plot. If we are accustomed to thinking of a novel as teleological—a story with a set place to go—or as a vehicle for instruction and enlightenment à la Arnold (Fleishman, Hutcheon), then camp in general works to hamper the smooth journey to the end and the non-stop voyage to heightened consciousness. The very fabric of the fictional representation of a historical society (whether past, present or future) is altered by its contact with camp. While the McEwanian “adequate” quality of the representation (not to mention Fleishman’s “more or less accurate” requisite) is certainly called into question, what replaces it or what in effect it becomes has a less certain resolution. And situated as a not-very-adequate portrayal, the ultimate significance of the text—and the queries it has about history, inheritance and the transmission of culture—remains in a suspensive state. If the camp gesture generally acts as a solvent of the seriousness or hegemony of another, does it then act as self-annulment when it is genetic partners in the same text to philosophical considerations about history? Or, in the manner of comic relief, does it merely—and momentarily—suspend (but otherwise leave untouched or uninterrogated) these considerations, opening discrete instances of levity before the sombre intoning of seriousness resumes? The degree of intermingling between these two tendencies in Ackroyd’s fiction supports the contention that camp does not temporarily interrupt so much as permanently suspend the assured dominance of historical inquiry.

In both The Great Fire of London and First Light camp takes a significant role. On the level of narrative development or emplotment, camp functions at multiple strata in a near selfsame manner as postmodernism, at least as it has usually been delineated by its

leotard wearing Pat is followed by no self-reflection about the incongruity; and First Light’s sombre Mark Clare is never self-conscious about the utter strangeness of his interaction with Temple, Tupper, Mint and Fraicheur. Though the “straight” figures make no matter of their camp encounters, the narration positions the juxtapositions of two worlds (so to speak) so that the reader cannot fail to observe them.

proponents. The arsenal of critical terminology deployed by apologists of postmodernist art—whether the “deformation” and “indeterminacies” of Hassan, foregrounded “ontological seams” of McHale, or installation/subversion and use/abuse dialectic offered by Hutcheon—could be describing the effects of camp as well. For example, if The Great Fire of London is interpreted as a meditation on the idea of cultural (ir)recoverability, then the incursion of, for example, Audrey’s melodramatic possession by Little Dorrit—all of that frequent returning to what Sontag calls “surface and style at the expense of content” (278) and the constant juxtaposition of incongruous elements (angst followed by farce, suicide on the heels of ludicrous dialogue, and so on)—can only disrupt the philosophical musing on origins. In such a case a critic might locate an example of postmodern technique or camp irreverence. Likewise, the sombre, almost mournful discussion about personal alienation and cosmic meaninglessness that is the loudest, most oft-repeated refrain in the various investigations of various pasts in First Light, is undercut effectively and with giddy repetition by camp characters and situations in a way that directly recalls Sontag’s celebratory axiom: “The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious” (288).

Granting the incursion of camp and its anti-serious mien, the nature of the newly modified narrative becomes less certain. If in the case of a non-literary camp irruption it is evident to critics from Sontag to Newton that the gesture is parodic, intended to (or else working to) undermine the authority of the target (whether it is philosophic seriousness or masculinity filtered through heteronormativity), the camp comedy in a fictional narrative does not necessarily have as easily recognized a target or effect. It could be seen (as a variety of book reviewers have noted) as existing for its own sake—camp pour la camp—silly theatrical behaviours and characters dancing, as it were, to their own tune. In such a view, the camp antics are fundamentally apolitical, really only so much silliness. And in that view as well, it has no proper place: camp merely interferes with the reader taking nourishment from the meat of the narrative. Sugary camp is now a high-energy

distraction; the meaty meditation of history is where sustenance actually lays. And so following the lead of this perspective, evacuating camp comedy from First Light would result in a more satisfying work because it would then become a better sustained consideration of the subject at hand, namely the nature of the universe and the human place in it.

Yet the persistence of this comic form in Ackroyd's fiction might make holders of the stance sketched above come to regard Ackroyd as a writer who cannot leave well enough alone (and one who despite their criticism makes the same mistake over and again). The position produces a critical dead-end because it effectively denies camp any textual integrity: it implies that camp might be amusing in isolation but really serves no good in an otherwise thoughtful novel. Instead of this critical stance, it might be a benefit to adopt and modify McHale's notion of dominant for a moment. That way, we can see camp as a fluid element in Ackroyd's fiction, sometimes dominant and sometimes less so. Furthermore, it then always acts as a component of the narrative, and so interacts or collides with other parts and characteristics. One "serious" characteristic (for instance, the historicism of any Ackroyd novel—of The Great Fire of London or of First Light) then intermingles (or inaugurates dialogue) with camp; the temperament of one affects the other. In this view camp's modification to the novels' quasi-historiography and meditations about history can still said to be distracting or intrusive, but the difference is that the now-repositioned tendency is productive: camp actively interferes with the putatively serious aspects of the narrative, and so transforms them. The critically and culturally valorized sustained examination of history, historical knowledge and cultural inheritance loses degrees of its profundity when the camp intersects it. Strangely, for this reader, drastic plot actions associated with the serious philosophic quandaries delineated within the novels—suicide of Kathleen Clare and onslaught of Damian Fall's madness in First Light or the attempted suicide of Laetitia Spender and the fiery death of her husband in The Great Fire of London—comes close to being rebuffed by camp's philosophy of mirth. The sombre

intellectualism of these characters becomes essentially death-oriented, whereas for the most part the camp figures and their antics reject death in favour of . . . fun! Like Augustine Fraicheur moulding T.S. Eliot's 1939 drama The Family Reunion into a "very camp" (151) comedy, the dire consequentiality, the thanatos-centrism of that sort of historical awareness is partially⁹⁵ dissolved in the novels by camp's pronounced, vitality-embracing insouciance.

The dissolve-and-undermine profile of camp offered above will no doubt strike a chord for readers who recall the paradigm-defining terms for postmodernism as published by Hassan, Foster, Hutcheon, Lyotard and company. Yet if camp "principles" function at a textual level in much the same style as postmodernist ones, there are none the less important distinctions to discern. (And at this point it may be beneficial to recall McHale's formulation of postmodernism's exceptional conceptual open-endedness—"No doubt there 'is' no such 'thing' as postmodernism. Or at least there is no such thing if what one has in mind is some kind of identifiable object 'out there' in the world, localizable, bounded by a definite outline, open to inspection, possessing attributes about which we can all agree" (1992 1)—and his refusal of any "fixed essence" for that "discursive" and "constructed" culture system). True to the generic formulas of camp (in particular: the unique mixture of theatricality, homosexuality, incongruity and irony that Sontag, Newton and Babuscio enumerate), the style specific to Ackroyd incorporates any of the four in varying degree at differing moments in the narrative. The four markers distinguish camp from postmodernism if only because of their very specificity and limitations: unlike postmodernism (and the exceptionally broad array of styles and techniques critics have

⁹⁵This undermining is, I am arguing, an overall structural quality in the fiction. It of course varies from one book to the next, being more visible and (to some critics) obtrusive in resolutely serious novels like First Light and Milton in America than it is in a novel whose predominant tone remains broadly comic (for instance, Chatterton or The Great Fire of London). Though in the comic novels campy behaviour and characters do stand out, they also contribute to the narrative's general economy, which, as Frye might have claimed (with some irony in the case of Ackroyd), is directed toward vitality, the replenishment of the 'real' in society.

discerned in it) camp's purview remains restricted and, so to speak, local. Secondly, while those who have delineated the strategies of postmodern art are quick to emphasize the self-consciousness of its practice (and practitioners) in regard to its place in its own history, the same cannot be said of camp. Though it might be possible that camp expresses a high degree of self-consciousness, it is to a different degree than that expressed in postmodernism. If, for instance, "a postmodern novel" wants to draw attention to itself as an artifact toying with literary (and social) conventions, a camp performance—which has been historically performed for and within what Sontag calls a "subculture"—simultaneously directs its energy at asserting its inappropriate behaviour in the face of opposition and critiquing that same oppositional norm. With no "post" in its name, moreover, camp's ideological and historical impetus is not fixed to the epoch or aesthetic that preceded it, but rather hinged upon a long-intact and prevalent system of (gendered) disparity.

In light of camp's fundamental fluidity, it will come as no surprise that even my notations about its effects have their exceptions. First, it must be stated that while camp characters are normally identified as homosexual men and women (and if not, they are heterosexual women), it is difficult to assert from their positioning any sustained critique of gender norms or sexual disparity that latter-day scholars have frequently attributed to the camp moment or person. Less an urgent political "voice of survival and continuity in a community that needs to be reminded that it possesses both" (Bergman 107), Ackroydian camp may (despite the sexuality of both author and character) as Long claims, "defuse[] by parody the devices of oppression" (79)—providing that these "devices of oppression" are not heteronormative cultural edicts or patriarchal gender edicts.⁹⁶ Rather, camp here

⁹⁶To move back a step: there might be a case to make for an implicit critique of gender norms even within Ackroyd's camp. We might recall at this point that Peck detects in *First Light* a comic criticism of "the pretences of the romantic quest," a literary theme he identifies as "a male narrative form" (449). And we might also return to Calinescu's lack of regard for camp, "the atrocious encroachment of camp" (Calinescu and Fokkema 6), in fact, and how he associates it with weakness, moral cowardice—and effeminacy (i.e., a good modernist is a heroic modernist in his opinion). Finally, Sontag's series of camp

functions in close approximation to the contentious elements Sontag observed: it is “the sensibility of failed seriousness, of the theatricalization of experience. Camp refuses both the harmonies of traditional seriousness, and the risks of fully identifying with extreme states of feeling” (287). A text of realist sobriety, which usually serves as the bedrock of Ackroyd’s novels, and works in standard fashion to enable and cement the philosophical consideration of profound matters related to history and knowledge, becomes less serious (and so less “meaningful”) when it collides with campy comedy. The “failed” seriousness, as stated earlier, disables its own position and renders the questions it has raised if not moot then in any case not nearly so pressing.

The fluidity of camp in Ackroyd’s novel is inconstant, moreover, and so acts to qualify general models and typological statements a critic may propose about the trait’s functioning. Within a given novel or chapter, a camp character(istic) might instantly lose tell-tale emblems—and become something else again. When looking at the camp figures themselves, for instance, there is little constant about them but much that is protean. Their own unwillingness to stay true to a typology is something of an annoyance for the critic who is eager to make a case; some are camp, others quasi-camp and still others slip between one pole and another. However, since there are no set Rules for Camp, and that lawlessness is a chief characteristic of the form, it is quite possible to consider the shifting character ontology in relation to the “standard” camp function so far outlined. A good example of this generic character instability is Evangeline Tupper in First Light. (Similarly, in The Great Fire of London Rowan Phillips, homosexual and holder of a chameleon identity, plays much the same role.) Though her exterior—the unselfconscious irreverence, her extravagant vanity and laughable hubris (her very ridiculousness, in fact)—marks her

kinship ties—artifice, style, sensual surface, theatrics, duplicity, extravagance, flamboyance—are further linked to homosexual male sensibilities (with Wilde as a founding father), and then put in the service of playfulness and the dethroning of seriousness. If camp is de facto (male) effeminacy, then that makes the cultural institution called “seriousness” masculinist. Thus, the disavowal of the pursuit of seriousness is also the pointed rejection of a “male” trait.

as both a camp function and a camp figure in the text, she is shown as having an emotional interiority that works to connect her to the other “serious” characters in the novel like Mark Clare or Damian Fall. When, for instance, on repeated occasions she returns to London and visits with her father, Tupper bears no sign of her former flamboyance and theatricality; her camp self, in short, momentarily erodes to reveal a character with conventionally realist psychological depth and complexity. Outside the public purview, she is virtually unrecognizable, the comic bravado of a parrot-like, heavily made-up woman becomes merely a “small, thin woman” (24) aware of herself, as she thinks, being “[s]o far away from my origin” (22). Even Hermione, Tupper’s lover of two decades, “suspect[s] that the roles they played were a way of evading reality” (88). Tupper’s experience of and thoughts about her failed relationship with her father illustrated below bear no trace of the usual camp comic disjunction, and are instead (and contrary to Peck’s assertion about gender) thematically parallel with the generic searches for fulfillment-through-origins associated with *First Light*’s questing characters:

As soon as she walked away her mood of weary resignation returned. And it occurred to her, as she left the white square, that it was because she could not reveal her true feelings to her own father that she could not disclose them to anyone else. She walked between the leafless poplars and, when a woman crossed her path, instinctively Evangeline looked away. She looked down at the ground. So I have no connection with the world, she thought. The white square might as well be in a dream. (24)

Within the same frame, though, and unlike the ludicrous queer flamboyance of Augustine Fraicheur and the unsettling iterations of Lola Trout or Floey Hanover, the performance of Evangeline Tupper is inscribed with psychological significance: if her customary camp behaviour cannot be said to be a direct result of her social status as a lesbian, then it is at least an act linked to her inability to “be herself.” Tupper’s camp, then, in addition to prodding at (if not wholly undermining) some narrative conventions, has an additional cultural implication. Recalling the politicized reading of camp offered by the authors of Camp Grounds, Tupper’s stratified identity acts as (serious) commentary about her own status as an outsider and her response to it. For a textual moment at least: despite those

pensive minutes outside her father's house, Tupper returns to the Pilgrim Valley and her excessive, ludicrous self quickly, with apparent ease and without any seeming recollection of her previous anguish. Camp behaviour is then accordingly politicized because it is exposed as being resultant of social stigmatization—but then subdued or redirected as silly, anti-serious fun. The weirdly-attired, badly-behaved figures of fun in these novels, the characters who provide as Ackroyd says it, “a bit of slap and tickle,” are irruptions and in a sense block the linear progression of the philosophical musings on origins or history or identity in the novels, and hence, like comedy (in general) and postmodernism (as delineated by key commentators), draw attention to socio-literary narrative conventions in such a way as to open them to interrogation; their theatricality and incongruity, moreover, always already signal the fundamental artifice—un-naturalized, a fiction—of the narrative. At the same time, their own unusual positioning as camp/non-camp encourages a consideration of camp that takes into account its origins in a cultural prejudice.

Ackroydian camp routinely operates in a bi-directional manner—at minimum. Its acts as an interruption, breaking the solemnity of the serious, high-art endeavour—the quest for individual roots, the search for the origins of an English civilization or attempt to truly connect with the historical past—which is, in turn, a subordination and dismantling of the superior or principal narrative. Campiness critiques (or at least turns its back to) conventional novelistic narrative topoi such as the quest or the raising of self-consciousness or the sustained meditation and reminds us of Andrew Ross's estimation of the camp intellectual, who, he argues, foregrounds his disenfranchisement while maintaining a “parodic critique of the properly educated and properly situated intellectual” (64). Though it is problematic to deign Ackroyd a camp intellectual or his novels the product of one, Ross's point is suggestive in light of some of the responses to Ackroyd's novels. After all, a small body of criticism (of *First Light* and *The Great Fire of London* alone) judges Ackroyd's novels as faulty or second-rate because they do not achieve balance and contain sudden and unpredictable breaks from solemnity to manic comedy.

Their putative “mysterious failure of realisation” (King 21) or “remove from life” (Massie 52) gets cited as evidence of weakness and artistic inadequacy. Such criticism assumes standards with a quantifiable experiential or phenomenological basis: “powerful,” “good” or “accomplished” fiction is that which somehow appears to be “fully realised” or “at no remove from life.” Serious fiction or the development of profound themes, such criticism implies, cannot co-exist with an irreverent camp disposition; campy intrusions are distortions that mar textual symmetry. It does not seem unwarranted to draw further conclusions from the position as I am seeing it. To comprehend and understand the past or to even think about the nature of understanding the past requires sustained seriousness. Incursions of any comic sort appear unwelcome because they lead to an environment that is not conducive to any high-minded investigation. If camp comedy can be said to take a political stance, it would appear to be one that questions the relevance of this much-vaunted way of knowing ourselves and our pasts.

4. Effecting “extreme artificiality”: A Note on ‘Non-Realist Historicism’

History is the distillation of evidence surviving the past. Where there is no evidence there is no history.

Handlin, Truth in History

But many bizarre things are real, Miss Tupper. As you must know.

Peter Ackroyd, First Light

What is it about the histrionic, the camp, the incongruous or the artificial that so causes upset? Or, to view it another way, why is there such a cultural investment in—to adopt Brian McHale’s quasi-Freudian terms—the suppression of ontological violations and the effacement of ontological seams in literary representation, particularly with the (historical) novel? Is it a matter of social control and ideological position-shoring as Alison Lee claims? Though necessarily speculative, responses to these awkwardly broad questions are important to any study of the fiction published by Peter Ackroyd because they intersect with criticism that gauges those novels less-than-perfect because they do not or cannot maintain a supposed purity of vision. After all, when Allan Massie invokes the

(conventional) distinction between “literature” and “life” and the “naturalistic and “artificiality,” and in doing so tacitly accepts the historically-entrenched valuation of life over literature, so-called natural over so-called artificial and speech over writing (not to mention serious over comic),⁹⁷ is he not also not-so-subtly promoting a species of literature which actively camouflages its own falsity—one advertising an ability to fully represent reality as it actually exists? This question is not directed at Massie only, of course. As Thomas Docherty points out in his introduction to Reading (Absent) Character, critical discourse has frequently envisioned realism as a mode of literature whose underlying organization “is based upon a notion of mimetic adequacy to the real world” (x). He then observes that “[m]imetic adequacy” is a vague critical concept” which begs the inevitable questions: “How adequate?” and “Whose real world?” (xi). In Postmodern Characters, Aleid Fokkema likewise discusses a contemporary literary theorist’s unease with those “traditional terms which nevertheless cannot be replaced or ignored” (18). Fokkema contends that the “still widespread” belief that characters represent human beings directly affects criticism: “When critics speak unselfconsciously of characters in literature, they unwittingly participate in a discourse on character that has dominated for at least a century” (28). Yet within the field of literary criticism, Fokkema writes, “it is generally accepted that postmodern character violently breaks with the established conventions of representation” (72). He later cites Linda Hutcheon’s generalization to support his point. Hutcheon, Fokkema states, manipulates “Barbara Foley’s [1986] concise description of the paradigm of the nineteenth-century historical novel” in order to “insert in square brackets the postmodern changes” (120). Hutcheon’s proposal asserts the dependence of postmodern literary strategies on those that preceded them even they assiduously work to contest or undercut their predecessor’s legitimacy as organic or “natural” literary laws. She writes—

⁹⁷Pace Derrida in Of Grammatology: “There is therefore a good and bad writing: the good and natural is the divine inscription in the heart and soul; the perverse and artful is technique, exiled in the exteriority of the body” (17).

Characters [never] constitute a microcosmic portrayal of representative social types; they experience complications and conflicts that embody important tendencies [not] in historical development [whatever that might mean, but in narrative plotting, often traceable to other intertexts]; one or more world-historical figures enters the fictive world, lending an aura of extratextual validation to the text's generalizations and judgments [which are promptly undercut and questioned by the revealing of the true intertextual, rather than extratextual, identity of the sources of that validation]; the conclusion [never] reaffirms [but contests] the legitimacy of a norm that transforms social and political conflict into moral debate. (Fokkema 56)

Though he questions her unbridled enthusiasm, Fokkema tentatively agrees with Hutcheon's point, and wonders whether postmodern fiction promises "a new concept of mimesis" (68), one that "hover[s]," "undermining conventions of mimesis yet constituting some pertinent aspect of human culture" (69). If such literature simultaneously "practices and undermines representation" (69), then it enables a critique of conventions offering only a restricted and restrictive version of reality. In a similar if less tentative manner, Hutcheon acolyte Alison Lee describes in Realism and Power how the ideology of "Realism" is inimical to freedom and, in essence, happiness—except, of course, when that politics is serving the desires of the dominant audience/author/publisher. According to Lee, postmodern fiction (Ackroyd's Hawksmoor included) is wary of the power of Realism, ceding to its authority while always simultaneously contesting, and possibly subverting, that same authority. Her study focusses

on the challenge to literary Realism by postmodern techniques and conventions which seek to subvert the assumptions that Realism and its related ideology—what we usually call liberal humanism—have encouraged readers and teachers of literature to think of as "natural," "normal," and "neutral." Common sense and the transparency of language—as well as subjectivity, truth, meaning, and value—are terms and concepts which are still on the syllabus of the academy, and which postmodern novels try to question and draw attention to as conventions (x)

Lee champions literary postmodernism⁹⁸—which, she contends, "plays (seriously) with the structures of power," "exists in the liminal space between power and subversion" (xii)

⁹⁸Lee's understanding of realism and postmodernism owes much to Linda Hutcheon, who taught Lee when she was a graduate student. What is different, though, is that Lee subtly

and, unlike Realism, “affirms” that “meaning is irrevocably ambiguous and plural” (25)—as something that “poses challenges to Realist conventions,” suggesting that through it “authority and its relation to experience are at least under interrogation.” (xiii). In line with positions she ascribes to Eagleton, Said and Belsey (who, Lee contends, “see Realism as a tool of ideological control” (27)), Lee locates in postmodern texts a heritage of “radical undermining” (28) that stems from the earlier work of such writers as de Saussure and Barthes.

Though Lee’s models of power, literature, realism, postmodernism, reading are clearly schematic and her faith in the social sway of literature surprisingly old-fashioned, the issues she (along with others like McHale, Fokkema and Hutcheon) raises regarding the critical discourse about realism is interesting insofar as realism has been the favoured technique of historical novelists until recently. My earlier historical survey of historical fiction established that with the exception of some outspoken schismatics the majority of writers of and about historical fiction have been empiricists and truth-seekers by inclination. To recall, briefly: influential Mary Renault’s basic commandments for historical novelists are “desire the truth” (Fleishman xii) and avoid “pollut[ing] by falsehood”

elides Hutcheon’s ambiguity, and replaces it with a hard-lined binarism. For Lee, Realism is a political tool which works to continue itself and the values it supposedly upholds. The reader of the texts, then, is in effect coerced by it, and takes from it the ideology it asserts. There is little ambiguity and, apparently, no space for interpretation or resistant readings. For Lee, then, Realism is a literary form that serves the needs of the dominant class (heterosexual white men?), inculcating those needs in the reader, who in turn internalizes them as *rerum natura*. Simple.

Though Lee is working in a tradition more or less built and validated by Hutcheon, she does meet resistance from other scholars addressing the realism/postmodernism debate. Steven Connor, for instance, takes her to task for her “flattening” of realism and for the “breathtaking naivety” she imputes to it (1996 132). Andrzej Gaslorek questions the conventional division between realism and postmodernism. While noting realism’s “slipperiness as a concept” (184) he argues that “contemporary realisms” do not necessarily correspond to reality nor portray pre-existent events but offer “representations that are plausible by virtue of their rootedness in social reality” (183). Furthermore, for Gaslorek, realism offers solutions where postmodernism (as he construes it) does not: realism “offers the possibility of adjudicating between different accounts of the world. It denies that all accounts of reality are radically incommensurable and argues that there are clear rational criteria according to which the truth of conflicting viewpoints can be ascertained” (190).

(McEwan 18); in order to effect the proper "vivification of a shadowy period or lost past" (xi), Fleishman similarly requires a scientific objective by the historical novelist to "describe and interpret—more or less accurately—the states of affairs" (3-4) of past eras; and for McEwan, history's "layers of reliability" (12) must be carefully and respectfully studied to oppose a fashionable "doctrinaire skepticism" (13) that he believes creates only the "dullness of solipsism" (17). It is not difficult to hear echoes of these dicta in the critical complaints of Ackroyd's inappropriate comedy, his mannered artificiality and failure of realization, particularly when these qualities are placed in juxtaposition to the ostensibly more consequential philosophical and historiographic concerns critics delineate in his fiction. The past should be studied with a straight face, criticism suggests; anything interrupting the carefully measured, respectfully exact recreation of a lost past prevents readerly full understanding of it—and so, in a sense, of ourselves. The very fictive nature of the narrative is thereby (somehow) overlooked—the intent of the author to build an imaginary recreation of the past that nonetheless represents the past via a historiographic methodology stands as sufficient justification for and testimony to the narrative's epistemological adequacy. And as Barbara Foley (1986) points out, the critical measurement of success ultimately relies on the close proximity of imagined history to the accepted, authentic kind written by historians.

Within that interpretive modality, the notion of a comedic historicism does not compute: since comedy more or less serves the interests of the non-serious and the interruptive, any "adequate" study of past epochs or subjects is rendered invalid because the authority of the textual voice announces its lack even as it establishes itself through the conventional (realist) means. Though in some contemporary scholarship the idea of fiction mimicking historical actuality or even historical discourse has the taint of a long-discredited hypothesis (and a somewhat embarrassing one: "Puh-leeze . . .," we might imagine Linda Hutcheon uttering), the scientism—loaded words like "accuracy," "reliability," and "rationality" are not mere happenstance—inherent in both criticism of Ackroyd and

commentators on the historical novel suggests, contra Lee's gleeful advocacy of freedom-producing postmodern literature, a not-exactly-vestigial community holding on to belief in fiction as up to the task of representing past lives and societies. The partial or nonsense or silly representation, the discontinuous narrative, a seam-full tapestry, basically become here tantamount to little other than angst-producing meaninglessness. The criticism asks that history be taken seriously—according to a received and largely undisputed tradition of discourse—so that the always significant matter of our placement in historical time has due deference paid to it. This vital concern about the role of history/past historical actuality to contemporary individuals proves the central informing theme for the quartet of novels discussed in the next chapter, Hawksmoor, Chatterton, English Music and The House of Doctor Dee. Sharing much the same structure and thematic content, these novels illustrate further modalities of meanings for history in Ackroyd's fiction.

- C. PastlPresent: The Uses of History in
Hawksmoor, Chatterton, The House of Doctor Dee
and English Music

1. History-Telling, Category-Making

The politics of postmodernism show their troubling intricacy in the case of Ackroyd. The assault on the absolute—Absolute Reality, Absolute Truth and all their close cousins—has been taken to carry a progressive social charge: the “tyranny” of one truth to which all truths must correspond yields to the “democracy” of many versions of many truths. But Ackroyd’s example points up the hollowness of the political analogy. Ackroyd is the Tory postmodernist: now we know that there can be such a thing.

Michael Levenson

Ackroyd wants to disappear into his own work of art, leaving a seamless garment that is both a patchwork of various cloths and yet invisibly sewn together.

Brian Finney

None of it seemed very real, but I suppose that’s the trouble with history. It’s the one thing we have to make up for ourselves.

Chatterton

We are left with that pure and random play of signifiers that we call postmodernism, which no longer produces monumental works of the modernist type but ceaselessly reshuffles the fragments of preexistent texts, the building blocks of older cultural and social production, in some new and heightened bricolage: metabooks which cannibalize other books, metatexts which collate bits of other texts—such is the logic of postmodernism in general

...

Fredric Jameson

Literary canon construction—that most mysterious of processes—would seem to be if nothing else a process of convention maintenance and/or renovation entwined with an haphazard set of “tendency” and “opinion” accumulating in accretive increments: in tandem with authors, book publishers, newspaper editors and affiliated critics, scholars, prize juries and of course variously-situated readers themselves work to establish a fluid-but-

willing-to-solidity representation of an author (and work) which comes to stand with apparent autonomy—A Must-Read/Must Study Novel, An Important Author—and that becomes another fundamental element of cultural literacy. The current high profile of Peter Ackroyd (he of the literary prizes, news-making publishing contracts, widespread and well-placed reviews, widely printed interviews, gossiped-about—and much reprinted—antics, bestselling and chart-topping publications) suggests an author whose work is in the process of canonization. Ackroyd may well be, as his friend Brian Appleyard claimed in a lengthy 1989 London Times profile, “by increasingly common consent . . . likely to be one of the few English writers of his generation who will be read in a hundred years’ time” (50). In keeping with Appleyard’s sibylline assessment, Sir Malcolm Bradbury—an influential writer who published volumes of frequently cited critical work on contemporary American and British literature—provides ample space for Ackroyd in his 1993 survey, The Modern British Novel, even including in the ambitious appendix, “The British Novel Since 1876: A List of Major Works,” not one but five novels by Ackroyd: The Great Fire of London, Hawksmoor, Chatterton, First Light and The House of Doctor Dee. Still, as some of the appalled (and high profile) reviews already cited indicate, Ackroyd’s reputation as a figure of literary originality and intellectual breadth is nothing if not fluctuating: to take into account the stock-taking of a more recent survey of literature than Bradbury’s, Carmen Callil and Colm Toibin’s The Modern Library: The 200 Best Novels in English Since 1950 (1999), makes no mention whatsoever of Peter Ackroyd or his fiction. (Ditto the Salon.com Guide to Contemporary Writers (2000).)

While the assuredness of Ackroyd’s position vis à vis the economy of canon-formation remains uncertain, something more evident within the inchoate field of Ackroyd criticism is that the central thrust of scholarly response has been toward his thus-far “middle period” novels, Hawksmoor (1985) and Chatterton (1986); the modest body of Ackroyd criticism (and the larger one of literary postmodernism criticism) has customarily favoured the delineation of these two novels—to such a degree that the ones pre- or post-

dating them may as well not exist. Though English Music was widely disparaged and The House of Doctor Dee has received little critical attention, the two novels come under consideration here because both their structure and thematic development closely approximate those of their predecessors. These novels are remarkable foremost because of their sustained representation and consideration of the vital if complex relationship between present and past. Unlike Ackroyd's more conventionally-minded historical novels (The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde, Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem and Milton in America) or those novels set in the present but ever backward-looking (The Great Fire of London and First Light), Ackroyd's mid-point novels deliberately map how past historical actualities intersect with present-day concerns. An examination of the political modalities of these intersections forms the crux of my study's final chapter.

~~2-~~ Situating Hawksmoor, Chatterton, English Music and
The House of Doctor Dee

While this quartet of novels exhibits characteristics found in all Ackroyd's novels—structural mainstays like the forms of pastiche and camp comedy discussed are evident, as are typically broad considerations about English history, the recoverability of past historical actualities and the patrilineal transmission of culture—they are, furthermore, more closely linked to each other in terms of theme, structure and tone than the previous and subsequent novels. Most apparently, in all the novels past actuality is represented in juxtaposition to—albeit in eventual conflation with—a contemporary one. The juxtaposition has structural reinforcement: with the exception of minute instances of what I will designate as fugue, each novel keeps past and present discrete via chapter divisions. In Hawksmoor for instance, odd-numbered chapters are narrated by Nicholas Dyer circa 1711, while even-numbered chapters present a third-person account of a detective's murder investigation in contemporary London. The House of Doctor Dee, published some eight years later, takes the form of numeric chapters (narrated by a present-day Londoner) that are contiguous with titled chapters narrated by the Elizabethan magus, John Dee.

Transcendence of that temporal border does occur, however, and is wholly contingent on the appearance of paranormal phenomena.

i Aspects of the Novels

(a) Hawksmoor (1985), undoubtedly the most frequently discussed of Ackroyd's novels, initially unfolds as a documentary historical facsimile, one that simultaneously mimics conventions of both historiography and "classic" historical fiction and announces its falsity (by design). In the opening pages, for instance, the novel's disavowing "Acknowledgments" states that "this version of history is [Ackroyd's] own invention" and that "[a]ny relation to real people, either living or dead, is entirely coincidental" (iv). Yet the following page introduces the novel's subject within a stentorian, quasi-antique elocutionary frame: "Thus in 1711, the ninth year of the reign of Queen Anne, an Act of Parliament was passed to erect seven new Parish Churches in the Cities of London and Westminster, which commission was delivered to Her Majesty's Office of Works in Scotland Yard" (1). The dioramic description then peers at (fictional) Nicholas Dyer, the recipient of the (fictional) commission, working on scale models, and concludes, "This is the vision we still see and yet now, for a moment, there is only his heavy breathing as he bends over his papers and the noise of the fire which suddenly flares up and throws deep shadows across the room" (1). Conjoined with the authoritarian narrative voice, the inclusive, universalizing "we" of the passage promotes what McHale would identify as the suppression of ontological seams (and, juxtaposed to the exculpatory and legalistic "Acknowledgments," sits in seeming competition or counterpoint—providing, of course, that readers disregard the fact that "the vision" "we" see presented is fictional: history records Nicholas Hawksmoor (not Nicholas Dyer) as receiving a 1711 design commission for six London churches). The novel's first Part opens with narration by Dyer himself,

Ackroyd's "invention" speaking to his assistant Walter (and being recording as speaking⁹⁹) in authentic-seeming eighteenth century prose:

And so let us beginne; and, as the Fabrick takes its Shape in front of you, alwaies keep the structure intirely in Mind as you inscribe it. First, you must measure out or cast the Area in as exact a Manner as can be, and then you must draw the Plot and make the Scale. I have imparted to you the Principles of Terrour and Magnificance, for these you must represent in the due placing of Parts and Ornaments as well as in the Proportion of the several Orders: you see, Walter, how I take my Pen? (5)

Hawksmoor's first pages inaugurate a complex act of forgery for readers; while its author announces its ontological insecurity—fiction posing as the history of an invented figure in turn similar to an actual historical figure—directly with fantastic characters and unequivocal statement (i.e., "this version of history is my own invention"), the novel simultaneously utilizes an apparatus of historiographic and/or traditional historical novelistic technique—period language and grammar, figures (such as Christopher Wren) and locales. It is a forgery because readers can recognize it as such and have been informed moreover that it is, and yet the very form works to entrench it as an adequate representation.

Subsequent to the complications the first pages of Hawksmoor initiate, there are fewer formal signs directing readers to the novel's fabulous historicism—save the ongoing fact of Dyer's fictional status. Instead, Dyer's detailed autobiographical musings and personal speculations (during odd-numbered chapters) give weight to the "reality" of the historical representation, as do historically-specific events (the Plague, the Great Fire of London, the building of churches). In memoirist mode, Dyer recalls the death of his parents to bubonic plague, his "various Adventures as a Street-Boy" (17) and his apprenticeship with a mysterious man named Mirabilis whose "trew" teachings (20)

⁹⁹Since Dyer occasionally addresses "the Reader" and speaks of being situated in "the glass of Recollection" (15), a "Trance of Memory" (17) and the "Narrative of my trew History" (49), or of gathering memories that show him "what a chequer'd Work of Nature [his] Life has been" (11), his disclosures are tied to the confessional and diaristic and trial transcript modes of self-presentation found throughout Ackroyd's works, from Milton's letters and Chatterton's autobiography to Wilde's journal and Elizabeth Cree's crime-confiding diary.

include a "Faith" (20) far older than Christianity: the belief, in short, that "Sathan is the God of this World and fit to be worshipp'd" (21). Dyer's subsequent true plan for the seven churches in London ("this Capital City of the World of Affliction is still the Capitol of Darknesse, or the Dungeon of Man's Desires," (47) as Dyer calls it) is to build an adjacent and subterranean "Sepulture" in order to secure that his own churches will rise to join a long line of "sacred Misteries" in England so that after the sacrifice of a youth, "Darknesse will call out for more Darknesse"(22). Dyer views his work as a profound righting of wrongs—

In this Rationall and mechanic Age there are those who call Daemons mere Bugs or Chimeras and if such People will believe in Mr Hobbes, the Greshamites and other such gee-gaws, who can help it? They must not be contradicted, and they are resolved not to be perswaded; I address myself to Mysteries infinitely more Sacred and, in Confederacy with the Guardian Spirits of the Waerth, I place Stone upon Stone in Spittle-Fields, in Limehouse and in Wapping. (22-23)

Each chapter narrated by Dyer precedes a third-person complement set in a contemporary London marked by dissolution, poverty, madness, decay and malignancy; it is Little St. Hugh, the Dyer-designed church in Spitalfields, which to Mrs. Hill, the mother of a boy who goes missing, "represented all that was dark and immutably dirty in the area" (34) that dominates the scene. While history—whether in the shape of the landscapes, buildings, children's rhymes, words, spirit—is ever-present, contemporary London appears both enervated and infiltrated by foreboding. The novel's first Part highlights this atmosphere, focussing on the mysterious death of a boy and a vagrant. Part Two introduces the eponymous Detective Chief Superintendent Nick Hawksmoor, an avid student of rational knowledge, patterns, procedure and conclusion formed from empirical observation. Hawksmoor's beliefs—which echo those of the rationalistic Christopher Wren—are challenged by the abnormal unfolding of the murders, and as a result he begins to formulate broad questions—

All these events were random and yet connected, part of a pattern so large that it remained inexplicable. He might, then, have to invent a past from the evidence available—and, in that case, would not the future also be an

invention? It was if he was staring at one of those puzzle drawings in which the foreground and background create entirely different images: you could not look at such a thing for long. (157)

Hawksmoor furthermore begins to suffer from a kind of mental breakdown when order does not result from his following standard operating procedure. His inability to discern the actual time of the murders (which seem to him “to be quite unusual—to be taking place in the wrong time” (117)) in effect undermines the police detection hermeneutic that is the basis of his identity.

From the beginning Hawksmoor is filled with a tissue of echoes, repetition and coincidence that serves to affiliate 1711 with the late twentieth century. In addition to thematic parallels—murders, names and locations—there are structural ones. For example, the phrases concluding one chapter coincide with ones that begin the next chapter (e.g., “And then the shadow fell” (86) concludes Chapter Four, and “The Shadowe falls naturally here” (87) opens Chapter Five). The interconnection relates to overlapping key concerns expressed by both Hawksmoor and Dyer—regarding pattern, history, time and meaning. As he ends his “Account” (205), Dyer states that “my own History is a Patern which others may follow in the far Side of Time” (205), and then he strives to interpret visions of the future he has experienced. The novel concludes with the apparent completion of a pattern, and with the enigmatic fusion of discrete times and subjectivities. Inside Little St. Hugh, Hawksmoor, having reached the terminus of his investigation, meets “his own Image” (216), and in a tumult of echoes the two speak “with one voice” that describes figures in a circle, “[t]heir words were my own but not my own” (216). Hawksmoor/Dyer then says, “And then in my dream, I looked down and saw in what rags I stood; and I am a child again, begging on the threshold of eternity” (216). Hawksmoor envisions this paired subjectivity as joining an expansive continuum whose significance remains undisclosed.

(b) While Chatterton (1987) returns to the comic devices of The Great Fire of London, its narrative representation of three distinct historical eras and thematic exploration the nature of historical knowledge, originality, and the transmission of culture link it more

closely to Hawksmoor. And like in Hawksmoor, too, the prelude or prefatory page of the novel imitates the tone of an authoritative encyclopaedia of biography. Chatterton begins thus: "Thomas Chatterton (1752-1770) was born in Bristol; he was educated at Colston's School there and was for a few months apprenticed to a lawyer, but his education was less important than the promptings of his own genius" (1). The forensic overview concludes that, "apparently worn down by his struggle against poverty and failure," he committed suicide:

An inquest was held and a verdict of felo de se or suicide was announced; the next morning, he was interred in the burying ground of the Shoe Lane Workhouse. Only one contemporary portrait of him is known to exist, but the image of the "marvellous boy" has been fixed for posterity in the painting, Chatterton, by Henry Wallis. This was completed in 1856, and the young George Meredith as its model for the dead poet lying in his attic room in Brooke Street. (1)

The secondary part of the prefatory apparatus presents four proleptic narrative segments, each separated by an asterisk. Verbatim passages from the soon-to-be plot of the novel (incorporating voices of the principal characters, Thomas Chatterton, Henry Wallis and George Meredith, Harriet Scrope and Charles Wychwood), the pages elliptically announce themes that will follow—plagiarism, pretense, quotation, inheritance. Finally, epigraphs in the form of couplets from Thomas Chatterton's "medieval" verse add another layer of complexity: they remind readers of the historicity of Chatterton (1752-1770) while providing them with examples of centuries-old (now "historical") forgery, and foreground too the matter of the complicated transmission of artistic tradition.

In spite of the ostensible solemnity suggested by the foregoing précis of Chatterton, it is important to reassert the fundamental comic shape of the novel. In other words, as in First Light the centrality of comedy in the novel encourages laughter as well as thought from readers even when considering the thematic interrogation of the concept of authenticity. Such is particularly the case in regard to plot elements set in contemporary London. Taking up much of the story's bulk, the present day is peopled by seemingly illegitimate and unaccomplished artists. Artist manqués Charles Wychwood and Philip

Slack, who suffer from an overwhelming case of “the anxiety of influence” (100), and Harriet Scrope, a novelist who plagiarized aspects of her second¹⁰⁰ novel, cannot write her autobiography and enjoys “inventing stories about herself” (30), form a triangle of positions regarding artistic originality and creativity. Ludicrously camp, Scrope (ironically titled the “Queen of Romance” by her friend Sarah Tilt though her novels were “generally considered mournful to the point of being macabre” (32)) is seeking a “ghost writer” (40) for her memoir, and holds apparently few scruples or morality about much-vaunted terms like “originality” and “literature.” Wychwood, by contrast, strives for immortality initially through his own (never published) poetry and then through his guardianship of a portrait of a middle-aged Chatterton and a confessional manuscript he discovers; his collapse (and death caused by a brain tumour) occurs immediately following his eloquent rebuttal to the statements made by the successful (if cynical) novelist Andrew Flint—

Everything is instantly forgotten. There is no history any more. There is no memory. There are no standards to encourage permanence—only novelty, and the whole cycle of new objects. And books are simply objects—consumer items to be picked up and laid aside. (150)

Philip Slack, an aspiring novelist who cannot locate his own voice, discovers at the novel’s close that his experiences with the Chatterton hoax and Charles Wychwood may lead to a novel: “‘So I tried writing my own novel but it didn’t work, you know. I kept on imitating other people. I had no real story, either, but now—’ he hesitated—‘but now with this—with Charles’s theory—I might be able to—’” (232). Slack suggests his “anxiety”

¹⁰⁰On one level, Scrope is a decayed or parodic exemplar of an Eliotan ideal. Her first novel, festooned with “kind words from Djuna Barnes and Henry Green” (101), had taken her six years to complete:

“She told herself that words were ‘sacred’, however, gradually forming their own associations and gathering in their own significant clusters of significant sound; when they were ready, they informed Harriet of their presence and she was content to transcribe them. As far as she was concerned, that was all. The only continuity which her novel possessed lay somewhere within the working of her own consciousness” (101–102). Later, since “she could not find within herself any strong connection with the world . . . she could find no method of describing it” (102), Scrope turned to the plots of another novelist for inspiration. That act, in turn “liberated her imagination; and, from that time forward all her novels were here own” (103). Yet in the present day, Scrope suffers from anxiety because she fears the discovery of her early plagiarism.

has been overcome to a large enough degree that he will be finally able to speak (that is, write) in his "own" voice.

The context for the mid-nineteenth century segments of Chatterton is the (historically actual) dissolution of the marriage of George and Mary Ellis Meredith, the consummation of a romance between Henry Wallis and Mary Ellis and how Wallis's personal activities and misgiving about his ethical behaviour affect the painting of George Meredith posing as Thomas Chatterton. In addition to the portrayal of domestic contretemps, scenes of the Merediths and Wallis supplement the novel's theme since in them the characters invariably engage in lively—if patently stagy—argument about art, originality and personality. Their Wildean turns of phrase often culminate in paradox, as when Meredith asks Wallis "So the greatest realism is also the greatest fakery?" (139) in response to the painter adding details to his portrait after the sitting has occurred. Elsewhere, witty conversations enact a playful debate about what is true and what is not (as exhibited through the following banter between George and Mary Ellis)—

"You are hardly real at all." She spoke very softly, still examining the drawings.

"You think me unnatural, my dear?"

"I find you more natural on paper."

"My own, or the sketches here?"

"Both, no doubt."

"So I am a forgery but my writing is not?"

"You must ask your looking glass that question."

"But you are my looking glass."

"No. I am only your wife." (141-142)

These mid-century scenes terminate well before the novel's conclusion. As Mary Ellis and Wallis begin their romantic alliance, Meredith (described as having once been saved from suicide by the ghost of Chatterton) fades altogether from the text.

The putatively originating voice of the novel is the great plagiarist Thomas Chatterton. Chatterton's first appearances in the novel are pointedly and humorously mediated ones: the "marvellous boy" poet appears as a middle-aged man in an oil portrait Wychwood happens upon at Leno Antiques and later apparently narrates his own life

though his "Account" (81), a (photocopied) manuscript later discovered by Wychwood. Not surprisingly, manuscript and portrait are ultimately revealed as forgeries. Segments of the novel's Part Three recount in conventionally realist third-person narration Chatterton's experiences in during August 23, 1770. Having recently lost his virginity, Chatterton discovered he has also contracted "the clap" (193), and takes steps to locate a remedy. He finds it in a mixture of arsenic and opium, the "illustrious London kill-or-cure" (194), too much of which he ingests. Chatterton dies in a febrile delirium, seeing himself in a vision of timelessness and believing, "I will not wholly die, then" and "I will live forever" (234). Beside asserting a plausible albeit humbling counter-origin for the death of (historical) Chatterton, the novel effectively repudiates the poetic idealization of the historical Chatterton, whose death and even suicide note prove to be subject to historical misinterpretation.

(c) Structurally, English Music (1992) takes cues from *Hawksmoor*: it is composed of nineteen chapters which alternate between a setting in contemporary England (circa 1992) featuring retrospective autobiographical first-person narration and another situated in an atemporal (yet decidedly not contemporary) literary-historical setting that the narrator, septuagenarian Timothy Harcombe, experienced in his youth as visions, dreams or fancies. A son's quest for variform heritage provides the central motif of Harcombe's retrospection, and is evident from the words (addressed to his father) with which he begins his recollection of his journey—

Yes. I have returned to the past. I have made that journey. "You can't go back," you said when I told you my intention. "Those days are long gone." But, as I explained at the time, that is not necessarily true. One day is changed into another, yet nothing is lost. (1)

Harcombe's return is a doubled one. His narration in odd-numbered chapters traces episodes of his childhood in a "faded," "dilapidated" and "almost undiscoverable" area (13) in London, his involvement with The Chemical Theatre (built near the graves of Blake and Bunyan, and atop a Dissenters' chapel) and the vicissitudes of his relationship with his

father, "Clement Harcombe, Medium and Healer" (2). Harcombe's father, like John Dee and Nicholas Dyer, is a kind of charlatan-magus, given to exploring the non-rational and unorthodox spiritual world as well as being a Faustus-like hubristic sensualist who has no patience with the limitations of his perception and is eager for material reward. With his son playing an integral role in his act, the elder Harcombe reaches into a spirit world, and, in doing so, mediates communication between past and present (or the living and dead) as well as healing ailments with seemingly supernatural finesse. Away from *The Chemical Theatre*, Timothy's father educates him during discussions of "English music"—

Instead [of Clement's talking about himself] we discussed what he used to call 'English music,' by which he meant not only music itself but also English history, English literature and English painting. With him one subject always led to another and he would break off from a discussion of William Byrd or Henry Purcell in order to tell me about Tennyson and Browning; he would turn from the work of Samuel Johnson to the paintings of Thomas Gainsborough, from pavans and galliards to odes and sonnets, from the London of Daniel Defoe to the London of Charles Dickens. And in my imagination, as he talked, all these things comprised one world which I believed to be still living—even in this small room where we sat. (21)

Suitably, the second aspect of Harcombe's memoir concerns an unexpected effect of Timothy's education. If artistic work becomes "a true image of life" (24) for Timothy, the nine even-numbered chapters of English Music represent his interaction with his national heritage as embodied in forms of art. The topography of Timothy's dream-vision¹⁰¹ is both pastiche and palimpsest: the inhabitants of the place (the range in the first chapter alone runs from Evangelist in Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress to the White Rabbit of Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland) speak as they might in their proper texts, and yet are conflated, seemingly existing on a vast plane of creative traces. The allegorical dream-visions provide clues and advice regarding Timothy's search for his father, his own identity as well as the larger question of (English) cultural heritage.

¹⁰¹For lack of a more accurate term. Since Timothy's psychic gifts are not subject to sceptical interrogation in the novel, it is not fair to diminish his lively experience of art as being a mere dream or fantasy. And although his initial dream-vision occurs as he is falling to sleep, he experiences other ones while being fully lucid.

Following Clement Harcombe's final act of healing (which leads to his death), the penultimate chapter of English Music incorporates an Arthurian frame, and engages in instruction about heroic artistic inheritance: as Timothy hears "English music" and sees "poets, here, and storytellers, and those who wrote all manner of English prose" (391), Merlin intones, "here in this world they gave their lives so that their vision might be seen, and all the land healed. Their words will remain forever" (391). In the final installment of his reminiscence, which effectively culminates at the 1936 burial of his father, Timothy observes that he took on his father's act at the circus "not out of homage or gratitude, but out of instinct" (396). He later inherits his mother's family's farmhouse where, with the exception of a seven-year absence during World War II, he has lived alone for the duration of his adulthood. Timothy's final words are designed to illustrate his message about the nature of inheritance. He addresses his deceased father, stating, "I have inherited the past because I have acknowledged it at last" (399) and "So you see, as I have explained to you before, I no longer need to open the old books. I have heard the music" (400). His very openness signifies an ostensibly natural absorption of the past, which, in turn, signifies a holistic subjectivity.

(d) The House of Doctor Dee (1993) incorporates thematic and structural motifs developed in earlier novels. Most obviously, in seven numbered chapters it tells the tale of an alienated, detached and undirected protagonist, Matthew Palmer, searching in the present day for patrimony in the ancient house ("not of any one period" (2)) he inherited from his recently deceased father. Alternating chapters are given titles (beginning with "The Spectacle" and concluding with "The Vision"), and feature narration by a historical figure, Doctor John Dee (born circa 1527), whose "true chronicle" (33) recalls a contented childhood, education at Cambridge and eventual apprenticeship under a scholar of "rare studies" (35), Ferdinand Griffin. Dee, like Nicholas Dyer and Clement Harcombe, has an ambiguous morality; though his life's work has been related to learning, he has also worked in less reputable areas. His selfishness and hubris lead him on an alchemical quest

to create gold and, later, life (in the form of a homunculus). Dee's vainglorious actions also hasten his wife's death. In the first installment of his chronicle, Dee establishes himself as a man whose reduced circumstances have resulted in his performing spectacles to audiences for coins. His real work, which takes place as he is surrounded by books that represent "the inheritance of our island" (67), places him outside the current of his culture. It is a position he maintains with pride—

There are some who mock and condemn me for living within the past, but they are far off the mark; like the navigator who charts his course by the aid of the glistening stars, those who understand the past ages do then master the present. (67)

As with English Music and Hawksmoor, the chapters are not strictly discrete. Matthew Palmer's house in Clerkenwell did not belong solely to his father: it is where John Dee lived and performed his experiments. In tracing his entitlement, Palmer finds the house was built in a district renowned for radical beliefs; Dee's previous ownership is, then, only one aspect of an impressive inheritance. And, like Hawksmoor, The House of Doctor Dee concludes with a kind of visionary and psychological fugue: in the ultimate chapter, "The Vision," Dee's autobiographical account fuses with that of Palmer's, and, moreover, with another, ostensibly that of Ackroyd himself. Dee begins the chapter speaking à la Hawksmoor of "treading backward into the past—yet was not my past, but that of others" (272). Soon after another "I" subtly synchronizes with or supplants that of Dee. Matthew Palmer is then speaking to his friend Daniel of a vision he experienced that Dee was witness to as well. A third "I" follows, and poses questions:

And that at least is true—to the extent that I do not understand how much of this history is known, and how much is my invention. And what is the past, after all? Is it that which is created in the formal act of writing, or does it have some substantial reality? Am I discovering it, or inventing it? Or could it be that I am discovering it within myself, so that it bears both the authenticity of surviving evidence and the immediacy of present intuition? The House of Doctor Dee itself leads me to that conclusion: no doubt you expected it to be written by the author whose name appears on the cover and the title-page, but in fact many of the words and phrases are taken from John Dee himself. If they are not his words, they belong to his contemporaries. Just as he took a number of mechanical parts and out of them constructed a beetle that could fly, so I have taken a number of obscure texts and have fashioned a novel from their

rearrangement. But is Doctor Dee now no more than a projection of my own attitudes and obsessions, or is he an historical figure whom I have genuinely tried to recreate? (274-275)

This finale, with its distinct Ackroydian inquiries, can be considered an apt summation or culmination of questions of history and inheritance that occur throughout the novels.

ii. Critical Reception

Hawksmoor and Chatterton marked the establishment of Ackroyd as a “major author.” Each novel was reviewed in high-profile and hence influential organs of book criticism (and dissemination), such as the Times Literary Supplement, London Review of Books, Daily Mail, Observer, Spectator, Listener and (the following year) the New York Times Book Review, that produced in turn momentum—media hype?—that led to further exposure through diverse review pages. Despite book jacket exclamations and the outpour of critical coverage, however, there was by no means a clear consensus of evaluation. In what has emerged as typical within the field of Ackroyd criticism, hailings of the “genius” “tour de force” and “brilliant” sort were met with both significant qualifications and plentiful quibbles that emphasize in general the putative philosophical limitations of Ackroyd’s fiction as well as its structural and/or stylistic inconsistencies.

—(a) Though awarded the Whitbread Novel of the Year and the Guardian Fiction Award, Hawksmoor garnered mixed critical commentary upon publication. For example, Alan Hollinghurst’s oft-cited TLS review was admiring yet ultimately dismissive. On a technical level Hollinghurst notes “sketchy characters” and “portentous vagueness,” and acknowledges that “[i]t must be said that when he is not in possessed mode, Ackroyd does not write nearly so well” (1049). More generally, the critic is hostile to the novel’s effects, observing, “as Ackroyd sets up facile parallelisms the trickery of the technique is somehow revealed, and the mechanics of possession appear trumpery after all” and “for all its sporadic brilliance and intricacy it has a lowering effect. It is a dark, cold novel, almost wholly untouched by altruism or responsibility” (1049). If Hollinghurst is less than content with Ackroyd’s final product he remains equivocal about Ackroyd’s idiosyncratic

historicism. He prefers Ackroyd's "vigorous, eccentric pastiche style of the late seventeenth as much as of the eighteenth century" to his "mimicry of Wilde's monotonous periods." He underscores Ackroyd's manipulation ("Ackroyd has reinvented early eighteenth century London, and with it one of its greatest geniuses, Nicholas Hawksmoor") yet does not condemn it—

This is not quite the picture we have of Hawksmoor, but Ackroyd has taken his cue from the eccentricities of his buildings, which so disturbingly combine the barbaric grandeur of the antique with a kind of atavistic feeling for Gothic forms. His was a vocabulary that, more than any other in the brief history of the English baroque, seemed even in its own time a kind of Babylonish dialect in stone, and that was soon discredited by the fashionable correctness of Palladianism. Ackroyd's trick is to fix on this bizarrerie, and in turning Hawksmoor into Dyer to exaggerate it, subvert it, and reinterpret it. In the process he aggravates Hawksmoor's differences from Wren, and from the empirical and scientific ethos of the Royal Society in general. (1049)

In Art in America the architectural scholar Joseph Rykwert applauds Ackroyd's "dense, brooding, almost hypnotic book" as "a high achievement of the storyteller's art" (13), but questions both the rationale and consequence of Ackroyd's disavowal of historical verities, detecting that "the campy, frivolous Vanbrugh of Ackroyd's book is very unlike the historical figure we know from his letters and from historical documents such as the actual Hawksmoor's accounts of him" (13). Rykwert notes, too, that since building sacrifices were once standard non-diabolical practices and that Christopher Wren himself had horoscopes cast for his buildings, Ackroyd's understanding of the nuance and breadth of Enlightenment thought is reductionist and, perhaps, overly schematic. In contrast, Pat Rogers in The London Review of Books approves that in a novel "remarkable for its power, ingenuity and subtlety alike," "Ackroyd has taken Hawksmoor's known interest in pre-Gothic architectural theory and made Dyer into a kind of rebel against the Enlightenment" (18). Compared to the interested and informed opinion of Hollinghurst or Rykwert, Joyce Carol Oates (who notes parenthetically "Nicholas Hawksmoor's dates are 1661-1736, not identical with Dyer's. 'Dyer' is apparently a fictitious name, and one presumes the ritual murders are fictitious as well" (3)), is taken with Ackroyd's

“unfailingly intelligent work of the imagination” and “witty and macabre work of the imagination,” though not particularly as historical fiction. She states that Hawksmoor “is primarily a novel of ideas” and that it “is less a novel in the conventional sense of the word (in which, for instance, human relationships and their development are of central important) than a highly idiosyncratic treatise or testament, on the subject of evil” (3).

Opinion in scholarly work is as various. Summarizing the “intensely literary” (443) Hawksmoor, John Peck locates the novel on “familiar ground” (444) in a (detective) genre developed from Dickens though to Eco; and while he admires Ackroyd’s virtuosity with regard to tone and texture he expresses dissatisfaction: “The effect is undeniably powerful; yet, curiously, it is possible for the reader simultaneously to feel that the novel is little more than a detective story with pretensions” (444). Susana Onega situates the novel in two distinct areas. The first and most familiar in her study settles on “transcendental” themes in Ackroyd. As Onega explains—

Indeed, as we go on reading, we find more and more shocking reduplications of names, events, actions and even identical sentences uttered by characters who live two centuries apart, until we are forced to conclude that, in the novel, nothing progresses in time, that the same events repeat themselves endlessly, and that the same people live and die only in order to be born and to live the same events again and again, eternally caught in the ever-revolving wheel of life and death. (44-45)

For Onega, Hawksmoor disrupts “traditional notions of chronological linearity in favour of a circular, or mythical conception of time” (45). The second, related pole of her discussion concerns the historically-based “coexistence of official empiricism and . . . subterranean magical practices,” (44) exemplified through the interactions of Christopher Wren and Nicolas Dyer. The “all-encompassing duality” (44) of the novel reinforces the theme of antagonistic worldviews which is by Onega’s reckoning at the base of Ackroyd’s historical imagining.

(b) Widely reviewed, Booker Prize nominee Chatterton was characterized by Brad Leithauser in The New Yorker as being written by an “admirable and frustrating novelist”—admirable because ingenious and a natural pasticheur, frustrating because

Ackroyd is perceived as a comedian who is rarely funny, a tic-ridden stylist and facile historical-philosopher who always “proves something of a disappointment in the end” (102). Leithauser nonetheless applauds loudly:

He is a virtuoso ventriloquist, who throws his voice not only from place to place but from era to era. And if his own delivery falters now and then, his dummy speaks with all the cool, clear, vatic force that one would hope to hear when, glass eyes blazing, a quickened reconstruction of wood and paint finds its voice at last. (102)

Denis Donoghue uses the word “superb” in the opening and closing sentences of his review in NYTBR. He admires Ackroyd’s “wonderfully vivid book” (40) in part because it does not have the contours of traditional historical novel (and, pace postmodern historiographic fiction, has no necessarily concern with unmasking the hidden investments in historical discourse)—

He is not interested in discovering “how it was” or even in provoking a sense of historical periods and scenes. In this respect he differs from the Irish novelist John Banville, whose novels “Kepler” and “Doctor Copernicus” give the impression that if we knew more about Kepler or Copernicus, our knowledge would coincide with Banville’s imagining. Mr. Ackroyd’s novels are historical romances, because they refuse to discriminate between the life a character apparently lived and the other lives he or she performed. Mr. Ackroyd seems to reject the implication, in the historical novel, that people coincide with themselves and settle for the one life which the decorum of historical narration gives them. (40)

Donoghue expresses admiration, moreover, for Ackroyd’s choice of setting “aside the official privilege of sequence, cause and effect, and produces a simultaneous concatenation of likenesses and differences, regardless of temporal impediments” (40). On the other hand, Martin Dodsworth’s TLS review is filled with complaint. The critic remarks—

In Hawksmoor the very banality of the plot was to make it dispensable; in Chatterton the object is to make it clear that whatever the plot does it cannot represent events in the real world. The camp stylization of much of the dialogue, the clash of styles within the book, both undermine the status of the plot as an ordered Aristotelian representation of reality. It is not possible to reconcile all the patterned elements in the novel with each other, or all the details which in a conventional book would confirm the imagined reality of the world presented. (976)

While Dodworth's understanding of the novel's plot dynamics could lead to intriguing questions, he finds only problems instead. In a novel "brutal" to its readers, he detects banality ("the whole discourse totters on the verge of saying nothing in a way that is perilous for Ackroyd's enterprise, or ought to be, were it not that saying nothing is precisely what he is after: 'everything just exists in order to exist'" (976)), failure of vision ("Its refusal of representation may, if the reader neglects or even rejects the novel's idea, look suspiciously like the alibi for a failure to represent what in a slipshod way could be called reality" (976)) and even a conclusion that "gestures too easily to a conventionality that for most of the way has been repudiated" (976). In NYRB David Lodge presents greater praise and less qualification. He discerns, for instance, a "tour de force of literary pastiche," but regrets Ackroyd's choice to focus the story in the present "since his touch is surer in recreating the past than in representing the present" (15). Lodge's review further laments characterization, stating that the "outrageous grotesques" are "occasionally amusing, but their chatter quickly becomes tiresome, grating on the nerves like squeaky chalk on a blackboard. Fortunately, Ackroyd never lingers with any single set of characters for very long" (15). In like manner he chides Ackroyd for using "his authority as a storyteller to decide the historically undecidable mystery of Chatterton's death" (16). Aside from these shortcomings, Lodge approves of the way the author "ingeniously teases us with a multiplicity of meanings" (16), and "[t]hus does Peter Ackroyd duplicate and deconstruct the oppositions of truth/falsehood, authenticity/forgery, originality/plagiarism. It is a brilliantly ingenious, consciously artificial, and mercifully unpedantic performance" (16).

Despite finding plot and characterization "too artificial" and "too mannered," Peck in "The Novels of Peter Ackroyd" is mostly effusive about Chatterton, which he considers a "great stride from Hawksmoor" because of its "increased readiness to question everything"—

Chatterton is, in the end, a very confident novel; it subverts and is thoroughly sceptical, but at the same time the reader and author occupy a position of power. It is a position of power that results from knowing who Chatterton was, of recognising the painting on the cover of the book, of knowing some of

the details of Chatterton's life in advance, and possibly knowing about Meredith's role in the full story. The more 'literary' the reader, the greater control he/she enjoys. Consequently, the questioning in the novel ruffles, but does not really disturb a cultural self-confidence that the reader and author share. The whole game in the novel may be a fake, but the reader still feels that he/she holds the trump card. In Chatterton then, as in Hawksmoor, the British literary inheritance is part of Ackroyd's subject, but it is also a trap; there is a level at which an apparently sceptical book is a contented bask in the certainties of a received culture. (446-447)

Sabine Hotho-Jackson's brief discussion of Chatterton emphasizes (in a Hutcheon vein) that like Fowles's The French Lieutenant's Woman and Byatt's Possession the novel shows "how tradition is reinterpreted in terms of a malleable entity which is eventually reconstituted in its own right rather than rejected" (113); these texts, Hotho-Jackson contends, "suggest a deconstructive mode" though in fact they truly exhibit "conventionalism" (113): "although Ackroyd questions and deconstructs, he does not destroy" (116); he "questions conventional literary history in order to replace it by an alternative strand in history and thus returns to the safe ground of humanistic affirmation of history" (117). Ackroyd's view of literary tradition, then, according to Hotho-Jackson, perceives it as dialectic: tradition is a constant companion to every poet, as such a riddle, a muse and a burden. There is no originality since history is a palimpsest; the poet cannot detach from the past because without it there would be no creative work. Hotho-Jackson takes Ackroyd to be agreeing with "[Harold] Bloom's conclusion that 'the precursors flood us, and our imagination can die by drowning in them, but no imaginative life is possible if such inundation is wholly evaded'" (117-118). But where Ackroyd diverges from Bloom is at his focus on "weaker poets"—by Hotho-Jackson's inclusive account: "he opens up a way into literary tradition which is touchingly human and extremely democratic because it shows that we are all poets and thus, in so many ways, engaged in making history" (118).

For Onega, Chatterton (Ackroyd's "most metafictional historiographic metafiction" (1998 34)) constitutes a transitional novel, one that openly wonders about "the linguistic nature of writing, the Derridean slippage of meaning and the troubled relationship of the individual writer with the traditions s/he is inscribed in" (34), yet one that ultimately holds

up a "compound cosmic body-and-voice, made up of great poets and artists of the past" through which artist figures can achieve immortality "not, however, on the higher, metaphysical sphere of Plato's Logos, but simply in the all too human realm of the creative imagination" (39-40). Onega construes the novel in near allegorical terms: in her interpretation, it is a novel that relates the efforts of various poets who overcome "a bad case of Bloomian 'anxiety of influence'" (36). Still, Onega readily notes, that while the vision with which Charles's life ends is just a dream it carries for her nonetheless great value—

But it must not be forgotten that although only 'a dream of wholeness and of beauty', 'the vision is real', and that 'All the yearning and all the unhappiness and all the sickness can be taken away by that vision'. The words are Charles's, but they are also, undeniably, Peter Ackroyd's (40).

According to Brian Finney, Peter Ackroyd evaluates "in a poststructuralist light," (250) and his novel, "structured to reflect this essentially deconstructive view" (256), is virtually a manifestation of the positions he took in Notes for a New Culture (which itself "reflects Yale's enthusiastic adoption of contemporary French theory" (241)). In Chatterton, moreover, Finney detects "a stance similar to that adopted by Hayden White," for Ackroyd apparently "shares the poststructuralists' distrust of history as something recoverable" (257)—

There is no such thing as an objective past, let alone a recoverable figure of Chatterton. Wordsworth and his fellow Romantics had constructed their legend around the recently dead poet, a legend which is itself subject to change by a subsequent age. Ackroyd is intent on undermining the Romantic image of Wordsworth's "marvelous boy," Coleridge's "spirit blest," Keats's "child of sorrow," de Vigny's "poète maudit," Oscar Wilde's "pure artist." All that survive from the Romantics' elevation of the alienated gifted artist reliant on his innate imagination are the texts, and these are themselves forgeries. (250)

Ever-summarizing, Finney states that Ackroyd "appears set on over-whelming his readers in a plethora of unending literary borrowings or plagiarisms in which he freely admits his own involvement" (254), and the principal rationale for doing so, is to exert "a serious comment on the false value that the world attaches to originality and authenticity" (255).

(c) Gauging from book review indices, English Music (1992) has been the most widely reviewed—and severely excoriated—of Ackroyd’s novels. Jane Urquhart comments that in the novel Ackroyd “has undertaken to celebrate, perhaps to eulogize, the whole of British (capital C) Cultural life—word, melody and paint,” and yet places herself in the position of “the reader [who] alternates between the suspicion that Ackroyd is ‘having us on’ and the fear that he is not” (C13). She laments, “his story is not without its moral, the gist of which seems to be that British is decidedly best” (C13). T.A. Shippey notes Ackroyd’s “predictability” and his treading on “dangerously familiar ground” (29) in TLS. Yet Shippey ultimately expresses admiration for Ackroyd’s project, both in terms of technique—“And there can be no doubt anyway that Ackroyd is a connoisseur whose pastiches show not only sharp sight and counterfeiting ability, but a deep love of what he is rewriting” (29)—and ethics: “Ackroyd lets little slip. He is a great reminder. Reading him you become conscious of the great wealth of the tradition which normally drifts by us unrecognized” (29). John Barrell’s lengthy review in LRB finds distasteful near-racist parochialism in English Music, and closes his argument with surprisingly politicized rhetoric: “But for the sake of the novel in Britain, let’s hope . . . that this very ‘English’ novel is the last of its breed” (8). Barrell provides an incomplete¹⁰² list of the “pastiches, evocations, ventriloquisations [sic] of the various books and pictures” of the novel and then asks: “What is this all about?” “The alert reader,” says Ackroyd, “will understand”: but this is a book that wears its messages openly upon its sleeve, and only the most myopic reader will miss them” (7). An “account which assimilates all arts and all artists to the same repetitive formula, without variety, without individuality, without history” (7), the novel is portrayed as providing no insight nor provoking much thought. The New Yorker review detects “epistemological confusion” in this “demoralizing” (143) novel, and complains that “Ackroyd’s imitations of Defoe and Blake and Dickens and Malory only remind the reader

¹⁰²With a sarcastic undertone, admittedly: “There are no doubt many more literary references than I picked up on; answers, on a postcard please, not to me but to Ackroyd, c/o Hamish Hamilton, 27 Wrights Lane, London W8 5TZ” (7).

how wan these imitations really are” (Klinkenborg 144). Klinkenborg complains that “mere learning” cannot compensate for the “expansiveness and depth” (143) in which tradition is truly rooted; and so the result is utter banality: “listening to [the narrator] talk to Miss Havisham is like watching Paula Abdul dance with the Gene Kelly of ‘Anchors Away’ in her diet-Coke commercial: it’s a presumptuous equivalent” (143). Michael Levenson in The New Republic supplies another lengthy critique of the perceived politics of the novel. In addition to broad generalizations—remarking on its “cranky overinsistence,” “unabashedly masculinist” position, “feeble masquerade[s],” banality, lack of subtlety (32) and affinity for the “showy technical maneuver” (30)—Levenson asserts that Ackroyd “seeks the vision without the belief: In place of faith English Music offers the imagination, and in place of God, the past” (31), that “the Englishness of the English—‘the one true shape of Britain’—is Ackroyd’s unrelievedly cherished motif” and that “[h]ere at the end of his decade. Ackroyd can chant the word ‘England’—‘Of time. Of continuity. Of England’—without irony, and nearly without cease” (31). Within that chant Levenson sees a “fervent gesture of literary nationalism,” and by asserting “you can never invent a community, you can only inherit one,” the novel “takes its most disagreeable turn and threatens to sink beneath a nationalism into a racialism” (32)—

National greatness issues from a changeless identity, and one can’t help but think, how sad. How sad, and finally how banal, that the yearning to belong must imply an endless return of the same sweet song. In the tedium of the book’s pyrotechnics—one weakly impersonated genius after another—lurks a lesson for certain high-shouldered defenders of the literary canon who claim that greatness is good enough and that monuments alone can feed a culture’s need. Ackroyd inadvertently shows just how closed and airless the history of the great can be, when so little more is said than that they were great, and still are great, and isn’t that great? (32)

Peck’s survey of Ackroyd in English Studies complains of predictability, thematic over-familiarity, routine performance and expected literary echoes (450); English Music, he explains, is a “disappointing retreat” (450) into mundane Ackroyd patter. Peck admires when Ackroyd “dares to defy regularity” and since in English Music he “is not prepared to take apart the structure he is putting together” (451), he spends little effort analyzing it.

Hermann Josef Schnackertz argues in "Peter Ackroyd's Fictions and the Englishness of English Literature" that following the radicalism of Notes for a New Culture, "Ackroyd's ensuing fictions have turned out to be much less radical and less experimental in the formal sense that one might have expected" (494).¹⁰³ He counterpoises a reading of English Music

¹⁰³There is much fall-out from Linda Hutcheon's work in criticism of Ackroyd. In fact, her inclusion of Ackroyd in her studies of postmodernism appear to act as the matrix for subsequent discussions. For instance, Schnackertz's (1990) footnote near this point refers to Alison Lee's study, Realism and Power (1990) for support. Specifically he refers to a page in which Lee is providing a reading of Ackroyd's Hawksmoor (in a passage that also discusses Ian Watson's Chekhov's Journey and Nigel Williams's Star Turn as significant examples of Hutcheon-coined "historiographic metafiction," that which "simultaneously creates and subverts the Realist convention of an unproblematically constituted, individual 'subject' who is the prime mover of events, and from whom essential meaning emanates" (55)). Lee reads Hawksmoor—"vehemently anti-empirical" (60), "a postmodern historiographic metafiction" (68)—as thematizing postmodern "play with Realist convention, but, more, with convention in general" (60): "because the agenda of postmodern texts is a paradoxical one in their simultaneous presentation and subversion of Realist conventions, there is a constant tension [in the novel] between past and present, presence and absence, construction and destruction" (70). (Other surveys of Ackroyd and historiographic metafiction include Onega (1993, 1995a, 1995b) and Elias (1993, 1995))

Linda Hutcheon herself, "who first taught [Lee] about postmodernism" (Lee vi), also cursorily discusses Hawksmoor, Star Turn and Chekhov's Journey in A Poetics of Postmodernism (1988). She cites Hawksmoor as an example of the kind of fiction that exemplifies her postmodern poetics—one aptly summarized with a quotation from Lyotard's (1984) essay, "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?": "A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgement, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for" (Hutcheon 1988 15).

In The English Novel in History 1950-1995 (1996) Steven Connor takes issue with both Hutcheon's and Lee's reckless absorption of Ackroyd and Hawksmoor into their postmodern cause and their reading of the novel's philosophy of history itself. Whereas, according to Connor, Lee finds in Hawksmoor "the relativity or undecidability of historical truth" and Hutcheon perceives "the enactment, as well as the theorisation, of 'the impossibility of final meaning'" (143), Connor himself detects that the "novel sets recurrence against irreversibility, proposing against a developmental view of history a spatialised view which sees history as occurring all at once" (144). The political dimension of such a perspective on the workings of history disturbs Connor—

"In such a spatialised view of history, everything has both already happened and is yet to come, held in store for its inevitable repetition in a future that is only the ghostly reenactment of the past. But if such a view of history indeed dissolves the clear differentiations between past and present that conventional history requires, it equally neutralises the possibility of the conflict, productive or otherwise, between different or incommensurable historical realities or forms of understanding. Such a view substitutes for the coherence of a view of history founded upon continuous linear progress the coherence of history as a closed and echoing plenitude" (144).

Furthermore, Connor adds, "the very fact of seeming to make this historical language and consciousness so abundantly available to the contemporary reader risks confirming rather than disturbing the reader's historical confidence. The act of taking possession of the language of the historical Other, in a novel that appears to be about a reverse process, in which the present comes to an awareness of the ways in which it is 'possessed' by the past, enacts both of the principal functions of narrative at once: its apparent eviction or displacement of the contemporary reader in fact restores that reader whole to his or her sense of historical belonging" (145). He concludes thus: "It is in the completeness of the assimilation and the suppression of self-consciousness that this most historical of novels seems at once to raise and evade the difficulties of history" (146).

Coincidentally, in his examination of *Hawksmoor* in *Postmodernism and Notions of National Difference* (1996), Geoffrey Lord invokes the exact same comment about the "impossibility of final meaning" (137) in Hutcheon's *Poetics*. Lord utilizes Ackroyd as a "postmodern" writer who is also a "British" one, and situates him in juxtaposition to Donald Barthelme ("postmodern" and "American") in order to illustrate differing national attitudes toward the national past. Whereas, Lord conjectures with surprising generalities, American culture is "persistently presentminded" and "remains future-oriented and markedly obsessed with the idea of breaking with the past to found something new" (102), "Britain is still a country habituated with looking back" and one where evidence of "the importance of the past . . . is widespread" (101).

In Lord's view, "the idea of continuity seems in itself to constitute meaning" for Ackroyd. Lord contends that *Hawksmoor*'s linguistic and structural strategies "generate[] a cumulative awareness of the ubiquity of the past" (130), and this weighty ubiquity leads naturally to the circularity of history so readily apparent in Ackroyd's novels—

"[*Hawksmoor*] suggests that all time is one, and even the slightest gesture, like raising an arm or a simple reference to dust, comes to seem significant because it is connected to a foreshadowing parallel in a complex of recurrences. Through Ackroyd's imaginative excavations, life as presented in the novel takes on the quality of a palimpsest. The idea of life as a palimpsest is a view that matches attitudes to the past said to typify the English bias toward the old" (134).

In the end, Ackroyd's "negotiation of the writing style of the past is not designed to bring about a new form of expression, rather he demonstrates a control of an already existing and knowable entity, albeit with the purpose of showing the linguistic nature of that world and how it can be recreated through language" (114). Ackroyd's circular philosophy of history in turn supports Lord's typology for national literary sentiments: "As a base premise, for an English writer, the world/language remains a given to which the individual is bound" (but to the future-oriented American writer, it is "something to be (re)made by the individual") (114). Seemingly haplessly tied to a "given" world and language, Ackroyd reiterates his Englishness, though with a gloss of postmodern open-endedness.

Luc Herman utilizes *Hawksmoor* in his essay, "The Relevance of History" (1990), in order to "investigate the practical outcome" (107) of the seeming contradiction described by Hutcheon, that historiographic metafiction "reinstalls historical contexts as significant and even determining, but in doing so, it problematizes the entire notion of historical knowledge" (1988 89). Herman is curious about this effect on the reader—

"Is he encouraged to cling to history and to continue to search that past for relevant insights, regardless of their 'poor' epistemological status, or do the postmodern representation tactics rather incite him to cherish relativism, possibly as a shield against any (ethical) involvement?" (107).

With evident dismay Herman notes Ackroyd's "playing around with the facts as they can be found in reference works," the novel's "marked tendency towards falsification" of

with Chatterton in order to highlight the ambivalence he perceives in Ackroyd's relationship with "traditional literary culture" (494). Schnackertz discusses Ackroyd's early fiction in approving tones because they "never pretend that they are anything else but fictional constructions, subjective visions, reinventions and rearrangements of a cultural past that can only be made accessible through a staging of various textual voices" (495). Yet whereas Chatterton "highlights questions of artistic originality, of truth and invention, of imitation and plagiarism as well as forgery and literary make-belief," for Schnackertz the disreputable English Music "offers a nostalgic retrospection, conjuring up an allegedly genuine tradition of English art and literature in a web of intertextual configurations" (495). Attempting "nothing less than an imaginary re-appropriation of English culture" (498), Ackroyd succeeds only in creating "a strangely flawed nostalgic elegy" that is especially "irritating" (500) to Schnackertz because of its quasi-racial(ist) exclusivity—

In the case of English Music, the recombination of various voices is just a form of recycling of the past which does not open up any new perspectives. The novel neither brings to light that which has been suppressed, nor does it mirror the reverse side of culture, which would otherwise remain hidden. Neither does Ackroyd's eclectic vision of Englishness function as an instrument of exploring the problems and concerns of the present. The main task which contemporary literature has to perform seems to be that of preserving the

language and "simplification: Ackroyd only gives a very schematic presentation of the two protagonists, Dyer and Wren, who appear as the typical representatives of incompatible ideologies" (114). Without ever mentioning Hutcheon or postmodernism again, Herman's "practical outcome" with regard to Ackroyd is ultimately only confusion and pique. He expresses annoyance for being forced into a game in Hawksmoor, wonders aloud whether "mystery is not too trivialized" (122) by the novel and concludes on an ambivalent note: "If insights are to be gained from the past as it is represented by Ackroyd, their epistemological value will inevitably be poor, so that the effect of the contemporary falsification is only secondary to the essentially vague form of historical 'truth'" (123).

Acknowledging Hutcheon's Poetics contention that "postmodern texts confront and rewrite history" (167) Aleid Fokkema's provocatively titled essay, "Abandoning the Postmodern? The Case of Peter Ackroyd" (1993), would appear to be pursuing the proper placement or categorization of Ackroyd. Yet the essay is essentially descriptive, and when it is not, it supplies incautious encapsulation that merely provokes questions Fokkema comes nowhere close to answering—"Ackroyd is an advocate of the irrational" (170); "Time [in Hawksmoor] is a continuum, and history therefore an illusion—which may explain why the critical left have objections to Ackroyd's work" (174); the novel's "irrational system of thought . . . helps dealing with the postmodern condition" (177). How the novel is helpful, why history becomes an illusion or what "the critical left" may be remain obscure. (See also: Fokkema (1991), de Lange (1993).)

memory of the greatness of England's cultural heritage. In spite of the use of postmodern techniques, English Music does not show the playful irreverence towards tradition normally associated with postmodernism. (501-502)

With this last dismissal of the novel Schnackertz also highlights the orthodoxy of Hutcheon-style postmodernism in literature—the good postmodern novel should bring to light that which has been suppressed, act as an instrument to explore contemporary problems and show playful irreverence toward tradition. It is in Chatterton that Onega first notices a transformation in Ackroyd's novelistic demeanor. She claims that whereas in The Great Fire of London Ackroyd had “condemned himself with his characters to the isolation and seclusion of the ‘prison-house of language’” (31, 40) change is evident in the 1987 novel—

in Chatterton the writer manages to liberate Charles Wychwood from the shackles of time and the “fall” into history by assuming, with Blake, the transcendental dimension of the human imagination. From now on, Ackroyd will take this idea for granted in every new novel, and will develop it to its ultimate consequences in one of his most Dickensian novels, English Music. (40)

In English Music, then, Onega observes a culmination of thought and the completion of a trajectory. Onega states that by the end of the novel, the narrator, Timothy Harcombe, has been positioned as kind of Ackroyd alter ego. He has—

has developed the very capacity Ackroyd has always been trying to achieve by absorbing and recasting the voices of his “strong predecessors” in his poetry, biographies and fiction: the capacity to reproduce the very sound of “English music”, the imaginative human equivalent of the music of the spheres, the product of the sum total of the voices of every writer and artist in the history of English civilization. (42)

Yet Onega notes that his “sum total” apparently embodied and/or experienced by Harcombe/Ackroyd remains imperfect since it is ever only dramatized, a representation or perhaps allegory of the quest for fusion with or incorporation into the chorus of “voices of every writer and artist in the history of English civilization”:

Thus, the novel reveals itself both as a Borgesian Library of Babel and as Blake's Spiritual or Cosmic Body, a paradoxical textual/imaginary world, trapping Ackroyd/the other individual writers in the

English canon within its cardboard walls and simultaneously allowing him/them to live/write in unison in the eternal and sublime yet all too human (and specifically English) World of Art created by the power of Peter Ackroyd's imagination. (42)

(d) Published one year after the much reviled English Music, The House of Doctor Dee (1993) received surprisingly little attention, as though the novel's familiarity of theme and form warranted its being overlooked. Eric Korn's TLS review is diffident. Korn plots a line of biographical highlights of "this ever-interesting figure" to support his notion that "Dee's genuine career is impressive" (20)—

Cambridge, Louvain, Sorbonne, Hungary, Venice; absentee rector of Upton-on-Severn, principal of Manchester College; research grants, presents, and occasional charges of treason from four successive English monarchs; expelled from Prague at the request of the bishop of Piacenza; stage-designer, geometer, chemist, archeologist, author of fifty books, cryptographer, first projector of the British Library, measurer and mapper of newfound lands to the Virgin Queen, explicator-in-chief of all scientific novelties to the Court (the supernova of 1572 and the comet of 1577; no wonder they watched the skies!); and, of course, neoplatonist philosopher, alchemist, astrologer. sryer, possible spy, glossolalist and dupe. (20)

Having established that Dee was monumental in Renaissance Europe and after ("archetype of Faustus, Prospero and Magoo"), Korn turns to The House of Doctor Dee. He concedes that Ackroyd brings Dee "to convincing, if garish life," and then provides a concise plot summary. While Korn does not state it, the structure of his review makes the historical Dee clearly much more complexly developed than he is in Ackroyd's novel; even the novel's visionary qualities, Korn regards as "too easily" achieved. In a like manner Jane Urquhart's Globe and Mail review expresses ambivalence. She admires Ackroyd's "painstaking . . . labours, sifting through layer after layer of human architecture, human experience, until he is able, and we are able, to believably connect past and present" (C18), but notes his employment of "devices that have been used by countless other architects of haunted houses" and that the novel pivots on "the interesting, if not altogether original, question of who is haunting whom" (C18). In the Spectator Francis King calls Dee an "imperfect but always ingenious and arresting novel," that evokes Dee's Elizabethan world

superbly: “every detail has the confident ring of authenticity” (27). King also finds the novel’s mysticism “perplexing,” and notes in regard to it “there is some failure of total realisation here, as there is some lack of total coherence” (27). And, strangely, in a review that admires Ackroyd’s convincing representation of Elizabethan London, King opens the review by recalling that the historical Doctor John Dee (“one of the most influential figures in the thought of Elizabethan England”) resided by the Thames at Mortlake and not in Clerkenwell as in the novel. King suggests this transposition is “significant,” and then contradicting himself, that as “in this author’s Hawksmoor and Chatterton, it would be foolish and futile to look for historical accuracy” (27) because faithful representation is not something he is interested in sustaining.

Because of its relatively recent publication date the novel has not received scholarly attention, excepting Onega’s brief overview publication. Seeing that The House of Doctor Dee “shares with Hawksmoor and First Light the same conception of myth” (55), Onega performs a reading of the novel that emphasizes both its mythical elements and integrity and its continuity with what she detects as Ackroyd’s visionary project. Onega does not read the novel so much as historical fiction as an allegory of and recipe for spiritual enlightenment. Her understanding of the novel and its purpose is built on what she sees as its fundamental design: Dee’s house’s “condition of umbilicus/axis mundi, that is, of being the navel/centre of the world” and “both the microcosmic replica of ‘London eternal’ and its centre” (60), its three storeys “may be said to replicate the ternarius or cosmic levels” (59), four differently-coloured doors “are the alchemical colours of the quaternarius, that is, the four basic constitutive elements” (59). She closes her encapsulation of the novel by asserting that the structure of the novel itself reflects Ackroyd’s spiritual concerns (culminating in the “transdimensional and atemporal chapter, ‘The Vision’” (64)), and provides a kind of map for the astute reader—

Thus, making good the Behemites’ belief that “the universe itself was in the shape of a single person” . . . The House of Doctor Dee shows its hidden condition of hieroglyphic monad, and reveals itself as a two-dimensional, yet infinite World/Book, the materialization of the spiritual body of a series of

living creatures who can be seen either as homunculi or as anthropoi, as literary characters or as historical figures, for, like the mythical City/Book they inhabit and jointly beget, their nature strictly depends on the reader's capacity to find and follow the footsteps left by Matthew/Dee/Ackroyd "for those that might find [them]." (65)

Seemingly armed with her hermeneutic's authority, Onega asserts that Ackroyd's novel (which manages to include Ackroyd himself and the historical figures he represents) leaves a path which, contingent on their "capacity," readers can follow on their journey to enlightenment.

(e) The torrent of criticism to which these "middle period" novels have been subjected is not easily contained, categorized or channeled into discrete streams; the criticism is resistant to consolidating gestures simply because it is so polyform: not only is there a plethora of quibbles (laboured comedy, annoyingly facile characters, inconsistency, etc.) and plentiful praise (to recall some superlative descriptions: "unfailingly intelligent," "virtuoso," "tour de force," "superb," and so on), but the critics directly and indirectly introduce significant, broadly moral considerations in their evaluations, and situate Ackroyd and his novels within questions (such as "What is good literature?" and "What is (good) literary postmodernism?") whose underlying assumptions include the cultural importance of literature as a forum for intellectual debate and a site of learning/teaching. When a novel like English Music can prompt one critic to state he hopes it represents "the last of its breed" (Barrell 8) and another to claim that its troubling and distasteful political dimensions should force readers "to think harder about the commonplaces of postmodernism" (Levenson 30), then it is evident that critical investment in the meaning of literature goes well beyond the assessment of its powers to entertain, to tell a good story; the criticism presupposes the political power of literature to sway readers and so demands from the producers of literature some modality of ethics.

While we can take it for granted that the criticism of these novels does not fall into rigid ideological camps, it is worthwhile to note some of its salient general qualities, especially as they pertain to historicism and postmodernism in literature, for these qualities

reveal some of the unstated norms that quietly operate within the criticism. On the one hand, then (and to generalize), there is a mode of critical discourse like that expressed by Hollinghurst, that expresses disappointment with Ackroyd because of the perceived lack of verisimilitude in his novel. When Hollinghurst complains of Hawksmoor being untouched by responsibility, his tone has an uncanny resemblance to a commonplace critical perspective we might call Leavisite or even Arnoldian—that literature must take its pedagogical cultural role seriously if it is to be classed as “significant” or “great.” Furthermore, Hollinghurst seemingly shares a similarity of ideology with a stream of critics of historical fiction exemplified by Fleishman, Renault and others (with Plato as the possible founder of their tribe): such criticism assumes the necessity of an author being earnest and having the desire to responsibly reproduce and reflect the world and its past with accuracy, with imaginative sympathy and with ethical responsibility. All else is lying, and so unethical.¹⁰⁴ In contradistinction are positions exemplified by Donoghue and Oates that suggest that exactitude of representation of a past historical actuality is by no means the principal of Ackroyd’s goals; such a position is a de facto defining of Ackroyd’s work as something outside the boundary of conventional historical fiction, and so side-steps that matter of ethical responsibility. Oates’s statement that Hawksmoor is a “treatise, or testament” on the subject of evil and “primarily a novel of ideas” (3) effectively removes its historicism and the need for accuracy; for her, “evil” is a human trait and condition whose perennial presence transcends the vicissitude of history. And Donoghue, who is more closely aligned with the model of postmodernity championed by Linda Hutcheon, suggests that Ackroyd, so intrigued by selfhood and its dissolution and proliferation, “cannot be content to write historical novels” and is “not interested in discovering ‘how it was’” because he is fascinated with only those “who do not consent to coincide with their official

¹⁰⁴ Truth is after all the primary aim. To recall Renault’s manifesto-like statement of her cause: “Often of course I must have done through ignorance what would horrify me if I could revisit the past . . . but one can at least desire the truth; and it is inconceivable to me how anyone can decide deliberately to betray it” (McEwan 19).

lineaments"—"Mr. Ackroyd seems to reject the implication, in the historical novel, that people coincide with themselves and settle for the one life which the decorum of historical narration gives them" (40). Donoghue's delineation of Chatterton and in fact Ackroyd's entire fictional corpus asserts its putative rebuttal of the ethos of historical novels as a literary form with something of significance to claim; under Donoghue's guidance, the species "historical novel" becomes naive and moribund, while Ackroyd and his work put on the fashionable face of the quintessentially "playful" postmodernist whose complex practices challenge readerly assumptions and genre norms.

3. History: Inside and Outside the Story

If Ackroyd's styles of historicism are gauged and commented on in the criticism of his fiction, it is no doubt because that large field—history—is a central focus and distinguishing characteristic of Hawksmoor, Chatterton, English Music and The House of Doctor Dee. At a glance, each novel presents in familiar historical novelistic fashion recreations of recognizable past historical times—and places, figures and events. Unlike their literary forebears, however, these novels juxtapose their past-times chapters with counterparts set in the present day. Furthermore, the fictions propose a type of unbroken and direct (if vague and metaphysical) causal link between past and present. In contrast to the ideal form championed by Fleishman and Lukács, the history-in-fiction of these novels—progressing away from the mundane stuff of actuality and toward an ultimate metaphysical jump—does not serve particularly well as an adequate representation of (past) material conditions and institutions that affected individual and society alike, and that led to transformations still readily apparent (to the reader¹⁰⁵) in contemporary society. Moreover,

¹⁰⁵Ackroyd's "metaphysical detective story" (Merivale and Sweeney 5), Hawksmoor, also offers readers another game. In "The Complex Architectonics of Postmodern Fiction: Hawksmoor—A Case Study," Adriaan de Lange remarks that open-endedness and circularity are important postmodern devices (146), and then reads the conclusion of Hawksmoor as an example of these techniques in play. De Lange notes there are three possible conclusions for the novel, one of which offers "an indefinite number" (155) of endings. The novel's foregrounded intertextuality makes it so: "the interplay between past and present fictions ensures that the pressure of anterior literature is always present in the act of reading, i.e., the experience of past books intrudes fruitfully on our

the narrative's perspectival purview, what Massie calls the "extreme artificiality" of the portrayal and what Donoghue frames as a figural non-coincidence with the "official lineaments . . . of historical narration" (40)—in short, the insufficiency of the representation as properly conventional quasi-historiography—effectively delimits the putative pedagogic function that serves as the genre's *raison d'être* within a Fleishmanian (via Cam, Butterfield, Renault) rationale. Given the restrictions of the standard (educative, pedagogic, civilization-enhancing) "historical effect" in the novels, questions about the additional roles of history within them will then surface. Accordingly, too, while criticism of the "more or less accurate" school and its failure-of-realisation measurements may express discontent with Ackroyd's "version" of history-telling (i.e., the "Acknowledgments" of *Hawksmoor*: "this version of history is my own invention"), the novels' perspectives about history require critical approaches perhaps less predicated on evaluating the relative acuity or truthfulness of the representation than on possible alternative significations of history within the text.

Curiously, there is a shared trait to much Ackroyd criticism that has gone without mention, one which leads indirectly to a consideration of the stratification of historical signification in his fiction. This trait links academic approaches as disparate as those of Onega and Peck with journalistic reviews whose range runs from Hollinghurst through to Levenson, Lodge and Donoghue. Criticism of Ackroyd's novels that is either hostile or appreciative nevertheless conflates Ackroyd and his novels; his fiction, bluntly, is regarded as the mouthpiece for Ackroyd's views, and as such the historicity in them frequently becomes framed as subordinate to, yet interconnected with, the political or philosophical position the author has posited. Needless to say such a hermeneutic has obvious limitations.

reception and interpretation of the present one" (156). The game is essentially one of academic detection: apparently, the reader with the broadest knowledge of past texts 'gets' the novel better than anyone else.

Yet before considering the criticism of Ackroyd's versions of history-telling, I will begin by examining roles of historicity within the texts proper. Over this section in general, I would like to employ a conceit that enables a bifurcated reading of Ackroyd's fiction, and which engages both fiction as a self-contained world and criticism that posits the fiction as in fact programmatic, and nothing if not a form of communicating that posits and entrenches political ideologies—step-by-step recommendations or prescriptions for being in the world. The first part of the discussion, "History Within the Worlds of the Novels," remains focussed on the roles differing modalities of history play in context to character development, social forms and, ultimately, psychic transformation. Since these novels often feature doubled quests in discrete epochs that culminate in a seeming eradication of that troublesome temporal-cultural distance, it is imperative to emphasize an interpretive schema that accounts for the nature of the relationship between characters and the historical periods that bore them. The discussion's second part, "History/Novels/Audiences," is admittedly cursory, a glance at the novels mediated—read, in other words, and interpreted as signifying along one specific political line, stating something about its author's didactic relationship in the world. Thus it is that Levenson can, via fiction, understand the progress of real-world Ackroyd as a transition from being a Derridean and "Yale School" postmodernist to being a conservative who utilizes the slack truisms of postmodernism to present a near-fascist vision of England as racially pure, culturally enlightened and unchanging. Not to mention: an author whose novels are in effect manifestos reflecting this decade-long alteration in personal politics. Or in like fashion, Onega delineates Doctor Dee and Hawksmoor as elaborately coded works that in part serve to enlighten readers about the (Ackroydian) truth in regard to the secrets of actual historical transcendence. Rather than refute these politicized readings of Ackroyd and/or his fiction, I propose opening up the texts further so that the putative singularity of their politics is placed under pressure. The political dimension in the work is such that its multiplicity can function in diverse directions, and even contradictorily.

i. History Within the Worlds of the Novels

The starting point for this section is history and paternity. It is an indisputable point that the two concepts are intertwined to such a degree in these novels they are virtually synonymous; here, men exist because they are products of history and past historical time exists in a sense because the questing protagonists imagine they need it in order to situate themselves in historicity of the present day. Though what these characters (Nicholas Hawksmoor in Hawksmoor, Charles Wychwood in Chatterton, Timothy Harcombe in English Music, Matthew Palmer in The House of Doctor Dee) apparently seek is relief from an anxiety that stems from their sense of profound disconnection from the social continuum, the stories of their odysseys invariably involve them with Delphic (if downtrodden) male figures. Engagement with such powerful men solves personal dilemmas and, furthermore, acts as an instantaneous portal into a highly specific kind of historicity—which is, contradictorily, portrayed as a kind of metaphysical, non-material actuality that, above all, provides ontological security or grounded subjectivity for the formerly restive and untethered individuals who connect with it. Before that contact, though, history remains something of a cheat and disappointment. For Ackroyd's protagonists, to be historical subjects, to read about history, to study historical artifacts and to reside in a pre-eminently historical metropolis is only ever to directly experience the insufficiency of their comprehension of past historical moments as well as the debilitating distance between the present day and those lost moments; as in Chatterton, the single portrait of the poet turns out to be forged, and the poet's purported manuscripts are equally unreliable: history in the usual senses is judged unfit to anchor subjectivity because it remains permanently distant and out of reach.

Escape into that oxymoronic timeless historicity, then, is the sole solution the disaffected protagonists of the novels can muster, even though in practical terms that escape may also result in psychic annihilation and corporeal death. Unlike in a realist work like Margaret Drabble's The Radiant Way (1987), for instance—a novel contemporaneous

with Ackroyd's Chatterton whose design tracks characters who contribute and respond to historical changes in England circa 1980 that were wrought by both individuals and institutions (and a novel in which individual characters are unable to ever transcend their reality yet remain determined to engage with and alter it when feasible)—the unfortunate predicament of the emblematic individual¹⁰⁶ of contemporary culture exhibited in novels like English Music and The House of Doctor Dee is seemingly unreparable; and the usual suspects—family, companionship, career, religion, narcotics—do not suffice as substitutes. While the characters crave meaningful connections that will give their very existence significance, they have no means to do so except through a visionary, metaphysical jump that effectively eliminates alienation as it transports them out of their time—an event which they do not knowingly initiate and over which they have little mastery. And given the unparalleled fullness and enormity of that engagement with historical presence, mundane interaction with contemporary historical unfoldings and the bare adequacy of the textual history of a Michel Foucault or Hayden White—in short, historical sites (a Roman ruin, a Palladian residence, a late medieval church, the typanum of a Victorian museum) or multifarious inscribed texts that are readily legible yet partial and opaque, whose very meaning and significance is necessarily subject to (mis)interpretation—pales in comparison and hardly warrants attention: why live in a dull corridor of obscure historical artifacts when you can literally become part of eternal, living History? And it is not just any eternity. It is one spent with la crème de la crème, the

¹⁰⁶Secondary figures (“non-emblematic” if only because they do not spend the same amount of time ‘on stage’ and are not given the same symbolic weight in the story) do not suffer the same fate as the Ackroyd protagonist. Figures like Edward Campion in English Music, Harriet Scrope, Vivien Wychwood and Philip Slack in Chatterton, John Vanbrugghe in Hawksmoor and Daniel Moore in The House of Doctor Dee, for instance, do not die nor ascend into metaphysical historicity. The matter of paternity (and the attendant theme of solving the alienation problem) is also absent from their lives. Yet their very marginality in the novels renders their workable existences (i.e., that they can live in the world of mundane history and need not transcend it in order to thrive) somehow less meaningful. Compared to the central, dramatic apotheosis of a Hawksmoor or a Harcombe, a Campion or Slack appears ovine if not merely mediocre. Content to exist on the plane of the everyday, these often campy comic figures are not granted access to the exalted realm their colleagues encounter—and disappear into.

distilled essence of quintessential English artistic and intellectual temperaments. Why keep your day job?

And because they opt out of their culture and history, the situation that has produced such anxiety and alienation remains essentially unchanged. In contrast to the kind of societal amelioration scheme commonly associated with both historical fiction and realism (like in the Drabble novel mentioned above) and exemplified by the famous epigraph, “Only connect,” of E.M. Forster’s Howard’s End—a prefatory nudge in a novel that may serve as an allegory or model of vital interpersonal engagement and dynamic society-building—the Ackroydian mise en scène does not feature a progressive interaction between person and environment. Rather, just the opposite: the two remain adrift; protagonists at no time embrace the society in which they actually reside, and society does not benefit from the protagonists’ input nor offer them a comfortable place at its expansive table. As the multitude of crazy vagrants, incidents of random violence, and avenues of ruined architecture and creeping disintegration attest, beginning with The Great Fire of London entropy and chaos remain the salient aspects in Ackroyd’s representation of contemporary city and country living. These active forces are forever working toward dismantling interpersonal and individual-cultural connections and fomenting both personal angst and social anomie. It is alienation, in fact, that is regularly associated with the contemporary in all the novels: a pall of detachment and futility covers all, even the comic figures in both The Great Fire of London and First Light; and the narrator heroes of Hawksmoor, Chatterton, English Music and The House of Doctor Dee not only live in a place marred by dissolution, despair and crime, but are themselves remarkable for their “orphaned” status—when not literally orphans their outstanding characteristics include distant relationships with (already distant) parents and sundry familial ties, an absence of valuable marital or romantic relations, and an expressed sense of not being connected to community (familial, tribal, ideological, national).

Yet these novels do not inaugurate any recuperative motif that would either serve to rehabilitate the text's portrayal of societal decay and individual unhappiness or join the two for synergistic productivity; when an Ackroydian protagonist dies (Chatterton), retires from society (English Music) or is subsumed (Hawksmoor, The House of Doctor Dee), he ultimately remains removed from the culture that produced him. If there is a sense that the protagonist is "saved" via his engagement with a vital though immaterial core of English culture, it is equally clear that, paradoxically, this exclusive core effectively rescues and excises him from his own historical place—implicitly a moment in time and national history that has no cultural value (and, oddly, is not "English") because it is decadent, vapid and void of historical significance. Such an unimpressive present day recalls Collingwood's comment about the mores of "certain" history writers:

Certain historians, sometimes whole generations of historians, find in certain periods of history nothing intelligible, and call them dark ages; but such phrases tell us nothing about those ages themselves, though they tell us a great deal about the persons who use them. (Holton 19)

If present day England is viewed as one such 'dark age,' the matter of what sustenance a person from another age can provide remains uncertain.

The protagonist's absorption of what might be called eternal Englishness, furthermore, leaves open the question of how the culture or place in which he resides should be understood. And while the past cannot be said to offer some prelapsarian vision of enchanted, Edenic wholeness—the epochs of John Dee and Nicholas Dyer are portrayed, after all, as being rife with disaffection—it none the less acts as a repository of pre-twentieth century traditional forms (music, painting, literature, etc.) and persons (Chatterton, Dee, Dyer, etc.) that supply present-day questing men with their Grail. History in the form of "ancestral" ties and the cultural "knowledge" that comes with them is an anchor that also poses a solution to this matter of disconnection. For "lost somewhere" (15) Matthew Palmer, a foundling, Doctor Dee and his stratified house offer the answer to the riddle of his severed paternity, lost childhood and unstable identity; for Nicholas

Hawksmoor detective's personality, Nicholas Dyer provides not only the evidence necessary of solving a murder spree but a pattern that calms the protagonist's overwhelming panic in the face of patternlessness; Charles Wychwood believes that the purported lost manuscripts of Thomas Chatterton (and the reconfiguring biographical information that comes with them) will result in a fame that will in turn nurture his own self-identification as a poet; and the broad canvas of "English music" is the inheritance that Timothy Harcombe needs to literally incorporate before he has the ability to find peace and feel connected to the nationality he bears. The vision is fundamentally consumeristic: instead of being a wisdom-through-slow-learning model, or a paradigm of 'finding yourself' by coming to comprehend your (culture's) past, the historical consciousness presented here is more a matter of finding 'just the right thing that's so you.' Once found, that talismanic figure or artifact guarantees a cure for what ails the heretofore discontented protagonist.

While the foregoing elucidation of general narratorial tendencies in Ackroyd's "middle-period" fiction has illustrated the link of causality in the relationship between disconnected protagonists and history, it has not so far examined specific elements of the relationships that actively undermine or subtly place into question that ostensibly perfect symmetry or complementarity. The neat equations—(disaffected protagonist + degenerated society = contemporary Ackroydian London) and (disaffected protagonist + degenerated society + present History = grounded protagonist [+ degenerated society])—act then as a sketchy map of Ackroydland. In light of the generalized non-consistent or multidirected functioning of structures and thematics in Ackroyd's fictions (like the scatter-shot workings of camp and pastiche discussed earlier), there are additional elements to note and that need be examined if a mapping of greater detail is to occur. These elements relate to vital queries: If Timothy Harcombe has "heard the music" and "no longer need[s] to open the old books" (400) and Matthew Palmer joins with John Dee (and an "T" associated with Peter Ackroyd) at the literal end of his textual journey, what is the significance of what they

have learned, seen, heard or gained? What does it mean to absorb "English music"? By addressing specific questions the following segments aim to specifically examine central figures and structures of the novels in context to their relationship with history, and in doing so provide additional thought in regard to the aforementioned Ackroyd fiction historical-function equation mentioned above.

(a) What sort of exemplar is Timothy Harcombe?

Considering that Nicholas Hawksmoor and Matthew Palmer undergo kinds of transcendent psychological fugues that enable them, respectively, to share "one voice," form an eternal "circle" and become "a child again, begging on the threshold of eternity" (217) and to "become one" with a "mystical city universal" (277), and that the more mundane Charles Wychwood experiences a vision-enhancing (if fatal) brain tumour, Timothy Harcombe is the sole survivor of the protagonists in Ackroyd's middle period novels. While by Onega's delineation history is the wellspring of Ackroyd's tradition of "writers . . . who have a strong sense of the sacredness of place and of communal bondage, and try to exorcise the fear of darkness through the visionary potential of art and literature" (81), it is nevertheless difficult to overlook the tendency of his protagonists to find in 'history' an extra, deleterious role: it generates psychic transformation, transcendence and presumed disappearance or else death (of the earthly body, at least). Of these modified-by-mysticism protagonists, then, Harcombe alone remains in contemporary society when his journey has reached completion. When he remarks at the close of his retrospective narrative, "I am an old man now, and I live alone in the farmhouse. I no longer read the books which my father left me, but I keep them in the room which once belonged to my mother" (399), he is also announcing his success at incorporating his quasi-genetic and cultural heritage as well as portraying himself as unexpectedly self-sufficient: as though because he has taken in tradition he no longer has any need or desire for contemporary society; he lives alone in a farmhouse far removed from London, the standard epicentre of culture and spirit in Ackroyd's fiction.

Yet what kind of a figure is Harcombe, how might his position be read? Like Onega,¹⁰⁷ Levenson interprets Ackroyd teleologically, as an author whose novels faithfully reflect the progress of his personal politics. If Onega gauges that progress as a move from a broadly post-structural suspicion of language as anything more than an arbitrary arrangement of words to a more conventional position that fulfils the “need to use language as an instrument for the communication of human experience and values” (21), then for Levenson the development is a refitting of radical early beliefs to include fast-growing conservative ones. As Levenson states: “Now with English Music a ten-year process appears to have run its course. Ackroyd hasn’t just produced another novel; he has arrived somewhere, and it’s suddenly possible to see the arc he has travelled” (29). In place of the “camp nihilism that grins in the flames” (30) which predates English Music, Levenson detects in Ackroyd a “new conviction” which virtually refutes that former position—

The earlier insight, dripping with comic juices, that we are rudely coerced by scripts from the dead past, gave way to the thought that those scripts from the dead may be the best things we have. We late moderns may be the living dead, but we needn’t surrender all hope: the true dead are all around us. If only we can learn to meet them, to acknowledge them, to weave ourselves into a compact with them, then we may all come alive together. (30)

More than mere fiction for Levenson, English Music is Ackroyd’s ideological summa and terminus—Levenson sees Ackroyd utilizing “postmodern” and “contemporary maneuvers” (“so often held up as acts of subversion and liberation”) in “the service of Tory nostalgia” (32). In English Music the critic simultaneously detects a transparent allegory and an instruction set with attendant will-to-truth, effectively denying the novel’s status as literature. In doing so he also takes Harcombe’s visions as legitimate (and as direct

¹⁰⁷Who explains Ackroyd’s modus operandi succinctly: “To sum up, where in The Great Fire of London, Ackroyd, incapable of pledging his faith in the existence of an Absolute Logos, had condemned himself with his characters to the isolation and seclusion of the prison-house of language, in Chatterton the writer manages to liberate Charles Wychwood from the shackles of time and the ‘fall’ into history by assuming, with Blake, the transcendental dimension of the human imagination. From now on, Ackroyd will take this idea for granted in every new novel, and will develop it to its ultimate consequences in one of his most Dickensian novels, English Music (1992)” (40).

expression of Ackroyd's belief in the unrivalled singularity of the English artistic canon), and furthermore implicitly positions Harcombe himself as role model or exemplar: he is the lone English man Ackroyd valorizes as the heir of the "English music"-al tradition; all others—in short, the remaining characters in the novel—cannot hear the music and do not, therefore, warrant the attention of readers.

Yet if Harcombe's acts of retrospection describe an eventual and exemplary immersion into and occupation by "English music"—a sketchy continuum that admittedly resembles a cursory survey course of select "greats" in English literary history—it also describes an individual who remains profoundly isolated and self-exiled. While art-in-history in a sense solves one dilemma of subjectivity (in that Harcombe exhibits himself as complete thanks to his visionary engagement with English Art), it is surely not a social model: those art forms affect Harcombe alone; and though those same forms are supposedly representative of the best of artistic Englishness, their effect as cultural artifacts is severely curtailed. "Great" art, then, does not result in any Arnoldian epiphany that in turn transforms personal revelation into civilization creation, that desire to contribute to culture maintenance and growth. Rather, it produces a clearly satisfied man who is content with isolation from both present day history and his fellow citizens. If, as Levenson claims, Harcombe is Ackroyd's exemplary figure, then is it necessary to note that this supposed model Englishman rejects society and the whole contemporary world in favour of being alone and holding the knowledge that he can feel "English music"—historical knowledge that enables him to stand aloof from the ongoing flow of history. As such, his status as the putative Ackroydian ideal is open to dispute.

(b) A Premature Death

Like Spenser Spender, the protagonist of The Great Fire of London, Ackroyd's comic first novel, Charles Wychwood of Chatterton dies well before the end of the story that has principally focussed on his progress. A poet manqué, he dies without having published a single poem, though he has, as Onega sees it, been able to overcome his

Bloomian “anxiety of influence,” and so leaves the mundane world a “strong poet”—if only in potential. While Onega adroitly notes that “in the world of Chatterton the unreality of fiction and the reality of the material world are constantly denied” (35), her interested reading later insists that Wychwood’s “cathartic liberation from his romantic attachment to the myth of origins” (37) results in his (familiar) visionary voyage that does not so much deny worldly materiality and textual immateriality as collapse the distinction into a twilight dimension peculiar to Ackroyd:

It is this compound cosmic body-and-voice, made up of the great poets and artists of the past that Chatterton, Meredith and Wychwood joyfully join with linked hands at the end of the novel, thus achieving immortality, not, however, on the higher metaphysical sphere of Plato’s Logos, but simply in the all too human realm of the Creative Imagination. (39-40)

The narrative then in a sense compensates for Wychwood’s untimely death by representing his redemptive apotheosis: his linking hands with literary luminaries like Meredith and Chatterton indicates his rightful place in the ahistorical metaphysical realm reserved for artists. Onega supports her stance by splicing together phrases of Wychwood’s (and by doing so implies that Wychwood is the novel’s singular mouthpiece for Ackroyd’s philosophy of art)—

But it must not be forgotten that although only ‘a dream of wholeness, and of beauty’, ‘the vision is real’, and that ‘All the yearning and all the unhappiness and all the sickness can be taken away by that vision’. The words are Charles’s, but they are also, undeniably, Peter Ackroyd’s. (40)

The visionary act does not deny the gap between dream and reality so much as move outside the entire binaristic condition. Like the psychic fugues of Hawksmoor/Dyer and Dee/Palmer, the experience shared by Wychwood, Chatterton and Wallis¹⁰⁸ directs readers

¹⁰⁸Yet not the Merediths, Harriet Scrope or Philip Slack, apparently. The matter of who is granted access to this place and who—implicitly—is denied proves an interesting quandary. Why, for example, Wallis is visionary and Meredith is not is something the narrative never articulates. More than anything else, the visionary quality would appear to be a mental disposition, one not necessarily related to artistic demeanor or kind. So while Scrope’s obvious artistic decadence might disqualify her from the firmament of like-minded visionaries, George Meredith and Philip Slack would seem apt for induction. Yet they have no visionary experience in the novel.

away from their daily, complex travails (such as Chatterton's and Wychwood's poverty and lack of recognition and Wallis's moral crisis). It is as though the mean trajectory of their lived existence is a foregone conclusion because in the continuum of ever-after their metaphysical linkage assures them and those looking onto them that their art and subjectivity shines undimmed in perpetuity. Nonetheless, and as with The Great Fire of London, the narrative does not cease until well after the death of the visionary figure. The fact of this continuing on actively detracts from the apotheotic gesture, signalling the still vital existence of the many who do not seek and are not granted the transcendence the protagonist deems necessary.

(Interestingly, both Finney's and Peck's brief discussions of the novel as well as David Lodge's review focus on what Finney calls its "essentially deconstructive view of the world seen through contemporary spectacles" (256), yet fail to address the visionary aspect. Lodge identifies how with its playful and infinite "chain of allusions" Chatterton can "duplicate and deconstruct the oppositions of truth/falsehood, authenticity/forgery, originality/plagiarism" and so emphasize the "impossibility of establishing the plain truth of any human history" (16). Finney too finds postmodern play, yet limits its reach: "Ackroyd might well be problematizing such signifiers as 'the authentic' and 'the original,' but he subordinates the resulting free play between, say, 'the authentic' and 'the forged' to an aesthetic structure that contains the free play within its confines and limits the problematization of meaning" (259). And Peck's assessment of the novel finds still less free play since the "apparently skeptical book is a contented bask in the certainties of a received culture":

As is the case in Hawksmoor, therefore, the ambitious reach of Ackroyd's novel seems to be partly undercut by the familiar British qualities that enable us to place the text; there is, in both novels, a culture that author and reader share, which provides them both with reassuring points of reference. (447)

In most cases, the ostensibly subversive slant of the novel's historiographic method is judged to subvert itself with the introduction of "reassuring points of reference" (Peck),

restrictive “structural patterning” (Finney) and of course the “all too human realm of the Creative Imagination” (Onega). If for Onega the only way Ackroyd’s novels decide we can fully engage with past historical realities and figures is to step outside time and into a continuum of artistic personalities, for other critical commentators, in the case of Chatterton, history remains never fully recoverable (Lodge), obscure but ultimately reachable (Finney) or else always already there (Peck). In failing to remark on Wychwood’s literally extempore linkage with Chatterton and Wallis, these critics can consider only the contours of the novel’s “essentially deconstructive view”—which, presumably, would implode with the sudden emergence of an ahistorical, atemporal plane of reality).

As with the characters of Hawksmoor, The House of Doctor Dee and English Music, too, there are those for whom no vision is summoned, no music heard. The character types range from the deeply dispossessed (such as the oft-seen but rarely named vagrants and lunatics) to the relatively functional and contented. Interestingly, figures like Daniel Moore in The House of Doctor Dee, Vivien Wychwood, Harriet Scrope and Philip Slack in Chatterton, Edward Campion in English Music and Walter Payne in Hawksmoor—in short, all the characters who do not reach any exalted visionary state—persist in existence despite infirmity of body and inadequacy of reality. As they are represented, it is as though they simply make due with what contemporary life offers them, whether it is insufficient historical knowledge, scant grounding of subjectivity, failure of direction or generalized anxiety and alienation. Moreover, their existence—however bare the subsistence—is portrayed as participatory, linked to other individuals and communities. Like characters of the Drabble and Forster novels referred to earlier, these bountiful if frequently peripheral characters are exhibited as being firmly anchored to quotidian actuality; that they are not beneficiaries of visionary sight produces in them no pangs of remorse or feelings of insufficiency. They in fact express no desire for or even awareness of such metaphysics. While Wychwood’s tumour produces visions, it also signals

imminent death. Its meaning remains private because only he has the experience. Similarly, his ascension into the artistic firmament occurs in his eyes only, though readers are the privileged witnesses of it.

(c) Two Cases of Sudden Disappearance

As has been illustrated the-ways-it-was and “sentiments de l’existence” of history are ultimately besides the point for the obsessed-with-genealogy protagonists. Unlike Ackroyd himself, whose early interviews inevitably drew attention to his cautious and detailed research (which also served to legitimize his works by placing his practice within the Fleishmanian tradition of “imaginative sympathy” and “realist responsibility”), the present-day protagonists do not learn about a past historical period, understand themselves as being subject of historical processes and so glean from history knowledge that helps them situate their lives or selves. Their interaction with ‘history’ in fact closely resembles an intertwining with a powerful historical personage who more or less possesses them. They are less educated than they are enchanted—if only because the experience is metaphysical, not rational or even strictly conscious. And their engagement with “the historical” fundamentally becomes an occult and ahistorical experience that removes them from the crises of the contemporary yet does not transport them to any Edenic place of return since the actual, material past is no social salve or refuge of bygone authenticity. They are lifted from quotidian reality altogether and relocated into placeless, timeless, historyless universal eternity—a void occupied by a chain of linked artistic “greats.”¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹This point may belabour the obvious, but it can be noted that the eternal and universal is in fact rather localized and historically delimited. Universal eternity is London more or less over a select number of centuries; as such it excludes countless aspects of human experience, not to mention significant matters related to race, class, ethnicity, gender, nationality and sexuality. While this caveat could be (mis)construed as the posturing of political correctness and/or as fashionable post-colonial referencing, it is meant more to voice some concern about the limits of the stated universal vision. For example, in what sense should readers understand the metaphysical ascensions of The House of Doctor Dee and Hawksmoor as universal? And if the universal is in fact simply The Best of British Culture Makers what does that say about the oft-repeated “ascension mechanism” of Ackroyd’s fiction?

Then again, nothing in Ackroyd is ever so neat or open to such seamless categorization. In addition to the saturated-with-ambiguity conclusions of The House of Doctor Dee and Hawksmoor, there are the questions posed by those terminating vocal fugues. With the conjoining of John Dee and Matthew Palmer in particular the previously absent authorial "I" intrudes, and in effect comments on the fusion the "I" is choosing to represent at that narratorial instant—

And that at last is true—to the extent that I do not understand how much of this history is known, and how much is my own invention. And what is the past, after all? Is it that which I created in the formal act of writing, or does it have some substantial reality? . . . But is Doctor Dee now no more than a projection of my own attitudes and obsessions, or is he an historical figure whom I have tried genuinely to recreate? (274-275)

The sole critical commentator on this concluding passage, Susana Onega, situates it as a mystery. She views "The Vision," the chapter in which the scene occurs, as "'most secret' and difficult to fathom, as it only exists within the 'spiritual body' created by Matthew/Dee/Ackroyd in conjunction with the earlier visionary writers and characters in the English tradition" (65). Onega's interpretation is in keeping with her study's general interest in synthesizing Ackroyd within the very "visionary tradition" that forms the frequent subject of his fiction and biographies. Her interest in his project of synthesis apparently inhibits any commentary about the disruptive aspect of the "I." The doubts and uncertainties expressed by the first-person speaker (who remains unidentified and therefore not necessarily "Ackroyd" as Onega surmises) underscore¹¹⁰ the fictionality of the preceding story, the potential falsity of both the portrait of Dee and his quests and the

¹¹⁰Structurally, the conclusions of Hawksmoor and The House of Doctor Dee are much the same: two questing characters separated by centuries are joined in the final pages of the narrative. Without the intrusion of Dee's "I," though, the fugue of Hawksmoor carries on without a hint of question. Hawksmoor visits Little St. Hugh and in "the body of the church," meets "his own Image" and touches him (216). The two weep "when they looked at the space between them" (216), and, complementary like light and shadow or shape and reflection, they ultimately speak "with one voice" (217) to announce a return to child-like innocence at the threshold of eternity. The completion of the duo's parallel quests for transcendence, for completion, for salvation, for answers is portrayed with no hint of irony or meta-textual nudges from the sort of "I" that appears near the same moment, structurally-speaking, in Dee.

epiphanic psychic fugue/historical transcendence structure itself. Like the brief journal passages in The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde where “Wilde” admits to lying, fictionalizing and mis-remembering, and so calls into question the otherwise unquestioned and persuasive veracity of the account so far presented to his audience, the doubting “I” of The House of Doctor Dee dissolves the illusion usually sustained by the novel’s seamless realist history-writing. Rather than simply pointing out the narrative’s new clothes, the self-revelation of the “I” also highlights the closely conventional historical novelistic yearnings for “true” and “known” history that has been assembled by an authority that “tried genuinely to recreate” a real historical figure for the usual pedagogical purpose. That concluding intrusion, then, acts dually: by its very nature it disrupts the smooth flow of the expected genre conventions (even while the open-ended question, “And what is the past, after all?,” directs attention to larger, thematic developments); yet the “I” retracts or at least minimizes the fact of the intrusion by asserting legitimacy of intent: that the self-described author of the intrusion has only tried to capture the past via a responsible compiling of putatively authentic evidence (i.e., “the words and phrases are taken from John Dee himself” (275)—presence, in short, the unmediated words of God). And still that virtuous posture remains disingenuous—any reputable historical novelist in the Renault mould could of course never shift evidence to support the notion that Doctor John Dee (1527-1608), author of General and Rare Memorials pertayning to the perfect Art of Navigation amongst others, created a homunculus, communicated with it in London circa 1993 in order to attain some kind of a mystical union that may lead to “the mystical city universal” (277). Empiricism, the scientific paradigm that in part underpins traditional historical fiction, would inhibit such a statement.

ii. History/Novels/Audiences

In addition to supplying a steady interpretive stream for Ackroyd’s individual novels, critics tend as well to place Ackroyd’s work in a general category, to position it as “postmodern” (or not) for this reason or that, as “significant” (or not) for this reason or

that, as “political” . . . and so on. Like the “blurb” version¹¹¹ of Ackroyd’s novels, the critical shorthand version of Ackroyd available in an assortment of articles and books—from Hutcheon, Elias, Fokkema and Lee to Bradbury and Connor—is of course Ackroyd simplified, but also Ackroyd assessed and compartmentalized. As with the process mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, such acts of measurement work to situate the author(’s work) in a field (for instance, contemporary postmodernist fiction in English) with an intent, it would appear, to make him/it more easily recognizable and/or consumable, to establish both a hierarchy and an of-the-moment canon (cf. reprinted on the back cover of The House of Doctor Dee from Sunday Times: “Our most exciting and original writer . . . one of the few English writers of his generation who will be read in a hundred years’ time”) and, probably, to serve as a starting point for a place-making or history-telling critical project. When subordinated to a critic’s project the symmetry or asymmetry, tropes, themes and even plots of individual novels like Hawksmoor and Chatterton are not the subject of the critic’s investigation so much as what is seen as their general ideological and/or stylistic demeanour; they become one aspect of a commendable organic growth (as in Bradbury’s “The British Novel Since 1876: A List of Major Works”) or a representative of a newly-born genus (such as “postmodernist historical novels” (Elias) or “historiographic metafiction” (Hutcheon et. al)). Thus can Onega in “British Historiographic Metafiction in the 1980s,” “British Historiographic Metafiction,” and her introduction to *Telling Histories* connect novels of Ackroyd to those written by as disparate a group of novelists as Rose Tremain, A.S. Byatt, Martin Amis and Jeanette Winterson.

¹¹¹ While really beyond my scope here, it is worth noting that blurbs create their own representations of an author’s work, ones that are, of course, geared toward selling it as a valuable an original product. While “virtuosity,” “command of language” and “wit” are key terms in the paperback editions of The Great Fire of London and The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde, those used in the editions of Hawksmoor and The House of Doctor Dee emphasize the author’s mastery of mood, his intelligence as well as mysteriousness established by his storytelling. Interestingly, they do not draw attention to his historiographic dimension, nor to his metaphysical one. Apparently, chills and goosebumps sell more units than speculations about a rogue magus and an errant architect.

Not only does she collapse all of Ackroyd's fiction into one modality, but she links the technique and ideology with the work of a generation of authors, each, she notes, affirming the critical project of Linda Hutcheon, and exemplifying the "evolution" and "eclosion" (1995 7) of "this trend" (historiographic metafiction) in England. As critical overviews by Bradbury, Lodge, Lee and Hutcheon repeatedly confirm, Onega is not alone in this kind of critical place-making (though she is perhaps most blatant with her publication of near-identical scholarship). Beside establishing (by naming) the existence of a thriving national franchise of an important global phenomenon, this process of categorization vastly expands the reach of the phenomenon—Ackroyd's The Great Fire of London and Hawksmoor, Tremain's Restoration, Rushdie's Midnight's Children, Banville's Kepler and Drabble's The Gates of Ivory are all considered examples of "postmodernist art" and "historiographic metafiction," and are in Onega's account, "creative response[s] to the same basic question concerning history and literature posed by post-structuralism and deconstruction" (1995 16). The "trend" is, then, a stylistic and ideological social response to History/historiography and past (hence inadequate) models of epistemology shared by an entire generation of disparate artists. At the same time, however, the vast guest list of practitioners works to diminish their distinctiveness and, incidentally, the multi-dimensionality of postmodern fiction: while these authors are all apparently practicing a method that "uses and abuses, installs and then subverts the very concepts it challenges" (Onega 1995 7; quoting Hutcheon (1988)), the critical work that contains them limits their technique to a predictable number of stylistic tricks and shared discursive strategies.

When critics read Ackroyd's novels as politically dynamic, they tend to see them as modelling paradigms or promoting causes. Hutcheon, Elias, Onega and Lee, for example, construe his novels as exemplars of historiographic metafiction, and so, as such, politicized fiction that is challenging conventions (albeit ambivalently); even the most vehement and hostile of critics—Michael Levenson in his overview of Peter Ackroyd's

work and review of English Music in The New Republic—frames his response in order to demonstrate that what may have been challenging in Ackroyd once upon a time, is now (in 1992) not simply weak literature but bad politics: a document replete with conservative postures, nationalistic (inching toward fascistic) sentiment, and suspect (because profoundly uncritical and notably parti pris) historiography. Both stances surely have some validity. Yet rather than being of a singular dimension or performing one function and so warranting the reductive reading offered above, Ackroyd's novelistic representations of and uses for history fulfill a variety of functions. As with the comedy mentioned two chapters earlier, to concretize the role of this aspect of Ackroyd's fiction is critically remiss. Such concretizing also illustrates a case of critical reductionism—since it is possible to discuss Ackroyd's historical representation as monosemous only by the heroic (sidestepping?) suppression of other readily visible senses that do not neatly fit the critic's thesis.

Even a superficial survey of “the historical” in Ackroyd's fiction reveals a number of elementals within the term itself whose dynamism and textual hegemony—dominance, recessiveness—vary, collide, subside and ascend at varying points throughout the narratives' duration. For example, historical figures (her thoughts, his reminiscences), historical settings (their appearance, their significance), meditations about historical progress, period spelling and syntax, speculations on epochal subjectivities and so on, form the basic elements of the aggregate seen as “the historical” within the novels. In close relation to the aggregated nature of “the historical” as well stands the fact of singular, albeit serial, modalities of what can be called the historical function in the novels: if history has multiple facets in the narrative, then it also performs broad and distinct kinds of ‘acts’ that of course modify and so dissolve its ostensibly self-evident uniformity. The undoubted multiformity of such historical functions effectively works, incidentally, to impede reductive critical gestures that privilege one particular modality at the expense of all others—that in order to assert that fiction plays seriously with the structure of power or

subverts conventions or seriously challenges liberal humanism, for instance, as Lee and Hutcheon would have it, serious critical elisions must take place. The following listing (or loose typology) serves to illustrate the various modalities, and by doing so aims to suggest the complex architecture of historical representation in the novels (that necessitates an interpretive schema for a Chatterton or a Hawksmoor that is less interested in confirming a singularity of situation than speculating on the multiplicity).

The first modality, what will here be called the tableau function, is exemplified by the historical detailing of the sort Peter Ackroyd himself has at times disparaged as “costume dramas” (1987 30)—that is, fiction in which the historical era serves as (a) so much exotic period scenery and (b) as a legitimating ground for feasibly ‘actual’ historical plot development. In this function the evocation of obscure facts and physical details as well as the utilization of period idioms legitimizes the novel’s thematic concern. We can recall that Fleishman draws a conventional distinction between risible (popular) “Kitsch” historical novels and those (literary) ones which are part of “an estimable tradition in English and other literatures” (xii) whose intent is the “vivification of a shadowy period or lost past” (xi). The implicit ethical judgement is that whereas the “estimable” historical novelist “provokes or conveys by imaginative sympathy, the sentiment de l’existence, the feeling of how it was to be alive in another age” (3), the author in the “Kitsch” tradition simply appropriates antique props (clothing, furniture, archaic words) to cloak a contemporary romance, action or melodrama plot. And while these hoary relics do usually appear in the “estimable” tradition, it would seem that their presence is not spurious because they are subordinate to a plot which strives to emphasize actual historical (not the romantic, etc.) conditions and sentiments. In short, one is built to entertain while the other aims for edification.

If nothing else, Ackroyd’s historical representations illustrate category breach or slippage, and in their way refuse the critical hermeneutic that seeks to categorize them as either this or that. Considering the undeniable theatrical elements of Ackroyd’s novels

(murder, seances, chiromancy, malapropisms, death, fire, beheadings, disappearances, transvestism, trials, spiritual healing, various occultisms), the undoubted thriller component to the plots and the visible philosophical ruminations, there is no difficulty finding evidence of both (valorized and discredited) Fleishmanian traditions at work within the novels. For example, the authorial self-presentation at the conclusion of The House of Doctor Dee—"But is Doctor Dee now no more than a projection of my own attitudes and obsessions, or is he an historical figure whom I have tried genuinely to recreate?" (275)—explicitly identifies with Fleishman's "estimable" modality, that of an earnest pedagogically-oriented writer trying "genuinely to recreate" how it was to live in a bygone era. Elsewhere, however, evidence of an Ackroyd alter ego drawn to giving "people a bit of pleasure, a bit of slap and tickle" (McGrath 47) abounds. The comic plotting and self-consciously mannered and artificial dialogue of Chatterton, the seance-room histrionics of English Music and even the heightened Gothic elements of Hawksmoor represent past historical actualities in styles that diverge from the strictly realist tradition approved of by Renault, Fleishman and company; their interests are less directed toward recreating history per se than in employing historical pasts to in tandem provoke, inform and entertain.

A second mode—and it should be noted that none of these functions occurs without already overflowing into another category—becomes visible when the historical representation serves chiefly as a conduit for or illustration of ongoing thematic developments in the novels. This, the dialogic function, directs discussion about the nature of representation as such. Here characters and their dialogue are contrived—say, in the manner of Wilde's "The Critic as Artist" or Dryden's "An Essay of Dramatic Poesy"—so as to debate over and provide meta-commentary about subjects integral to the text in which they are contained. Within this mode the historical period and figures are virtually incidental because the representation of them serves to illustrate a thematic point not necessarily related or particular to any singular historical period. In other words, it is of little consequence whether the argumentative dialogue takes place in London circa 1856,

Paris circa 1900 or New England circa 1660 because the fundamental points of the debate transcend the boundaries of the historical moment. The most direct example of this mode comes with the Victorian scenes in Chatterton. In these scenes—identified as Chelsea, London in the mild winter of 1856—the Merediths and Henry Wallis do not function so much as vitally realized, interactive, true-to-their-biographies, true-to-Victorian-culture characters set in a virtual facsimile of London circa 1856, than as speakers who pointedly comment on little else but the themes of authenticity, truth, forgery and falsity—as though they know they are inhabitants of a novel-world in which these are the only topics worth pursuing. Other than having the scantiest of biographical correspondence, the figures could be anyone: the same dialogue between “Oscar and Constance Wilde” and “Alfred Douglas” or “Karl and Eleanor Marx” and “Dan Leno” would serve equally well. Likewise, the conversations between John Dee and his assistant, Edward Kelley, or Nicholas Dyer and his assistant, Walter Pyne, effectively provide dramatizations of points in a debate; as realist representations of character interaction their integrity remains open to significant question. Characters, in short, are not so much psychologically realized as voided of the bulk of their biographical mass, and then filled as it were with an authorial hand that directs their mannequin-like conversation. They are, then, exemplary of those spectacular historical “images” Jameson expresses such anxiety about, directed not toward reproducing or excavating “real history” but exhibited for some other purpose, namely further elucidation of thematic concerns in the work that contains them. In the novels that portray them, the historical “truth” of these figures is secondary to the manner in which they develop a theme that runs throughout the text of their fictional world. Readers are not granted access to the period’s “sentiment de l’existence” or the unique subjectivity of a historical figure. Rather, they are offered a choice seat in order to closely witness a contemporary re-enactment of an ancient, epoch-hopping debate.

In the novels, furthermore, Ackroyd’s historicism takes on an allegorical function. Rather than strictly acting as biographical portraits of (fictional) Nicholas Dyer and

(historical) John Dee or a neutral-voiced chorus of representative literary voices (in English Music), these historical figures and artifacts serve as illustrations of larger, culture-wide conflicts or characteristics of English history. Dee may be, as Onega notes, one of several peculiarly English visionaries who populate Ackroyd's novels. As such, the breadth of his historical status—1527-1608; "He was a profoundly learned scholar and hermeticist, but also a sham" (Drabble 152)—has effectively been moulded so that it enacts a kind of parable or allegory. Likewise, the fictional Dyer (who uncannily brings to mind Nicholas Hawksmoor (1661-1736), architect of six London churches) is not "brought to life" so much as shaped to take a central role in an allegorical drama about the conflicts between a new tradition of rationalism and an older one of occult animism occurring in late seventeenth century London society. The point here parallels Hayden White's presentation of history-writing. Working from R.G. Collingwood's theory of historiographer-as-story-teller,¹¹² Hayden White advances the argument that "most historical sequences can be emplotted in a number of different ways, so as to provide different interpretations of those events and to endow them with different meanings" (1978 83). While it is granted that fiction itself is necessarily plotted, what is of significance here is that in novels like The House of Doctor Dee and Hawksmoor a selective line history is represented in order to illustrate a particular narrative—whether an ideological conflict, a shift in consciousness or

¹¹²See H. White, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact." Playing a historian of historiography, White argues, "In their efforts to make sense of the historical record, which is fragmentary and always incomplete, historians make use of what Collingwood called 'the constructive imagination,' which told the historian—as it tells the competent detective—what 'must have been the case' given the available evidence and the formal properties it displayed to the consciousness capable of putting the right question to it And he concluded that historians provide plausible explanations for bodies of historical evidence when they succeed in discovering the story or complex of stories implicitly contained within them.

White continues: "What Collingwood failed to see was that no given set of casually recorded historical events can in itself constitute a story; the most it might offer to the historian are story elements. The event are made into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motif repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies and the like—in short, all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or play" (1978 84).

the shape of a formerly “lost” moment. The suppression, subordination, highlighting and repetition which White contends is the underpinning of history-writing, finds its echo with Ackroyd’s historical resuscitations. For example, Dee, Milton and Wilde are revived so that both their biographical arcs and lived preoccupations become in a sense illustrations—ones that may or may not come into conflict with the established facts of the man. Rather than being a series of disparate events, their lives become trajectories; and rather than having complicated, conflicted and discontinuous subjectivities, they are focussed and monomaniacal, the exorbitance of their lives pared down or elided in the service of a novel’s thematic development. History and historical figures are in fact highly edited, portrayed with the objective of revelation as well as non-disclosure. And though that statement would appear to be self-evident, it is necessary to recall that the text itself makes no grand effort to signal its portraiture as edited, selective, manipulated or partial. The “lives” of these figures are in fact often “naturalized,” positioned as “more or less accurate” glimpses of the former actual. Just as the biographers of Wilde noted earlier in the discussion of The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde chose to chart the progress of his life as a mythic arc, so too the lives of these figures are framed as naturally illustrative, the allegory of such and such. After all, as the author of General and Rare Memorials pertayning to the perfect Art of Navigation, John Dee could as easily have become a central figure in the rousing tale of an Elizabethan shipping innovator and magnate.

An ambiguous element, history’s quasi-ontological function, is difficult to situate. As mentioned in the last section, history does and does not provide a source of grounding for the present day alienated protagonists of Hawksmoor, Chatterton, English Music and The House of Doctor Dee. Though readers are witness to a search into remote historical actuality whose successful culmination is marked by the searcher’s apparent transcendence outside the pain of present day culture, in one strong sense material history remains for him virtually meaningless. Unlike the educative, civilizing purpose history-learning has popularly been conceived as promoting (and that historical fiction itself has been theorized

as fostering), history—persons, places, events and subjectivities of the past—remains remote and ineffectual for the Ackroyd protagonist. He cannot gain from it such stuff that might make his life fuller of meaning and significance, and so both bearable and socially vibrant. These men earnestly search the past for clues because they expect to find in those clues knowledge and from it gain a semblance of order and ontological security. Yet they do not ultimately locate wisdom via material historical artifacts *per se*. What they encounter instead is that the same dead distant past is for them also a seedbed. From such a vital source come John Dee, Nicholas Hawksmoor, Thomas Chatterton and a full complement of artistic masterpieces. It is not material culture as a whole then, but rather these singularities and what they offer—the paradoxical transcendence from historicity that enables the protagonists to become grounded, ultimately free of their anxiety-causing unanchored subjectivities—that in effect become core, influential history. The visionary moment in each of the novels presents a lengthy continuum of spectral figures whose genius sets them apart from all other deceased Englishers. These figures alone embody the sole meaning of history for the protagonists. And that remains the situation for them alone, since no other character is granted access to these key figures and art forms.

(For readers, this function poses practical problems that the others do not. There is a degree of pessimism expressed through the structure and resolution of the protagonists' searches. Following their quests, readers can learn that for these central figures history remains largely inert and unreachable—and so fundamentally uninstrusive and meaningless—unless an individual is granted direct access via a magical (*Hawksmoor*, *The House of Doctor Dee*) or paranormal (*Chatterton*, *English Music*) transcendent jump into a continuum (of English history's enlightened artists) that stands outside of time and space. Vis à vis the "lessons" Hutcheon imagines postmodern historical fiction teaching, it is difficult to credit this approach with much practical application—unless one follows Onega's approach of admiring Ackroyd for his creative solution for the whole matter of transcendence: he places it within the human realm of the imagination. Otherwise, readers

can take (cold) comfort by focussing on the mundane pluck of decidedly peripheral characters for whom both questing and need for absolute ontological grounding are not half as important.)

An additional multivalent historical mode in Ackroyd comes under an admittedly broad designation: the political function. This last function has a complicated structure because of course “the political” has myriad strata, and so applications. And as I have already argued, Ackroyd’s novels contain political significance of diverse kinds. The camp comedy is a complex political mode, as is the use of pastiche. For instance, the comic interruptions into an otherwise dominant philosophical disquisitional narrative about time, history, culture and subjectivity in First Light interrupt the “serious” tone and effectively dismantle the effects such convention-bound seriousness has formerly produced (as well as the response it has induced). Likewise, Ackroyd’s excoriation-through-fiction of John Milton utilizing pastiche elements of Milton’s own texts and imitation of his signature style, serves to delegitimize the historical man and, by the inevitable process of association, his poetry and standing as a moral paragon and heroic “Star” in the canon of English literature. Both of these examples indicate modalities of political meaning in Ackroyd’s fiction. Moreover, as Levenson takes pains to make clear, the novels are by no means necessarily radical or even subversive; their effects are multifarious, producing political “statements” that are diverse, divergent and not ever strictly commensurate.

The general point here is that “political significance” has a vast reach, and a general critical tendency to categorize Ackroyd as, say, a postmodern Tory or his novels as exemplary postmodern historiographic metafiction inevitably restricts and obscures the full extent of the contours of the political operations in his fiction. For instance, the commonplace placement of Ackroyd’s novels within postmodernist fiction genre also works to establish the putative political disposition of novels: as postmodern (as outlined and concretized by Hutcheon and, preceding her, Jencks, Hassan, Thiher, Huyssen, Graff, Fiedler, Foster and so on), the fiction will be, say, intrinsically inclined (in

Hutcheon's terms) toward a "problematizing of the nature of historical knowledge" (1988 111). Or else, Hutcheon again: "Postmodern art similarly asserts and then deliberately undermines such principles as value, order, meaning, control, and identity" (13). In the case of the former categorization, the tendency of Ackroyd's (fundamentally postmodern) fiction will be toward providing a critique of "the nature of historical knowledge."

According to the latter definition the purview of postmodern art has such reach as to incorporate an entire arsenal of techniques and modalities—all of which are dedicated to asserting and then undermining a host of cultural conventions. The problem with these typological gestures is that one is so narrow that it retards or excludes other non-postmodern readings of the fiction, while the other is so inclusive as to lose its utility as a critical category. As camp and pastiche indicate, there are alternate readings of historical modalities in Ackroyd that do not touch upon matters necessarily postmodern. Bakhtin famously valorizes prose over poetry because the former reveals its "socially heteroglot multiplicity" while the latter for ever "presumes nothing beyond the borders of its own context" (1981 278). It would not seem controversial to assert that political discourse in Ackroyd's prose is similarly variform or heteroglot; and yet by being conceptualized within the framework of postmodernism, limitation and standardization are precisely what occur.

- D. Those Conventional Concluding Remarks:
The Plato Papers, (National) History and Politics

Novels which retreat from the ethical are actually uncommon.
Simon During (1990)

I will speak of a novelist, Charles Dickens, who flourished in a period somewhere between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries of our earth. The titles of his works have been retrieved but only one text survives, alas in an incomplete form The novel is entitled On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, by Charles D—. The rest of the name has been gouged out by some crude tool, and the phrase “Vile stuff!” written in a dye-based substance.

The Plato Papers

Remember that what you are told is really threefold: shaped by the teller, reshaped by the listener, concealed from both by the dead man of the tale.
Nabokov, The Real Life of Sebastian Knight
(serving as an epigraph in the Prologue of Ackroyd’s Dickens)

The Plato Papers (1999) is Ackroyd’s most recent novel, and the first one as well set in the future. Despite portraying an apparently multidimensional reality inhabited by tall beings (Londoners, angels) whose bodies produce coloured auras and who themselves seem able to partially transcend the familiar twentieth-first century dimensions of time and space, the spare tale remains compendious in its Ackroydian themes, techniques and structure. As with The Great Fire of London, for instance, the novel’s title has an allusive quality, yet one that recalls Onega’s “red-herring allusions” and “allusions that lead nowhere” (1998 12): does The Plato Papers relate to The Pickwick Papers (or The Aspern Papers) and if so, how? Moreover, the plot trajectory—marked by four sections: “The Lectures and Remarks of Plato on the Conditions of Past Ages,” “The Journey of Plato to the Underworld,” “The Trial of Plato Charged with Corrupting the Young by Spinning Lies and Fables” and “The Judgment Upon Plato”—has visible pastiche elements, appropriating the historical biographical narrative of Socrates and the mythic Orpheus descent motif to ambiguous purpose. The novel opens, furthermore, with a collection of eleven epigraphic comments, beginning with an extract from Ronald Corvo’s A New

Theory of the Earth (2030) and concluding with a précis from The Plato Papers of “Anon” (3705). Though wholly fictive, their form and function evokes the ostensibly documentary, pseudo-historiographic, facticity-establishing prefaces of Chatterton, Hawksmoor and Milton in America.

In keeping with all Ackroyd’s work, The Plato Papers is resolute in its preoccupation about both communicating with and coming to understand the past. In support of that theme, the novel’s first section highlights ten orations by Plato, a figure identified as having “assumed the robe and mask of the orator” as his calling and taken “the first ages of the earth” (40) as his topic. The majority of Plato’s public presentations pay close attention to the deciphering of objects from “c. AD 1500 - c. AD 2300: The Age of Mouldwarp” (i). The sole¹¹³ orator/historian of the futuristic habitat discourses on, for instance, a book by “E. A. Poe” (i.e., “Poe is an abbreviation of Poet, and by common consent the rest was deciphered: E.A. Poe = Eminent American Poet” (29)). Under Plato’s (mis)guidance, Poe’s fiction comes to stand as fact, a historical chronicle of American society. Likewise, Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious is transformed into a “comic handbook” and “the work of a clown or buffoon who was billed as Sigmund Freud—no doubt pronounced ‘Fraud’ to add piquancy to his stage character” (59). Fragments of Charles Darwin, T.S. Eliot and Alfred Hitchcock are subject to similar acts of grotesque and comic misinterpretation. Additionally, excerpts from Plato’s glossary of ancient terms and artifacts—“literature: a word of unknown provenance, generally attributed to ‘litter’ or waste” (19); “biographer: from bio-graphy, the reading of life by means of lines. A fortune-teller or palmist” (13)—serve to support the initial representation of Plato as a ludicrously inaccurate historian and (as a public figure and knowledge disseminator) a conduit of disinformation and his own era as one bumbling in the dark

¹¹³That readers are allowed access to. Plato refers to other persons formulating hypotheses about historical artifacts, and mentions that there is an Academy of Past Ages (29) dedicated to making sense of found objects, but nothing else is disclosed about them.

despite its chauvinism. The characteristically Ackroydian comedy that exists for present-day readers¹¹⁴ of the oration stands distinct from that of Plato's in-text audience. Whereas contemporary readers of Ackroyd's novel understand the ineptitude of Plato's readings, Plato's own audience gains pleasure from the orations because those versions of "how things were" promote Witspellian cultural egotism: by learning how inane, misguided or simply wrong the peoples of past ages in fact were, the good spectral citizens of London circa 3400 A.D. take comfort in their superiority.

The novel's potential for extended satire and implicit critique of contemporary historiographic efforts is effectively extinguished as Plato begins to doubt the veracity of his reconstructive accounts. Dialogues with "Soul" eventually lead to Plato's descent into a cave where he directly experiences Mouldwarp actuality. In similar manner to the dream-visions of Timothy Harcombe in English Music, the herb-produced cure for blindness of Milton in America, the tumour-directed vision of Charles Wychwood in Chatterton and the magic-enabled fugues of Hawksmoor and The House of Doctor Dee, Plato's soul-managed albeit momentary visit to Mouldwarpian London leads to a radical change of consciousness. Plato begins to express sympathy for people of the past, to assert the

¹¹⁴Potential comedy, at any rate. The Plato Papers was relatively widely reviewed, and received not atypical mixed commentary—though perhaps more unfavourable than usual. Eric Korn in the TLS calls it "a short but thin-stretched book" that left him "frozen-faced," and concludes that the novel "is a sinewless skeleton, and will not stand alone" (21). In The Globe and Mail, Cary Fagan summarizes the plot and then notes, "All of this is clever and pointed enough, but it is also not particularly fresh or startling, and after awhile it begins to sound rather thin"; he notes the novel "raises interesting questions, but it does so in such an intellectualized and dyspeptic manner that the questions never really engage the reader" (D15). Nigel Spivey, the reviewer for The National Post, provides little judgement, though he mentions that "Ackroyd's foray into the futuristic mode is highly elliptical, and some readers will immediately resent that," and that "he beckons with a sheaf of minor snipes, jokes and conceits that will either immediately alienate or engage" (WP10). In The New York Times Book Review, John Sutherland observes that The Plato Papers (the American edition has a subtitle: not A Novel, but A Prophecy) is less a novel than "Ackroyd's Poetics," a cogitation on the theory and practice of his writing" (7). Following that, Sutherland states the chapters of the novel—"such a slight book"—"are short, as is the book itself. It could easily have been presented as a \$2 pamphlet, but Ackroyd is an expensive performer—he was the first British biographer to attract a \$1 million advance. We too must pay" (7). He finds aspects of the novel "extremely funny," yet concludes that its "longueurs" and conceits are tiresome.

intermingling (121) of past and present cultures, to cast doubt on his own culture's knowledge of the past and to question its received wisdom and conventions. He is accused of having "corrupted the youth of this city" (100) by his words and speeches; with the ultimate judgement—"But there is no sentence. You have not been charged with any wrongdoing. The city has acquitted you" (134)—Plato comes to realize he has come to be regarded as a "mistaken visionary" and so chooses to condemn himself to "perpetual exile" (134). With an echo of the conclusion of The Great Fire of London, the final chapter summarizes the hero's fate:

So Plato left the city and was never seen again. There are many who say that he travelled to other cities, where he continued his orations. Some are convinced that there was indeed a cave beneath the earth and that Plato returned there unknown and unseen by the people of Mouldwarp. Sidonia and Ornatus believe that he simply entered another dream. (139)

Being set in a distant future rather than a distant past the novel is, as mentioned, a departure for Ackroyd. That difference however is qualified by the cultural predilection of the novel's future citizens: though multidimensional and spiritual, Witspellian Londoners, and Plato in particular, are fascinated by and to a degree reliant on explorations of the past. The Plato Papers is also unconventional insofar as it eschews the realism usually found(at)ional in Ackroyd's fiction. The novel consists of dialogues, orations, pronouncements, glossary excerpts and, in the final chapter, a narratorial encapsulation. Without the "seam-disguising" realist grounding, the novel assumes a fantastical form—it contains allegorical threads, dramatized scenes and scholarly apparatus, yet little "reality-effect" technique. Finally, an additional element of insecurity compounds the work's already unstable epistemological status. The insecurity arrives at the last of the eleven epigraphs. In a manner similar to The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde, the novel is presented as a document written by another. Yet the "originary" voice in The Plato Papers has a more complex genesis. The eleventh epigraph discloses that The Plato Papers is an artifact written (performed?) by "Anon." circa 3705, perhaps centuries after "The Age of Witspell" and Plato. The anonymous author, following "the conventions of spherical

drama" (v), engages in an act of conjuring and portraiture directed toward illustrating Plato, a historical figure who also provides (shades of Dee, Chatterton, Hawksmoor) an allegorical history lesson. The anonymously-authored biographical drama, in short, emplots that life as both "unhappily brief" and "a continual search after truth," and as an example of societal prejudice: "it will also be my duty to faithfully record Plato's final days in the city and to ascertain how a cruel superstition exercised boundless dominion over the most elevated and benevolent mind" (v). The stratification is daunting: a novel (by Peter Ackroyd on Chatto & Windus in 1999) is presented as a series of dialogues, orations and expository historiography (by "Anon." in 3705); the orations (by Plato, circa 3400) teach about "The Age of Orpheus" (3500 BC-300 BC) through to "The Age of Mouldwarp" (1500 AD-2300 AD). For the eyes of contemporary readers, Plato's remarks are often risibly wrong, and yet at times remarkably accurate. His supposed fallibility, however, is actually a representation by "Anon.," about whom—as the name makes perfectly clear—nothing whatsoever is known. That figure's actual motivations are opaque and the depth of her or his historical knowledge and ability to represent any past life remains fully unanswered. And since that one initial comment by "Anon." is presented as an epigraph, it is necessary to assume that another, yet more anonymous editor or author has compiled it. Like Plato analyzing "'Hitchcock Frenzy'" (70), readers can only form conjectures about the 'actual' significance of the marked-as-historical text before them.

Ackroyd's Postmodern Condition

Tradition, usually said to be received, is in reality made, in an unceasing activity of selection, revision, and outright invention, whose function is to defend identity against the threat of heterogeneity, discontinuity and contradiction. Its purpose is to bind (and necessarily, therefore, to exclude). Tradition is prone to represent itself as custom, as the settled fact of continuity, but its real process is shot through with anxiety.

Francis Mulhern

... the remaking of history is a persistent critique, unglamorously chipping away at the binary oppositions and continuities that emerge continuously in the supposed account of the real.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

With such semantic gaps and inconsistencies, The Plato Papers might well appear to be one of the aporia-inducing texts of postmodernism. On closer examination, however, the appearance of a categorical fit proves somewhat illusory. Certainly, it is possible to place The Plato Papers and indeed much of Ackroyd's work within any of the discrete-yet-proximate scholar-produced typologies of the (metaphors of the) permutations of (purportedly ineffable) literary postmodernism—whether, for example, Hassan's of play/absence (in contrast to the purpose/presence of modernism), Thiher's vision of suspensive (as opposed to disjunctive, modernist) irony, McHale's foregrounded ontological (not epistemological and modernist) dominant, Jameson's spectacular simulacra (versus real historicity), Connor's historicised and historical modalities, and Hutcheon's dialectic of the using/installing then abusing/subverting of conventions and norms of "liberal humanism." Situating The Plato Papers as a characteristic instance of postmodern literature or "applying" a particular scholar's take on postmodernism (explained at a hypothetical conference panel: "The Plato Papers: Exemplifying Historiographic Metafiction?"; "The Plato Papers and Jameson's 'images, simulacra, and pastiches of the past': Commensurate?") is a moderately productive critical strategy insofar as it does suggest an approach to a general consideration and categorization. In that case, literature stands in support of a critic's delineation of a broad, historically delimited cultural condition or phenomenon. Its political dimensions are in turn contingent on the critic's singular modelling of that cultural condition: for Jameson, The Plato Papers could be classed as just one product within the prevailing late capitalist economical logic, and so merely symptomatic¹¹⁵ of the losses and declines Jameson imputes to that wrong-headed system of production; under Hutcheon's gaze, the same novel would exemplify "paradigmatic" (1988 5) historiographic metafiction, a characteristically recuperative postmodern form (that "reinstalls historical contexts as significant and even determining,

¹¹⁵It is Jameson's term: postmodernism is "an alarming and pathological symptom of a society that has become incapable of dealing with time and history" (1983 117).

but in doing so, it problematizes the entire notion of historical knowledge” (1988 89)), and one whose aim remains principally pedagogical; these works “make their readers question their own (and by implication, others’) interpretations” (1991 108) of the world.

Still, as the foregoing chapters have made sufficiently plain, the discontinuities endemic to Ackroyd’s fiction encourage multiple readings—such that we can without difficulty imagine scholars like Connor, Hutcheon and Jameson detecting in any Ackroyd novel traits and tendencies that would support their peculiar perspective: simultaneously (or at least contiguously) fashion-plate images and critique of convention and historicised fiction “about its own historically relative construction of history” (Connor 1996 143). Thus, the designating of the fiction—or author: “Peter Ackroyd is representative of a new breed of British novelists who can loosely be termed postmodernist” (Finney 240)—as postmodern would seem problematic, implicating critic and fiction in a larger, as-yet-unresolved debate concisely positioned by Hal Foster’s still largely unsatisfactorily answered 1983 question, “Postmodernism: does it exist at all and, if so, what does it mean?” (ix). Even the aforementioned “applied” approach (Ackroyd via Hutcheon, Ackroyd via Jameson) would ultimately result in delineating how (or how not) The Plato Papers or The Great Fire of London conforms to that particular scholar’s model of (literary) postmodernism. With such an approach the questions one might ask of Ackroyd’s fiction are then always already determined by the frame of scholarship. Moreover, possible alternate positionings beyond that ultimately restrictive frame (such as with the camp comedy discussed in Chapter B and with the use of pastiche examined in Chapter A) are effectively excluded as extraneous or else absorbed as “postmodern.” In “Toward a Concept of Postmodernism” Ihab Hassan anticipated many of the problems that might emerge from criticism utilizing a term and concept whose defining features are fluid, if not contradictory and chaotic. After outlining nine points directed toward defining a tricky word, Hassan notes—

Finally, though not least vexing, is postmodernism an honorific term, used insidiously to valorize writers, however disparate, whom we otherwise

esteem, to hail trends, however, discordant, which we somehow approve? Or is it, on the contrary, a term of opprobrium and objurgation? In short, is postmodernism a descriptive as well as an evaluative or normative category of literary thought? (1987 89)

Hassan does not really answer his own questions; he merely issues a sound warning to prospective critics. My own reading and delineation of Ackroyd's fiction has been shaped in part by the oversights and suppressions built into the Ackroyd-as-representative-of-a-new-breed-of-British-novelists-who-can-loosely-be-termed-postmodernist critical projects I have regularly encountered. Moreover, the very instability or non-locatability of the term and phenomenon renders criticism utilizing it as a stable, placeable thing open to question.

Though postmodernism and the criticism hinged to it have proven vexing because so dauntingly complicated and irreducible, some future project might well consider Ackroyd's oeuvre vis à vis questions that postmodernism in general is frequently presumed to raise. That much-touted reflexive incredulity at/interrogation of cultural metanarratives, for instance, or the staunch antifoundationalism could usefully interact (collide?) with what Ackroyd himself has identified (in interview) as his fervent wish to "reinterpret the whole of English culture¹¹⁶ from the beginning to the end" (Walsh 5), to produce biographical texts (as stated in the Prologue of Dickens) that are an "agent of real knowledge" (xvi) and to retrieve (as suggested by the one instance of first-person narration in The House of Doctor Dee) "authentic" historical figures. It would be fruitful to examine Ackroyd's

¹¹⁶Compare to Perry Anderson (1992): "Twenty years ago it was possible to take the nation—actually the metanational state making up the United Kingdom—as an unproblematic unit for cultural enquiry Within the set of major Western societies, Britain in the immediate post-war decades possessed a peculiarly stable and insulated culture. Alone of them it had never known either social upheaval, foreign occupation or mass immigration—the three great solvents of fixed collective identity in the twentieth century; while unlike the few smaller European countries which had also escaped these, it had been the world's premier empire for two centuries, with all the confidence of superiority imparted by global power. These were circumstances which made British intellectual life exceptionally well defined The national stamp of the prevailing outlook was one of its own proudest themes. In these conditions the frontier of spirit were indeed largely one with the borders of state" (200–201).

Anderson then states that such is no longer the case: "In this epoch [of internationalization and immigration], no culture could remain national in the pristiner senses of the past" (201).

ongoing work in terms of its production of that “real knowledge,” particularly with regard to a “whole” and “reinterpret[ed]” Englishness. If, as the eminent Marxist critic Benedict Anderson sensibly remarks in Imagined Communities, “nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts of a particular kind” (4), the “nation-ness” Ackroyd’s literary work (fiction, biography) constructs would bear marks inscribing certain political leanings. And if, as Robert Young claims in White Mythologies, “History, with a capital H, similarly cannot tolerate otherness or leave it outside its economy of inclusion” (4), it would be worthwhile to speculate whether Ackroyd’s work constitutes the “alternative” history-writing Young champions or whether it is Western historiography as usual, a discourse of generally intolerant and exclusive mien.

Clearly, Ackroyd’s nation-representing project is well under way. In the past two decades he has published biographies of T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound,¹¹⁷ Charles Dickens,¹¹⁸ William Blake and Thomas More. Most recently, he has published a best-selling “biography” of London itself, representing it as “a visionary city” (768), a site of grand “historical destiny” (766) and “‘the capital of all capitals’ in every cultural and social sense” (777). And (fulfilling part of his seven-figure contract) Ackroyd is currently writing a biography of the ne plus ultra of literary Englishness, Shakespeare. Famously, too, his fiction is marked by its retrieval, incorporation and/or revivification of historical figures

¹¹⁷Such an analysis of Ackroyd would of course need to elucidate the racial or cultural boundaries of ‘the English,’ whose genesis Defoe sardonically described as “from a Mixture of all things began/That Het’rogeneous Thing, An Englishman” (Anderson 1991 x). Ackroyd’s version of Englishness might need to be conceptually expanded to incorporate American-born poets like Eliot and Pound.

¹¹⁸Though not listed in the hardcover’s Contents page—and actually purged from the paperback edition—Ackroyd’s biography of Dickens emphasizes its own status as construct-of-interpreted-facts with seven interchapters far more fictive than biographical. Each segment has a strong correlation to elements of Ackroyd’s novels. The first, for instance, imagines Dickens entering the world of Little Dorritt and holding a conversation with that pathetic child of Marshalsea; the third takes the form of a “true conversation between imagined selves” (427), that is, a dialogue between Chatterton, Eliot, Wilde and Dickens; the sixth is an interview between the biographer and himself (including the ironic statement, “Once you introduce uncertainty and doubts, the whole enterprise begins to collapse” (893)); the fourth is pastiche Dickens à la The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde.

(both substantially, as in the case of Milton, Dee, Chatterton and Wilde, and less so, as seen in the numerous 'walk-on' characters like the Marxs, the Merediths, Wren, and Leno). That fiction, in addition, offers intense intertextuality, a complex web of allusion, sampling/quotation, pastiche and paraphrasing from select works of English artistic history.

There is no arguing that heritage, inheritance, history and historiography are not elementary thematic particles in Ackroyd's non-fiction and fiction, associating individual character to community, society and nation. What kind of discursive world or imaginary nation-space all these words create naturally invites consideration, especially since the books so ardently function to portray a particular slant of England and Englishness past, present and future. The positionings of nation and nationality (and nationalism) are ones through which Ackroyd's textual politics—'postmodern' or not—could be profitably examined, for surely "nation"¹¹⁹ and akin concepts are historical phenomena borne of imperialism, of capitalism, of patriarchy and of the bourgeois liberal humanism that might come under criticism (or attack) via the incredulity-performing positions of postmodernism and others. If indeed Ackroyd's novels are postmodern, it is fair to inquire whether they exhibit signs of critique and "subversion" in relation to nation(ality)? And if they do not, how can that fact be critically accounted for? According to Anderson, "nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time" (3)—despite being so very imagined and subject to historical change. Moreover, drawing in part from Ernest Renan and Anderson, Homi Bhabha states at the base of modern nation formation are acts of

¹¹⁹Or perhaps not. I was surprised that in International Postmodernism: Theory and Literary Practice (1997) editors Hans Bertens and Douwe Fokkema had chosen to solicit thirty brief essays that describe "The Reception and Processing of Postmodernism" by nationality (i.e., "Postmodernism in Finland," "Postmodernism in the Literatures of Former Yugoslavia"). By the editors' arrangements, then, while postmodern art apparently works to question and undermine many cultural conventions, its manifestations remain steadfastly local (concepts of race and nation seemingly unaffected by its political ambitions).

“forgetting”¹²⁰ (1994 160), and from that non-place he aims to take “some speculative fieldnotes” about a “disjunctive, liminal space of national society” (1990 312), that “incommensurability in the midst of the everyday” (311). Finally, in an essay relevant to the current speculation here, “Rewriting Wrong: On the Ethics of Literary Reversion,” Steven Connor makes the conjecture that “rewriting compromises the cultural authority of the original text” (80). Proceeding from all these disparate points, it would be valuable to query what cultural figures and institutions Ackroyd rewrites—as well as to what degree—and how (if at all) his modifications diverge from conventions and expectations, the canon and ‘official history.’

(And to extrapolate about what and who is ‘forgotten’/not written and what that might signify: after all, thus far Ackroyd’s is a land where women are usually given secondary—often comic—roles and where there appears to be nary a soul who is not white, more or less middle class and Anglo-Saxon. Speaking of the “normalizing drive” of F.R. Leavis’s nation-staying discourse, Francis Mulhern concludes that the “governing values of Leavisian discourse are class-restrictive, (hetero)sexist and ethnocentric” (259). And in Notes for a New Culture Ackroyd attacks Leavis for his promulgation of “false

¹²⁰See also Anderson (1991). Describing (after Hayden White) new cultural methods of emplotting History, Anderson notes that the ideology of nation-writing is predicated on remembering and forgetting (“characteristic amnesias” (204)) in prescribed patterns: “A vast pedagogical industry works ceaselessly to oblige young Americans to remember/forget the hostilities of 1861–65 as a great ‘civil’ war between ‘brothers’ rather than between—as they briefly were—two sovereign nation-states. (We can be sure, however, that if the Confederacy had succeeded in maintaining its independence, this ‘civil war’ would have been replaced in memory by something quite unbrotherly.) English history textbooks offer the diverting spectacle of a great Founding Father whom every schoolchild is taught to call William the Conqueror. The same child is not informed that William spoke no English, indeed could not have done so, since the English language did not exist in his epoch; nor is he or she told ‘Conqueror of what?’. For the only intelligible answer would turn the old Norman predator into a more successful precursor of Napoléon and Hitler. Hence ‘the Conqueror’ operates as [a] kind of ellipsis . . . to remind one of something which it is immediately obligatory to forget. (201) See also Brennan’s essay, “The National Longing for Form,” which quotes Raymond Williams with approval: “‘Nation’ as a term is radically connected with ‘native’. We are born into relationships which are typically settled into a place. This form of primary and ‘placeable’ bonding is of quite fundamental human and natural importance. Yet the jump from that to anything like the modern nation-state is entirely artificial” (45).

notions" of literature, those that "try to take from literature what literature cannot provide—the ability to constitute an ideology of action" (119). Yet a half century after Leavis, how does Ackroyd's tradition-rewriting project diverge (if at all) from that of the disdained Leavis?)

As we might expect from Ackroyd's work, these interpenetrated elements of history, nation, citizen and literature are multifaceted, veering toward nostalgia and racialism (as Schnackertz, Roessner¹²¹ and Levenson make abundantly clear), yet also offering counter-positions that render judgements about his work as racist, as masculinist, as Tory and so on, somewhat rash—or at least incomplete. A peculiar construction of Englishness is certainly evident in Ackroyd's work. In light of novels discussed here previously, it is no challenge to hazard a guess that coming to understand Ackroyd's 'England' would be an undertaking equally complex, contradictory and confounding.

¹²¹ Roessner writes in much the same vein as Levenson: "Ackroyd promotes a particular conservative vision of English art and English identity. He attempts to recenter his conception of Englishness by linking it to a mystical force working through artistic history. In doing so, Ackroyd aligns himself with conservative cultural critics, from T.S. Eliot to Harold Bloom, who attempt to define and champion a canon of literature. Like Bloom, Ackroyd adapts Eliot's spatialized concept of literary history in order to conserve a tradition he believes is being assailed by the drive toward diversity and multiculturalism. While Ackroyd does distinguish himself from Eliot and Bloom by advancing an unabashedly nationalist agenda, *English Music* reveals how an allegedly transcendent tradition works to unhold a conservative ideology. In this way, the novel attests to the true plurality of this postmodern moment: here, even the white English male must argue for the legitimacy of his vision of identity, and a tradition formerly thought to be dominant must be presented as marginalized in an attempt to shore up its authority" (122–123).

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