



## REVIEW

**Petr Chalupský:** *A Horror and a Beauty: The World of Peter Ackroyd's London Novels*. Prague: Karolinum Press, 2016. ISBN 978-80-246-3161-5, 301 pp.

Research in the field of contemporary British fiction has long been Petr Chalupský's special area of interest within his expertise in Literary Studies and Literary Theory. More specifically, it is the image of the city and its culture in the novel that resulted in his first monograph entitled *The Postmodern City of Dreadful Night: The Image of the City in the Works of Martin Amis and Ian McEwan*, published in 2009. Before and since, Chalupský has contributed a number of short critical studies on other novelists and their works to various literary journals and conference proceedings. Among them, more notably one which provides a telling link to the monograph reviewed here, "Crime Narratives in Peter Ackroyd's Historiographic Metafiction", which appeared in the *European Journal of English Studies* in 2010.

With his more than sixty books comprised of poetry, essays, novels, biography, critical and historical studies, Peter Ackroyd ranks among the most prolific contemporary British writers for whom writing is a passion as well as a vital need. Despite the fashionable tendency to reject the idea of possible biographical influences or connections between authors and their works, Petr Chalupský in his new book on Ackroyd's London novels starts from this close connection and introduces the reader to Ackroyd's life and his views on writing. Both are essentially defined by Ackroyd's very personal ties to London, which is the landscape of his imagination. His oeuvre reflects the heterogeneous character of the metropolis in various areas of his writing while all the fields of his interest, i.e. biography, history, literary history and the novel, penetrate and complement one another. Chalupský has limited his study of Peter Ackroyd's novel writing to London, which both generally and in Ackroyd's conception means a space of huge proportions that cannot be enclosed in the nine London novels alone. The central aspect of it all is Ackroyd's chronotope – his concept of perpetual time, the mixing of the past with the present and the future – while the places and events, often as if repeatedly happening in them, reflect less well-known, dark or subversive parts of London. Chalupský emphasizes and clearly appreciates Ackroyd's conception of the past, in this case the past of the city in the novel as historical facts complemented and balanced with 'spiritual truth'. In this respect he commends Ackroyd's novels as inventive and inspiring, and therefore worthy of attention.

In spite of the dense and intricate intermingling of the various elements of Ackroyd's portrayal of London in his novels and non-fiction studies, Chalupský has chosen six vantage points for analysis. The first of them in the first chapter, "Ackroyd's London Past and Present", offers Ackroyd's view of London in the past and present approached by Chalupský on the basis of Ackroyd's four lectures from the 1990s, though in combination with Ackroyd's two extensive studies which interlink London and its biography with the overall development of English literary and creative sensibility. Of Ackroyd's personal attitudes Chalupský moreover points to his opinion on the importance of the role of

Catholicism and spiritual radicalism and, on the other hand, his critique of postmodernism and the current emphasis on the role of minority literatures both of which are in contradiction to Ackroyd's concept of historical continuity – his 'patterns of continuity'. The latter also complements Ackroyd's rejection of a closed canon of English literature and its separation from contemporary literature. The strong sense of continuity is further supported by his concept of heterogeneity, in the literary context understood as a combination of various literary tools, styles and genres, in Ackroyd's view yet another feature of the English literary heritage, although this kind of heterogeneity nowadays comes to be linked with postmodern culture. Here Chalupský also points to an interesting connection which Ackroyd finds between the English liking for theatricality, theatre, caricature and humour, and the tradition of medieval drama – miracle and mystery plays – with their origins in the Catholic mass, i.e. in the older Catholic rather than the later Protestant tradition. At the same time, however, he draws attention to the novelist's re-definition of the traditional chronology as a labyrinth where time sometimes flows in a circle, sometimes in a spiral, or completely unpredictably as a continuum without recognizable past, present or future. Chalupský then goes on to demonstrate convincingly how Ackroyd's conception of heterogeneity and time permeates his picture of London as a place in the temporal continuum of English history and literary sensibility in all their contradictions. Moreover, he does not overlook Ackroyd's emphasis on inclusiveness which leads Ackroyd to appreciate great London writers and artists and to aspire in the same way to resonate with their heritage although their work may sometimes have been criticized for lack of moral vision. Ackroyd's interest in and inclination towards less well-known and darker parts of London and lower, popular forms of culture is seen by Chalupský as an explanation of the lack of attention accorded to Ackroyd's work on the part of academic literary criticism. While I do not disagree with this suggestion, I still believe that in our time enthusiastic for postmodern critical theories, it may rather be Ackroyd's dismissive attitude to postmodern culture and theory that has contributed to the comparative paucity of critical interest in his novels. In spite of that, as Chalupský asserts, Ackroyd's novels are repeatedly confronted with postmodernism, typically with the postmodern conception of history, historiography and their deconstruction, fragmentation and revision or hypothetical fiction. Chalupský however argues in favour of the view that Ackroyd's purpose is not postmodern playfulness, but rediscovery of the past in order to better understand the present. As another important aspect of Ackroyd's London chronotope Chalupský regards the fact that Ackroyd's London in his novels is not only a place in time, but also a theme and a character. In this he differs from Bakhtin's chronotope, but not quite so from other contemporary British writers for whom London often plays a more important role than their novel characters. This approach, too, contributes to Ackroyd's vision of London as a timeless, eternal city.

In the second chapter entitled "Uncanny London" Chalupský agrees with Marina Warner that magical stories with paranormal occurrences are enjoying unprecedented interest in contemporary culture and the arts. Peter Ackroyd is therefore not a particular exception in his frequent embodiment of magical aspects of London. Nevertheless, Chalupský reveals and appreciates Ackroyd's idiosyncratic view of London in his focus on its "unofficial", hidden history, on mysterious currents linking occultism with serial murders, communication with spirits, alchemy and the myth of the homunculus, but always in close connection with the history of the town and its literary dimension. Chalupský supports all that with extensive explorations of the relevant areas of cultural and literary history to show that Ackroyd's London is founded on constant encountering of the rational and the irrational principles, none of which is ascribed the value of truth. On the contrary, to understand London, it is indispensable to attain their, albeit seemingly, paradoxical symbiosis. At the same time, Chalupský keeps emphasizing the playfulness of Ackroyd's novels employing a confrontation of different points of view, including speculations about 'what if' – all of it as the work of the great power of Ackroyd's imagination.

Next Chalupský goes on to look at "Felonious London" – the dark corners of deserted, dilapidated areas that have always spawned crime. Ackroyd connects their literary portrayal with the long tradition of the London Gothic narrative, but also with the works of Charles Dickens, whose inspiration he takes for his own intention to portray the 'unofficial' history of the city, and, as Chalupský shows, in contrast to many of his contemporaries who play with elements of the detective story

in a postmodern stylistic game of the mixing of genres. On all of the London novels Chalupský demonstrates Ackroyd's concept that crime is deeply embedded in the texture of the town as a fact and its narrative in an endless process of mutual inspiration and London itself is its multilayered palimpsest. Here Chalupský also convincingly argues the thesis that Ackroyd's criminal cases contribute to the hybridization of the traditional historical novel, thus contributing to the renewed strengthening and enlivening of the genre.

"Psychogeographic and Antiquarian London" is observed by Chalupský as an aspect of Ackroyd's psycho-spatial-temporal fictional construct of London. Ackroyd's novel characters not only inhabit this London, but together with their author participate, many of them knowingly, in mapping its trans-temporal character – of the city as a text which is constantly being re-written. Chalupský works here with a relatively new term – the field of psychogeography – which he adopts as a suitable tool for reflecting modern urban experience, particularly in the form of "psychogeographical walks" around old and marginal or marginalized parts of the city that represent a kind of opposition against modernity and its progression leading to the demise of such places. Chalupský finds a subversive attitude in the literary psychogeographical approach to London, too, and not only in Ackroyd. On the other hand, he does not regard Ackroyd as a typical representative of literary psychogeography, because instead of a documentary and subversive form, he projects a predominantly prophetic and visionary view of an eternal city which is essentially traditionalist.

In the following "Theatrical London" Chalupský starts from Ackroyd's own claim that London itself is theatrical and that its theatricality is its most important characteristic feature, first and foremost in its ability to adopt various parallel identities for various purposes and in the essential encounter of the contrasts of pathos and pantomime. Ackroyd further asserts that in these respects London is different and more theatrical than other metropolises. With this characteristic of London, however apt it sounds on the whole, I would have expected some kind of minimal critical response from Petr Chalupský, who lives in Prague – surely hardly a less theatrical city – although I appreciate that such a diversion would probably incongruously disturb the otherwise largely consensual flow of the debate with Ackroyd's work and Ackroydian criticism.

"Literary London" closes the circle of thematic portraits of London as a text in a constant process of re-writing and self-reflection in which all that has ever been written about it participates. Nevertheless, not even here does Chalupský give in to the postmodern play of the boundless intertext, but points to specific examples of texts and writing as themes in the debated novels and to their author's intention. It is but sporadically that he refers to the unresolved dispute whether Ackroyd is or is not a postmodern author and to Ackroyd's opinions and attitudes to postmodernism even though he, maybe somewhat surprisingly, then opines that *Chatterton* (1987) may be read as a novel version of Roland Barthes's key postmodern ideas. The circle of the debate is suitably and virtually closed by an analysis of Ackroyd's latest London novel *Three Brothers* (2013) with his autobiographical authorial self-reflection.

In each of the thematic chapters Chalupský illustrates the relevant aspects of the particular debate on analyses of Ackroyd's London novels or sometimes only by means of references to individual characters or their stories or relation to the place which permeates them and is an essential part of them all. The result is an excellent, detailed study of Ackroyd's London novels in intensive debate with his biography of London, with sizeable Ackroydian criticism and a number of concepts of critical theory. In other words, Chalupský's own inspiring reading and interpretation of Ackroyd's work is supported by wide-ranging literary and cultural research and deep thought. In his conclusions Chalupský emphasizes the contradiction, albeit somewhat harmonious, between Ackroyd's conception and creation essentially building on plurality, heterogeneity and continuity, of permeation of temporal levels and viewpoints, and his rejection of postmodernism, especially as (re)presented by postmodern critical theories. In agreement with the novelist's view, namely that his approach best portrays London and the English sensibility and is in fact hundreds of years old, Chalupský offers a picture of the London of Ackroyd's novels as always the same pattern of permanence in eternal continuity. At the same time he defends Ackroyd against his critics who dislike Ackroyd's pathos in his portrayal of English cultural identity.

Petr Chalupský's comprehensive study of Peter Ackroyd's multilayered novel writing debates in depth all sides and elements of his London novels, which moreover sufficiently characterize and to a great extent even comprise all of Ackroyd's writing including his non-fiction. Chalupský's, in every respect admirable work of literary criticism and scholarship, after both extensive and intensive analysis and debate with a great amount of theoretical and critical ideas, sounds celebratory and convincingly in favour of Peter Ackroyd's oeuvre and is without any doubt well worth reading.

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