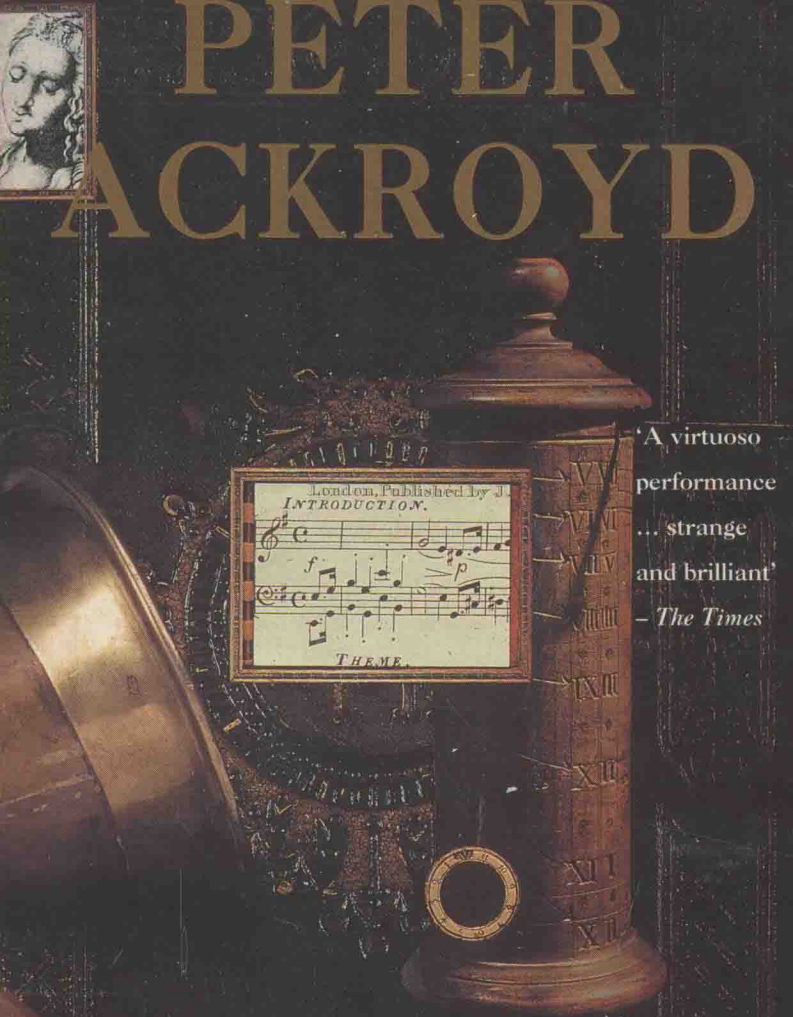
PETER ACKROYD



'A virtuoso performance ... strange and brilliant' – *The Times*

English Music

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ENGLISH MUSIC

PENGUIN BOOKS

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'A book which is on the one hand a disciplined and touching study of the father/son relationship and on the other a daring exploration of the meaning of English culture' – John Kemp in the *Literary Review*

'A passionate argument for the recognition and acknowledgement of an all-pervading Englishness of spirit and also a moving account of the ... complexity of a father–son relationship ... The delicacy with which Ackroyd traces how a son only comes to know his father by degrees, how misconceptions are gradually stripped away, how knowledge changes and deepens love, is wholly successful' – Mary Hope in the *Financial Times*

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'The work of a master ... He still manages to synthesize past and present with a force that carries all before it' – David Hughes in the *Mail on Sunday*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter Ackroyd was born in London in 1949, and he was educated at Cambridge and Yale Universities. He was literary editor of the *Spectator* for some years and is now chief book reviewer for *The Times*. He has published three books of poetry and is the author of *The Great Fire of London*, *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, winner of the Somerset Maugham Prize for 1984, *Hawksmoor*, winner of the Whitbread Award and *Guardian* Fiction Prize for 1985, *Chatterton* and *First Light*. His non-fiction work includes *Ezra Pound and His World*, a biography of T. S. Eliot that won the Whitbread and the Heinemann Awards for 1984, and a biography of Dickens, which was shortlisted for the NCR Book Award for 1991.

Acknowledgements

The first inspiration for this novel came from the Victorian medium, Daniel Home, and the short account of his son in *Incidents Of My Life*. Any other relation to people living or dead, real or imaginary, is entirely coincidental.

The scholarly reader will soon realize that I have appropriated passages from Thomas Browne, Thomas Malory, William Hogarth, Thomas Morley, Lewis Carroll, Samuel Johnson, Daniel Defoe and many other English writers; the alert reader will understand why I have done so.

'. . . he who can interpret what has been seen is a greater prophet than he who has simply seen it.'

St Augustine, *De Genesi ad Litteram*

'Invention, strictly speaking, is little more than a new combination of those images which have been previously gathered and deposited in the memory: nothing can come of nothing.'

Joshua Reynolds, Discourse II

ONE

YES. I HAVE RETURNED to the past. I have made that journey. 'You can't go back,' you said when I told you of 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.

So the old hall was there when I went back. The site of my earliest years, the site of the Chemical Theatre, remained just as it was and, when I looked up at the outline of its dark slate roof against that autumn sky in 1992, I did not know whether I was an old man still or whether I had become a child again. Of course the surface of things had changed: seventy years before, the City Road was a blackened thoroughfare of small shops and factories. I remember how the old hall itself had stood beside the Bee-Hive Boot Works and a shop which sold fancy goods like calico and trimming: now there was a car-rental showroom and a Superdrug chain-store, although I believe that I could make out the shape of the forgotten buildings. On the other side of the hall there had been a dairy, and the family who owned it kept a cow in the back-yard; they also sold soap and candles which, it was rumoured, were melted down from its predecessor. On that same spot, when I went back, there was a Spar supermarket. Yet something remained the same. How can I put it? The situation of the buildings, the disposition of everything, was familiar to me. When I went back . . . how far should that be?

The hall had been constructed in 1892: I knew this because the numbers had been scratched into the brickwork just below the roof and, whenever I glanced towards them, the date itself used to fill me with foreboding. I never understood why, although now I do. It was a typical London building of the late Victorian period, but on a scale appropriate to the narrow

streets and small houses that had spread across this area of Hackney near the City Road. Close by was Bunhill Fields, the final home of William Blake and John Bunyan, and the hall itself was supposed to have been built on the site of a Dissenters' chapel which had been destroyed during the East End riots of 1887. Some of the older people remembered that time, when an attack upon the new Anglo-Catholic churches in the area had turned into a general assault upon all religious establishments. The chapel was eventually rebuilt as a community hall run by the Board of Guardians, but by the time of my childhood, in the Twenties, it had become a hall of miscellaneous purposes. It had become a meeting place. And the placard outside read, simply, CLEMENT HARCOMBE. MEDIUM AND HEALER. He was my father.

'Welcome to the Chemical Theatre. Where all the spirits of your past come in dumb show before you.' So my father always began, in those days, but I did not recall his words until many years later. He repeated them just before he died, and I wrote them down soon after in order to express the true nature of the man. It may seem strange that an entire personality can be sealed within a few words, but it is so. For him they had all the resonance of a notable, even a dangerous, past against which he still measured himself; but at the time they meant nothing to me and, in those moments before his death when he spoke them again, I turned my head away. Had I done so many years before? Had I turned my head away when, as a child, I stood beside him on the stage of the Chemical Theatre?

I still remember the odour of the hall itself – or, rather, I am taken back to the period of my infancy whenever I once again smell dust, or paint, or the not unwelcome scent of human decay. My father held my hand tightly after we had stepped on to the wooden stage, in the glare of the gaslights, as if I were about to fall or run away; he used to press me closely against his side, grip my shoulder, or, most frequently, place his hand upon my head. When we stood together there,

it must have seemed that I had literally grown out of him, sprung forth from the palm of his outstretched hand. He released me only when he crossed the stage and sat in front of a small upright piano: he always played at the beginning of each performance. No, it was not a performance. Not then. It was, in truth, a ceremony. A ritual.

My father prided himself on being an artist, and that in more than one sense, but he was not an expert player of music. He knew several hymns, and now whenever I hear 'Jerusalem' the swelling voices take me back to that time when the frail notes of the old piano echoed around the hall; I can feel once again the dark brick of the building tainting the space around me, and I experience the sense of physical oppression which invaded me before each evening's meeting. My father played too slowly, as if he were not really convinced that the notes followed one another, but there were times when he had the strength or the confidence to improvise: he would reach a sudden crescendo, or devise a sequence of notes which exhibited a richer pattern and which seemed to spring from some buried memory of music he may once have heard. But he was not a good pianist. While he played I walked over and stood beside him; I can still recall putting my fingers across the small holes left in the side of the piano by the wood-worm burrowing their way out towards the air. As soon as he had finished, he stood up, put his hand upon my head once more, and led me towards the centre of the stage: this was a practice from which we rarely, if ever, deviated. He had a thin gold ring upon the second finger of his right hand, and it used to press down upon my scalp as we stood there together. After a few moments he recited the familiar words: 'Welcome to the Chemical Theatre. Where all the spirits of your past come in dumb show before you.'

I could never estimate the size of the audience: it was a small hall, and only held some seventy or eighty, but there always seemed too many bodies crowded together, too many expectant faces. The people sat upon low benches, the wood

worn and shiny with over-use; many of them examined their hands with apparent curiosity or looked down at the cracked green tiles beneath the seats. They rarely looked at my father, but more especially, as I sensed, they would not look at me. It was as if they pitied me. They were arranged in rows in front of the stage, although it was not a real theatrical stage but a rectangular platform raised about two feet from the ground. There were a few small square windows down each side of the hall, and three rows of gas-lamps illuminated the interior. In the winter months the hall was brilliantly lit and all I could see of the outside world were patches of blackness, but in the summer the hall remained unilluminated as a gradual grey twilight filtered through the windows during the course of the meeting; perhaps it was the twilight which I most feared. Now, in my memory, this period of my life seems to recede for ever, because I know of nothing that happened before it – only the slow passage of the seasons that encircled my life as my father and I stood together in silence upon the stage.

He still held me, but he passed his other hand across his face. He said nothing for a while and, as a result, created one of his more powerful effects – the playing of music and then the silence, in that transition creating a tension which only he could break. I see now that it was his way of acquiring power over them. Could it be possible that the music would never start again? Could this silence last for ever? 'There is someone here,' he would suddenly begin. 'Someone has come here. Who needs guidance.' My father always spoke in a deep voice, with a strong emphasis upon each phrase; perhaps he played the piano before each performance in order to internalize its music, because his own voice was ordinarily light and unemphatic. I do not know. 'Yes. Someone has come to us tonight.' At this point he would hold on to me more tightly than before, almost bearing me down into the ground, and then usually with quavering finger he would point out one among those before us. It did not seem curious to me at the

time, but often I found that I had been looking at the person whom he then singled out. There were even times when I felt compelled to point in precisely the same direction, but my father always managed to anticipate me.

Yet what was it that had arrested my attention? What had I seen when, with my father's hand upon my head, I looked out at the men and women sitting on the wooden benches in front of me? There were occasions when they were made up only of outlines, of serpentine lines, that were so sharply distinguished from the light that the people seemed to be bound by thin wires which trembled in the confined air. Then it seemed that all their colour and movement were being forcibly held within these lines – as if they were the painted models of a cardboard theatre suddenly suffused with life. But there were occasions when I saw something else. I saw phantoms. My recollection of these things is now so distant and so dispossessed that it might be the memory of some other person and yet, even as I write this, I watch the scene again; each man and woman had an outline still, but it was larger than the material body and consisted of a silver contour which seemed to vibrate before me. Yet this was the strangest thing: these phantoms issued from the human body, but in almost every case they were bent over towards the ground as if they were sighing. On occasions one would lean backwards, towards the being from which it had come, and it was then I saw that it was about twelve or thirteen inches taller than its material habitation. There was a world of energy lingering upon the earth, and I believe that this was what my father saw when he touched me. I cannot recall being alarmed, or even particularly surprised, by my vision; no doubt a child of eleven or twelve can accept all manner of strangeness before ordinary existence closes around him.

Sometimes my father held me up towards the people, as high as he could reach, until I was parallel with the row of gaslights above the stage; if I turned to look down at his face through the glare, I could see his eyes tightly closed and the sweat

breaking out upon his forehead. Sometimes, too, he would step down from the platform, holding me in his arms, and carry me across to the person at whom he had just pointed. Yes, I am being borne upwards, my hands around a stranger's neck. I can see light all around me even as I inhale the scent of stale face-powder and feel the pressure of my father's gold ring in my back. I had my arms around the neck of an old woman, and then I said 'Daniel'.

Daniel. It was the name of her only child, dead many years before in the Boer War. My father put me down and carefully led the old woman on to the platform; I took her hand also, for in uttering the name of her son I had laid claim upon her. I stayed beside her while my father disengaged himself for a moment, in order to turn down all the lights except those immediately above the platform. It was the winter of the year, as I remember, and the rest of the hall was quite dark. Now I stood behind her, my father in front: he had placed his hands upon her, but all the time he was observing me. Daniel. He took her shoulders and, in the deep emphatic voice which was so much a part of the ritual, he began to talk to her. 'Daniel,' he said. 'No need to worry. No need to worry.' I was staring at the row of gas-jets above her head; the flames were swaying slightly, no doubt caught in one of the draughts which circulated within the hall. 'Daniel knows about the pain in your side. Your left side. It will pass.' I turned my head and glanced out into the darkness around me: for a moment I thought I could see the phantoms, bending forward and staring down upon the ground. It was seeing, and not seeing. 'Happy now. Very happy. Daniel says it is nothing. Go away soon.' The old woman was shaking as I held her, and I knew that she was crying.

'Daniel,' the old woman said, as she raised her head towards my father. 'My dear.'

'He is happy. He remembers Blackie. Is that right? Blackie. Playing with her when she was a kitten. Is that it? World without end. Happy now. As you will be.'

And that was all. My father removed his hands from her shoulders and took two steps backwards. Now it was time to play my part. I took her arm, as I had been trained to do, and stood silently until my father had turned up the other lights; the phantoms had gone and while everyone blinked, or coughed, or shifted on the benches, I led the woman back to her own seat, where she remained, weeping, with her head bowed. My father was walking nervously around the platform, waiting for me to return to him.

In this period his powers were at their height and, as a result, the hall was often full. In London there have always been groups of people fascinated by the kind of work upon which my father was engaged, and it was not long before his reputation created a modest following. There were also others who came out of curiosity and so it was, on this winter evening, he stood before seventy or eighty of them: young men and women who had entered the hall separately and sat quietly at the back, middle-aged couples who chatted before the meeting began, old people who generally sat at the front and watched everything with eager eyes. Yet among these there were some less easy to define; they carried themselves with an air of both defiance and anxiety, as if they no more belonged in this place than anywhere else. How old did I say I was at this time? Was it eleven or twelve? And yet even then I believe I knew that these were people who had somehow failed in life – and there were times, yes, even then, when I realized with horror that I might one day occupy the same small space upon the margin.

In those days almost everyone was drably, if punctiliously, dressed – the women in shapeless hats with long coats buttoned up to the neck, the men in bowlers and double-breasted overcoats, with three-piece suits, starched collars and narrow ties. My father and I always wore the same clothes, too. I had a peaked cap, stiff collar and a short grey jacket which was known as a 'bum-freezer'. He was carefully dressed and for the performances wore the same black three-piece suit

with a watch-chain strung across the double-breasted waistcoat. He was a young man then, still in his early thirties, and yet in his dark suit he might have been of any age. He touched the chain of his watch, even now as the meeting continued, but he never once looked at the watch-face itself. Never once. The old woman, whose dead child was called Daniel, had gone out into the night; before she left the hall she had put some coins in the empty McVitie and Price biscuit tin which my father always placed beside the door. He watched her leave and then he turned to me, once more taking my hand before he addressed those who remained. They were very quiet. 'Some of you know me. But I am not important. Clement Harcombe is not important. Our friend has just left, taking with her awakened impressions of Daniel. I simply opened the door for her.' All the time he spoke he kept my hand firmly clenched in his own. 'When you go out from this place tonight, you will see the light from the hall pierce the darkness as you cross the threshold. That is all I have done: I have opened the door, and allowed the light to pass through.'

This was a time when death was in the air. Six or seven years had passed since the end of the Great War but, on looking back at it now, it seems to me to have been still a period of privation and mournfulness; it was as if all those deaths had cast a long shadow forward. Whether this is a reflection of the true circumstances of the time, or simply of my own condition as a child, I cannot say. But when I recall the dark coats and hats, the pale faces, the smell of Weights cigarettes; when I remember the monotony and anxiety which seemed so much part of the lives of all those whom my father knew; when I see once again my father standing before them in his three-piece suit – then it is with some conviction that I can describe this as a world dominated by the dead. By the spirits of the past. 'Come towards me now,' he said. He always employed the same words. 'Open the door. Let the light shine through and ease your journey. Come and be healed.'

There must have been occasions when no one came forward, but now I can only remember the times when one or two people rose from the wooden benches and nervously approached us on the platform. It might be an old woman with rheumatism, a young man with continuing headaches, or an older man with severe pains in his chest – when they came up, my father instructed me to step down, take them by the hand and lead them towards him as he waited for them with arms outstretched. My memory of this bears now the aspects of a dream for, as far as I can recall, I could always feel their pain when I first held them. It was not that I suffered it (that would have been too great a burden to endure), but rather that, in some moment of perception, I understood the contours of their sickness; it was as if a light had suddenly been switched on within an unfamiliar room. But there were others who seemed to carry images of the past within themselves. As I touched them I could see a dead father, or grandfather, or ghost further back, rising up and looking at me. All was vouchsafed in a moment, and then it was gone.

The faces of those people have gone now, too – all except four or five whom, as this story will show, I had good reason to remember. One face in particular comes back to me, from that same evening when my father heard the voice of Daniel. There was a young man who had often come to the meetings, and who always sat at the back of the hall in as inconspicuous a position as possible. He was one of those who came simply to be near my father, and he kept his eyes fixed on him throughout the evening. I noticed that he had a pronounced nervous mannerism, for at regular intervals the left side of his mouth would curve upwards and he would twist his head and neck in the same spasmodic movement; yet, when my father played the piano at the beginning of each performance, the music seemed to calm him and his seizures passed away. I am sure that my father recognized him well enough, but he never seemed to look at him and never once mentioned his presence to me. It was as if he liked to keep people silently in their places.

But on this particular evening he rose from the bench, and for the first time came forward when my father invited the audience to 'come and be healed'. It was with something like affection that I hurried down the aisle to take him and, as I touched his arm, I felt the power of his injury – the force of the hurt which propelled him into his strange nervous convulsions. At the same moment he looked at me in a curiously shy way, as if he knew how much I had discovered of him. Then I led him towards the stage. 'Yes,' my father was saying. 'Come forward. Come this way.' I guided him on to the raised wooden platform and I stood behind him as my father placed his hands upon his shoulders; it was the same posture always, the supplicant between us while my father remained within sight of the audience. Now he looked past the young man and stared into my face as he asked the familiar question: 'Tell me what has brought you here. How can I –' He always stopped at this moment, although he pitched his voice so that the whole hall reverberated with his words.

'It's my mouth.' He leaned forward and whispered to my father. 'It jumps up and down.'

My father said nothing. He was still looking towards me as he passed his hands three times over the young man's face, head and neck. 'Take it away.' His voice had grown even louder now, but he was still looking at me. 'Take it away.'

The young man made a sudden movement backwards, and he might have fallen if I had not been there to support him; then I felt him shuddering in my arms until he grew calm. I knew that it had gone. I knew that my father had cured him and that the nervous agitation had left him at last. He turned around to look when I took my hands away from his back; he was standing upright now, but he had so bewildered an expression upon his face that it was as if the sudden liberation had frightened rather than consoled him. After a few moments I led him towards his seat; he did not want to let go of my hand, however, but stood clutching it before he sat down once again. My father was always exhausted after the perform-