Contemporary Literary Criticism

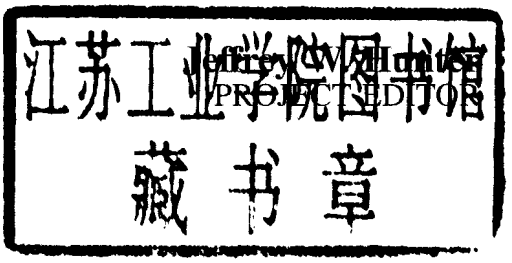
CLC 256

ISSN 0091-3421

Volume 256

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers



Jeffrey W. Hunter
PROJECT EDITOR

GALE
CENGAGE Learning

Detroit • New York • San Francisco • New Haven, Conn • Waterville, Maine • London

GALE
CENGAGE Learning

Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol. 256

Project Editor: Jeffrey W. Hunter

Editorial: Niesha Amos, Dana Ramel Barnes, Tom Burns, Elizabeth Cranston, Kathy D. Darrow, Kristen Dorsch, Jelena O. Krstović, Michelle Lee, Thomas J. Schoenberg, Noah Schusterbauer, Lawrence J. Trudeau, Russel Whitaker

Data Capture: Katrina Coach, Gwen Tucker

Indexing Services: Laurie Andriot

Rights and Acquisitions: Mardell Glinski Schultz, Tracie Richardson, Jhanay Williams

Composition and Electronic Capture: Gary Oudersluys

Manufacturing: Cynde Bishop

Associate Product Manager: Marc Cormier

Gale
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI, 48331-3535

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER 76-46132

ISBN-13: 978-1-4144-1254-2
ISBN-10: 1-4144-1254-1

ISSN 0091-3421

Printed in the United States of America
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 12 11 10 09 08

Preface

Named "one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years" by *Reference Quarterly,* the *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (*CLC*) series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC,* therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today's reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author's career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author's works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

Organization of the Book

A *CLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author's actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.

- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.

- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.

- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style,* 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).

- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.

- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.

- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

Indexes

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Gale, including *CLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

A **Cumulative Nationality Index** lists all authors featured in *CLC* by nationality, followed by the number of the *CLC* volume in which their entry appears.

A **Cumulative Topic Index** lists the literary themes and topics treated in the series as well as in other Literature Criticism series.

An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, films, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces an annual cumulative title index that alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in *CLC* and is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

Citing *Contemporary Literary Criticism*

When citing criticism reprinted in the Literary Criticism Series, students should provide complete bibliographic information so that the cited essay can be located in the original print or electronic source. Students who quote directly from reprinted criticism may use any accepted bibliographic format, such as University of Chicago Press style or Modern Language Association (MLA) style. Both the MLA and the University of Chicago formats are acceptable and recognized as being the current standards for citations. It is important, however, to choose one format for all citations; do not mix the two formats within a list of citations.

Acknowledgments

The editors wish to thank the copyright holders of the criticism included in this volume and the permissions managers of many book and magazine publishing companies for assisting us in securing reproduction rights. Following is a list of the copyright holders who have granted us permission to reproduce material in this volume of *CLC*. Every effort has been made to trace copyright, but if omissions have been made, please let us know.

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL IN *CLC*, VOLUME 256, WAS REPRODUCED FROM THE FOLLOWING PERIODICALS:

The Age, March 9, 2003. Copyright © 2003 The Age Company Ltd. Reproduced by permission.—***The American Scholar,*** v. 74, spring, 2005. Copyright © 2005 by the United Chapters of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. Reproduced by permission.—***Antipodes,*** v. 3, spring, 1989; v. 7, June, 1993; v. 13, December, 1999. All reproduced by permission.—***Ariel,*** v. 26, April, 1995 for "Sexual Gothic: Marian Engel's 'Bear' and Elizabeth Jolley's 'The Well'" by Gerry Turcotte. Copyright © 1995 The Board of Governors, The University of Calgary. Reproduced by permission of the publisher and the author.—***The Associated Press,*** October 23, 2003; August 2, 2007. Both reproduced by permission.—***Book Links,*** v. 13, May, 2004. Copyright © 2004 by the American Library Association. Reproduced by permission.—***Booklist,*** v. 94, August, 1998; v. 99, July, 2003; v. 104, September 15, 2007. Copyright © 1998, 2003, 2007 by the American Library Association. All reproduced by permission.—***Book Report,*** v. 19, March/April, 2001; v. 20, September/October, 2001. Copyright © 2001 by Linworth Publishing, Inc., Worthington, Ohio. Both reproduced by permission.—***The Boston Globe,*** August 18, 2007. Republished with permission of *The Boston Globe*, conveyed through Copyright Clearance Center, Inc.—***C E A MAGazine,*** v. 9, 1996. Reproduced by permission.—***Childhood Education,*** v. 79, summer, 2003; Copyright © 2003 by the Association. All reproduced by permission of the Association for Childhood Education International, 17904 Georgia Avenue, Suite 215, Olney, MD.—***The Children's Folklore Review,*** v. 25, 2002. Reproduced by permission.—***Children's Literature,*** v. 26, 1998. Yale University Press. Copyright © 1998 Hollins College. Reproduced by permission of the The Johns Hopkins University Press.—***Children's Literature Association Quarterly,*** v. 29, winter, 2004. Copyright © 2004 Children's Literature Association. Reproduced by permission.—***Children's Literature in Education,*** v. 36, June, 2005 for "Fairy-Tale Retellings Between Art and Pedagogy" by Vanessa Joosen. Copyright © 2005. Reproduced with kind permission from Springer Science and Business Media and the author.—***Christian Science Monitor,*** v. 88, November 4, 1996 for "Kids Need 'A Mix of Myth and Reality'" by Gloria Goodale. Reproduced by permission of the author.—***Connecticut Review,*** v. 25, 2003 for "Simic in the South" by Ryan G. Van Cleave and Todd James Pierce. Copyright © 2003 Board of Trustees, Connecticut State University. Reproduced by permission of the authors.—***Contemporary Literature,*** v. XLV, fall, 2004. Copyright © 2004 by the Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System. Reproduced by permission.—***Contemporary Review,*** v. 282, May, 2003; v. 288, summer, 2006. Both reproduced by the permission of Contemporary Review Ltd.—***Disability Studies Quarterly,*** v. 24, winter, 2004. Copyright © 2004 by the Society for Disability Studies. Reproduced by permission.—***Emergency Librarian,*** v. 25, March/April, 1998. Reproduced by permission.—***Harvard Review,*** fall, 2003. Copyright © 2003 *Harvard Review*. Reproduced by permission.—***History Today,*** v. 57, January, 2007. Reproduced by permission.—***The Horn Book Magazine,*** v. 76, May, 2000; v. 79, March/April, 2003; v. 83, July/August, 2007. Copyright © 2000, 2003, 2007 by The Horn Book, Inc., Boston, MA, www.hbook.com. All rights reserved. All reproduced by permission.—***International Herald Tribune***. Copyright © 1997 by The New York Times Company. Reprinted with permission.—***Irish Times,*** July 23, 2005. Reproduced by permission.—***Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts,*** v. 5, 1993 for "The Door to Lilith's Cave: Memory and Imagination in Jane Yolen's Holocaust Novels" by Ellen R. Weil. Reproduced by permission of the Estate of Ellen R. Weil.—***The Lion and the Unicorn,*** v. 21, April, 1997. Copyright © 1997 The Johns Hopkins University Press. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.—***Literature & Theology,*** v. 17, March, 2003 for "Charles Simic's Insomnia: Presence, Emptiness, and the Secular Divine" by J. Heath Atchley. Copyright © 2003 Oxford University Press. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission of the publisher and the author.—***Los Angeles Times,*** August 3, 2007; August 26, 2007. Copyright © 2007 Los Angeles Times. Both reproduced by permission.—***Modern Age,*** v. 49, winter, 2007. Reproduced by permission.—***New York Times Book Review***, April 6, 2003; October 26, 2003. Copyright © 1997 by The New York Times Company. Both reprinted with permission.—***Publishers Weekly,*** v. 247, April 24, 2000. Copyright © 2000 by Reed Publishing USA. Reproduced from *Publishers Weekly*, published by the Bowker Magazine Group of Cahners Publishing Co., a division of Reed Publishing USA, by permission.—***The Reading Teacher,*** v. 57, April, 2004. Copyright © 2004 International Reading Association. Reproduced by permission of the International Reading Association.—***School Library Journal,*** v. 21, October, 1974; v. 21, November, 1974; v. 23, October, 1976; v. 28, September, 1981; v. 29, September, 1982; v. 37, July, 1991; v. 51, March, 2005.

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL IN *CLC,* VOLUME 256, WAS REPRODUCED FROM THE FOLLOWING BOOKS:

Gale Literature Product Advisory Board

The members of the Gale Literature Product Advisory Board—reference librarians from public and academic library systems—represent a cross-section of our customer base and offer a variety of informed perspectives on both the presentation and content of our literature products. Advisory board members assess and define such quality issues as the relevance, currency, and usefulness of the author coverage, critical content, and literary topics included in our series; evaluate the layout, presentation, and general quality of our printed volumes; provide feedback on the criteria used for selecting authors and topics covered in our series; provide suggestions for potential enhancements to our series; identify any gaps in our coverage of authors or literary topics, recommending authors or topics for inclusion; analyze the appropriateness of our content and presentation for various user audiences, such as high school students, undergraduates, graduate students, librarians, and educators; and offer feedback on any proposed changes/enhancements to our series. We wish to thank the following advisors for their advice throughout the year.

Barbara M. Bibel
Librarian
Oakland Public Library
Oakland, California

Dr. Toby Burrows
Principal Librarian
The Scholars' Centre
University of Western Australia Library
Nedlands, Western Australia

Celia C. Daniel
Associate Reference Librarian
Howard University Libraries
Washington, D.C.

David M. Durant
Reference Librarian
Joyner Library
East Carolina University
Greenville, North Carolina

Nancy T. Guidry
Librarian
Bakersfield Community College
Bakersfield, California

Heather Martin
Arts & Humanities Librarian
University of Alabama at Birmingham, Sterne Library
Birmingham, Alabama

Susan Mikula
Librarian
Indiana Free Library
Indiana, Pennsylvania

Thomas Nixon
Humanities Reference Librarian
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Davis Library
Chapel Hill, North Carolina

Mark Schumacher
Jackson Library
University of North Carolina at Greensboro
Greensboro, North Carolina

Gwen Scott-Miller
Assistant Director
Sno-Isle Regional Library System
Marysville, Washington

The examples below follow recommendations for preparing a bibliography set forth in *The Chicago Manual of Style,* 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003); the first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals, the second to material reprinted from books:

James, Harold. "Narrative Engagement with *Atonement* and *The Blind Assassin.*" *Philosophy and Literature* 29, no. 1 (April 2005): 130-45. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism.* Vol. 246, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter, 188-95. Detroit: Gale, 2008.

Wesley, Marilyn C. "Anne Hèbert: The Tragic Melodramas." In *Canadian Women Writing Fiction,* edited by Mickey Pearlman, 41-52. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism.* Vol. 246, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter, 276-82. Detroit: Gale, 2008.

The examples below follow recommendations for preparing a works cited list set forth in the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers,* 5th ed. (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1999); the first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals, the second to material reprinted from books:

James, Harold. "Narrative Engagement with *Atonement* and *The Blind Assassin.*" *Philosophy and Literature* 29.1 (April 2005): 130-45. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism.* Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 246. Detroit: Gale, 2008. 188-95.

Wesley, Marilyn C. "Anne Hèbert: The Tragic Melodramas." *Canadian Women Writing Fiction,* edited by Mickey Pearlman. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993. 41-52. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism.* Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 246. Detroit: Gale, 2008. 276-82.

Suggestions are Welcome

Readers who wish to suggest new features, topics, or authors to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions or comments are cordially invited to call, write, or fax the Associate Product Manager:

Associate Product Manager, Literary Criticism Series
Gale
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535
1-800-347-4253 (GALE)
Fax: 248-699-8983

Contents

Peter Ackroyd
1949-

English novelist, biographer, historian, poet, essayist, short story and nonfiction writer, lecturer, critic, and dramatist.

The following entry provides an overview of Ackroyd's career through 2008. For additional information on Ackroyd's life and works, see *CLC,* Volumes 34, 52, and 140.

INTRODUCTION

A prolific author and literary scholar, Ackroyd is chiefly known for experimental works about historical persons and places that consider the problems of authorship and creative influence. Often studied within the tradition of "historiographic metafiction," Ackroyd has built his reputation upon a growing number of challenging novels and significant literary biographies that fuse history and imagination, reality and the supernatural. Ackroyd's most well-regarded novels, including *Hawksmoor* (1985) and *Chatterton* (1988), and his biographies of such literary giants as Charles Dickens, T. S. Eliot, and William Shakespeare, alternate between—and sometimes confuse—past and present, evincing his avowed desire to "conquer chronology." Ackroyd's literary vision is also characterized by his belief that writers find their voice through emulating authors from the past. Hence, his narrative perspective often shifts among author, protagonist, and fictional and nonfictional characters, and his writing is deeply allusive, most often finding inspiration in English authors and in his beloved home city, London.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

The only child of parents who separated early in life, Ackroyd was raised by his mother and maternal grandparents in a public housing project in West London. Ackroyd's Roman Catholic upbringing is evident throughout his writings, such as in his prize-winning *The Life of Thomas More* (1998), which has been praised for humanizing the saint and for exploring the relationship between religious practice and theatricality. Early in life Ackroyd determined to escape his working-class origins, and at age ten he received a scholarship to Saint Benedict's Preparatory School. After graduating from Clare College, Cambridge, in 1971, he studied at Yale University as a Mellon fellow, publishing two works of poetry, *Ouch* (1971) and *London Lickpenny* (1973), which, like his fiction, are highly referential, calling into question the identity of the author. While at Yale, Ackroyd also completed *Notes for a New Culture: An Essay on Modernism* (1976), a literary manifesto that established him as an early proponent of postmodernism among his generation of writers. Upon his return to London in 1973, Ackroyd was hired as literary editor of the *Spectator* magazine, the youngest person to ever hold the post. In 1980, Ackroyd published *Ezra Pound and His World,* the first of several large biographies of English authors. After nearly ten years editing the *Spectator,* Ackroyd resigned—opting to write full time, having already published his first novel, *The Great Fire of London* (1982), and under contract to write a biography of T. S. Eliot. During the 1980s, Ackroyd's fame increased, as his biographies and novels were awarded numerous literary prizes, including the Heinemann Award and the *Guardian* Fiction Prize. Since 1986 Ackroyd has been the chief book reviewer for the *London Times,* a position he has maintained while producing an extensive body of work—several books a year since 2002. His output has expanded to include productions for BBC-TV, history books for children in a series entitled *Voyages through Time,* shorter biographies of British writers in a series entitled *Brief Lives,* and celebrated histories of the city of London itself, including *London: The Biography* (2000) and *Illustrated London* (2003).

MAJOR WORKS

Ackroyd's novels and biographies share common features. Generally, his prose combines fact and fiction, exploring the convergence of past and present time, and human lives associated with a place—usually London—through successive centuries. A skilled mimic, Ackroyd identifies strongly with various English literary figures, often "impersonating" them in narrative interludes. Because Ackroyd consciously attempts to dislocate time and space, his writings are often termed "visionary" and "transcendent." Not

surprisingly, Ackroyd has often been accused by critics of "Anglophilia," a charge he has responded to in his literary criticism, including *Albion: The Origins of the English Imagination* (2002), where he attempts to show that English writers are what he terms "absorbent," drawing upon French, German, Italian, and other foreign sources.

Ackroyd's first novel, *The Great Fire of London,* describes a fictional film production of Charles Dickens's *Little Dorrit,* while at the same time presenting itself as a continuation of the novel, with its own cast of Dickensian characters. *The Great Fire of London* was followed by *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983), which purports to be Wilde's autobiographical account of the last months of his life in exile in Paris. *Hawksmoor* and *Chatterton* are considered Ackroyd's most successful attempts to subvert conventional notions of time and space. The first of these moves between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries: the historical Nicholas Hawksmoor becomes in the novel a Satanist named Nicolas Dyer, and the character Hawksmoor is a twentieth-century detective trying to solve a series of gruesome murders that have taken place in churches designed by the real-life Hawksmoor.

In *Chatterton,* a twentieth-century writer named Charles Wychwood embarks on a quest to prove that Thomas Chatterton, the eighteenth-century poet and forger, faked his own death in 1770 and lived into old age. The theme of fraud is also explored in *The Lambs of London* (2004), in which Charles and Mary Lamb become acquainted with an Irish bookseller who owns a copy of a "lost" Shakespeare play, as well as in *The Fall of Troy: A Novel* (2006), a fictional account of a nineteenth-century German man, Heinrich Schliemann, who manipulates historical evidence to prove the veracity of Homer's account of the Trojan War.

In a few of Ackroyd's novels, he makes the supernatural a part of the plot of his stories, which allows him to readily connect with spirits from the past. For example, the central character of *English Music* (1992), Timothy Harcombe, is a medium whose trances bring him into contact with English composers from the past; the setting of *The House of Doctor Dee* (1993) is a fictional house that once belonged to the Renaissance astrologer and magician John Dee; and *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994) involves a series of murders in London that some residents believe to be the work of a golem, although the suspects include Karl Marx, George Gissing, and Dan Leno, a popular nineteenth-century British comedian. *The Plato Papers: A Prophecy* (1999) is the only one of Ackroyd's novels in which time leaps not backward but forward. In this work, the philosopher Plato presides over a utopian city-state in the year 3700, making generalizations about the twentieth century without benefit of archival evidence, all of which has been destroyed.

Historical and structural license are also prominent characteristics of Ackroyd's biographies, yet these works have all been recommended for their extensive research. Critics have suggested that Ackroyd developed innovative writing techniques partly as the result of the restrictions that were placed on him in compiling his biography of T. S. Eliot. Ackroyd's *T. S. Eliot* (1984) is still considered essential to Eliot studies, despite the fact that he was forbidden by Eliot's estate from quoting any of the poet's unpublished correspondence or private papers. Critics have argued that, although Ackroyd's biographical technique is not conventionally realistic—making use of "'would have,' 'could have,' 'possibly,' and 'might'," as Sam Leith noted with reference to *Shakespeare: The Biography* (2004)—he nevertheless presents extremely detailed portraits by examining each subject's writings for what they reveal about his day-to-day existence and the world in which he lived. Ironically, Ackroyd's *Blake* (1995), a study of a fellow visionary with whom he closely identifies, is considered one of his most straightforward biographies. By contrast is *Dickens* (1990), a massive biography that brings its subject to life through imaginative interludes, evocations of Victorian London, and speculations about Dickens's life in combination with commentary on his novels and exposition on the meaning of biography itself. In this work Ackroyd presents scenes of Dickens walking the streets of London with various characters from his fiction, examining landmarks and conversing about events of the day.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Scholars concur that nearly all of Ackroyd's books bring the city of London to life with teeming energy. Scholars also agree that his experimental techniques have achieved varying degrees of success. Reviewers generally prefer the longer biographies to those in the *Brief Lives* series—*J. M. W. Turner* (2002) and *Chaucer* (2004)—where, according to some, Ackroyd's conjectures appear to be more careless supposition than the result of penetrating analysis. At his best, such as in the novels *Hawksmoor* and *Chatterton,* Ackroyd creates, in the words of Adrianna Neagu, "the illusion of an ultimate transcendent reality outside the textual realm." Elsewhere, as in the novel *Milton in America* (1996), in which Ackroyd places the poet in

Puritan New England, critics complain that Ackroyd allows his imagination extravagant reign. Ackroyd's work is difficult to classify, perhaps because the author himself is reluctant to distinguish among genres. Regardless of whether Ackroyd is labeled a postmodernist, a modernist, or a metafictional historiographer, his writings have consistently challenged readers to reassess conventional notions of critical interpretation. Some scholars, including Susana Onega, have seen in the fluidity of his conception of time and space an assault on Enlightenment reason. Alex Link notes that Ackroyd's writings have also been viewed as books about the very concept of "undecidability." While the merits of Ackroyd's individual books have been debated, literary historians consistently point to the whole of his work as an intriguing contribution to the study of British literature. As Neagu remarked, "Ackroyd has in later years become indispensable for an informed discussion of English cultural identity . . . . And whereas it is arguable whether Ackroyd is a 'good' writer, it is beyond dispute that he is an important one, one whose impact on redefining national culture is yet to come to the fore."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Ouch (poetry) 1971
London Lickpenny (poetry) 1973
Notes for a New Culture: An Essay on Modernism (criticism) 1976
Country Life (poetry) 1978
Dressing Up: Transvestism and Drag: The History of an Obsession (nonfiction) 1979
Ezra Pound and His World [later reissued as *Ezra Pound,*] (biography) 1980
The Great Fire of London (novel) 1982
The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde (novel) 1983
T. S. Eliot: A Life (biography) 1984
Hawksmoor (novel) 1985
The Diversions of Purley and Other Poems (poetry) 1987
Chatterton (novel) 1988
First Light (novel) 1989
**Dickens* [published in the United States as *Dickens, Life and Times*] (biography) 1990
Introduction to Dickens (criticism) 1991
English Music (novel) 1992
The House of Doctor Dee (novel) 1993
Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem (novel) 1994; published as *The Trial of Elizabeth Cree: A Novel of the Limehouse Murders,* 1995
Blake (biography) 1995
Milton in America: A Novel (novel) 1996
The Life of Thomas More (biography) 1998
The Plato Papers: A Prophecy (novel) 1999
London: The Biography (nonfiction) 2000
The Collection: Journalism, Reviews, Essays, Short Stories, Lectures (essays, short stories, and lectures) 2001
Albion: The Origins of the English Imagination (nonfiction) 2002
Dickens: Public Life, Private Passion (biography) 2002
J. M. W. Turner (biography) 2002
The Mystery of Charles Dickens (play) 2002
The Beginning (juvenile nonfiction) 2003
The Clerkenwell Tales (novel) 2003
Escape from Earth (juvenile nonfiction) 2003
Illustrated London (history) 2003
Ancient Egypt (juvenile nonfiction) 2004
Chaucer (biography) 2004
Cities of Blood (juvenile nonfiction) 2004
Kingdom of the Dead (juvenile nonfiction) 2004
The Lambs of London (novel) 2004
Shakespeare: The Biography (biography) 2004
Ancient Greece (juvenile nonfiction) 2005
Ancient Rome (juvenile nonfiction) 2005
The Fall of Troy: A Novel (novel) 2006
Newton (biography) 2007
Thames: Sacred River (nonfiction) 2007
Poe: A Life Cut Short (biography) 2008

*This work was released as a revised, abridged edition in 2002 as part of a tie-in to a three-part BBC television series.

CRITICISM

Susana Onega (essay date 1998)

SOURCE: Onega, Susana. "Lord of Language and Lord of Life." In *Peter Ackroyd,* pp. 24-42. Plymouth, U.K.: Northcote House, 1998.

[*In the following essay, Onega considers Ackroyd's early novels and biographical studies, demonstrating ways in which his fiction is influenced by the subjects of his biographies.*]

When choosing his curriculum as an undergraduate at Cambridge Ackroyd tried to avoid fiction to such a degree that, as he told an interviewer: 'I don't think I even *read* a novel till I was 26 or 27'.[1] Although, in a later interview, he softened this statement, admitting that he had written a thesis on James Baldwin, Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison,[2] the fact remains that he was not seriously interested in fiction until 1973, when

he became the youngest literary editor ever employed by the *Spectator.* Ackroyd then started reading fiction with the same voracity with which he had been reading poetry and literary theory at Cambridge and Yale. In 1978 he began writing ***Dressing Up: Transvestism and Drag, the History of an Obsession*** (1979) and was gathering material for his first biography, ***Ezra Pound and his World*** (1980). In keeping with his belief that all kinds of writing are simply the free play of language, Ackroyd sees his evolution from poetry to biography and fiction writing as complementary aspects of the same endeavour: 'I do not see any great disjunction, or any great hiatus between the poetry and the fiction. For me they are part of the same process. Similarly the biographies. I don't think of biographies and fictions as being separate activities.'[3]

As the subtitle makes clear, in ***Dressing Up*** [***Dressing Up: Transvestism and Drag, the History of an Obsession***] Ackroyd sets out to investigate the origins, evolution and diverse degrees of acceptance or rejection by different cultures of a recurrent phenomenon whose roots go back to the dawn of mankind and is traceable in widely divergent types of civilization. ***Dressing Up*** is a well documented, fully illustrated survey of transvestism and drag which already shows the young writer's interest in the comic possibilities cross-dressing offers the performing arts in general and pantomime in particular. This topic will find its more complex expression in ***Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*** (1994), but all his fiction may be said to evince with greater or lesser intensity a clear interest in transvestism and drag, reflected, for example, in the construction of grotesque and ludicrous gay or lesbian secondary characters or of heterosexual characters related to the world of music hall.

At the same time, Ackroyd had been working on ***Ezra Pound and his World*** (1980) and was soon to begin work on his first two novels, ***The Great Fire of London*** (1982) and ***The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*** (1983), and on his second biography, ***T. S. Eliot*** (1984). In chapter 1 we saw how Ackroyd's poetry evinces a growing impatience with the astringencies of poststructuralist and deconstructive theory and how he attempted to go beyond the modernist 'inward turn' in late poems such as **"the diversions of Purley"** by having recourse to the mythopoeic and transcendental function of writing. Therefore, his biographies of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, written earlier than these poems, may be said to respond to Ackroyd's need to analyse the ways in which the two great modernist poets had approached and tried to solve the same question, while ***The Great Fire of London*** and ***The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*** may be described as Ackroyd's first reactions to Pound's and Eliot's imaginative solutions.

Like ***Dressing Up,*** the biography of Ezra Pound was conceived as an introductory book, aimed at the general reader. Although the text is, therefore, limited in extension and allows the author little space for elaborate argumentation, it shows Ackroyd's fascination for the way in which the great modernist 'often elicits great poetry from the manipulation of another's voice' (***DU*** [***Dressing Up: Transvestism and Drag, the History of an Obsession*** 53), and how he managed to express his 'restless and shifting identity' translating, reshaping and manipulating the voices of the past masters into what can be described as an intertextual palimpsest of accumulated echoes, capable of suggesting a self-sustained world of language, precisely, as we saw in chapter 1, the effect that Ackroyd had been trying to achieve in his own poetry.

In *A Draft of XXX Cantos,* Ezra Pound presents the poet as wandering Odysseus, a mythical quester travelling across time zones and ontological boundaries in order to 'shock the readers [. . .] into an awareness of the disturbed and complex world around them' (***EPW*** [***Ezra Pound and his World***] 75). Pound's method to suggest the existence of a 'disturbed and complex' outward ontology is carried out through juxtapositions: of the general with the particular, of all kinds of 'voices', genres and modes, and of history, autobiography and literature. Although the *Cantos* were left unfinished and are made up of fragmented extracts demanding the reader's collaboration to complete them, Pound was convinced that they contained 'all the knowledge worth knowing, all the works of literature worth reading',[4] thus gesturing to a mysterious unity-within-fragmentation, which brings to mind T. S. Eliot's—and Peter Ackroyd's—need to find the underlying pattern holding together the fragmentary and subjective perceptions of the thinking individual.

In the biography of T. S. Eliot, Ackroyd explains how Pound and Eliot shared an acute feeling of alienation from American culture and society that produced in them 'a terrible emptiness' and the need to seek for 'a tradition or order of their own' (***TSE*** [***T. S. Eliot: A Life***] 25). Eliot's need to find 'some centre, some kind of coherence or wholeness' (***TSE*** 25) is surely what lies at the heart of Pound's baffling unity-within-fragmentation effect in the *Cantos* [*A Draft of XXX Cantos*]. And, according to Ackroyd, it is also what explains Eliot's early fascination with the philosophical ideas of F. H. Bradley, on which he wrote his doctoral thesis.

Convinced of the relativity and subjectivity of meaning and of the impossibility of discovering any objective meaning even in the most significant patterns of

human behaviour, Eliot seeks a way out of pure subjectivity and the failure of communication it involves, by embracing Bradley's definition of reality: 'For Bradley "Reality is One", a seamless and coherent whole which is non-relational—that is, it cannot be divided into separate intellectual categories' (***TSE*** 49). As Ackroyd further explains, in his subversion of such orthodox categories as 'space' and 'time', which reflect only a partial comprehension of reality, 'Bradley is pushed back towards a larger description which can only be expressed as the Absolute. Without such a concept, the world becomes literally meaningless. The Absolute holds together Thought and Reality, Will and Feeling, in a sublime whole' (***TSE*** 49).

Bradley's contention that 'Reality is One' and that there is an Absolute truth in the realm of the sublime, beyond the limitations of conceptual knowledge, brings to mind Emerson's pantheistic idealism. However, in Bradley's scheme idealism is combined with the kind of scepticism that was so dear to Eliot, the recognition that all forms of knowledge and experience are conditional or relative, and that it is only when 'they are organized into a coherent whole [that] they can vouchsafe glimpses of absolute truth' (***TSE*** 50). Ackroyd points out, in words that recall his own 'magpie acquisitiveness' and go a long way towards explaining the structural neatness of his novels, that 'the only way of reaching towards the Absolute is by a steady enlargement of our knowledge and a continual search for system, unity and coherence' (***TSE*** 50).

In the ensuing novels, we will see how Ackroyd attempts to transcend the modernist 'inward turn' along the lines set by Pound and Eliot, that is, by postulating the transcendental component of writing, but we will also see how extremely difficult he finds it to pledge his trust in the existence of an absolute and transcendental ideal world, for, as he notes in the Eliot biography, the problem with this scheme is that it is based on an act of faith, the postulation of the existence of an Absolute Logos, an objective world in which, in F. H. Bradley's words, 'the cruder and vaguer, or more limited, is somehow contained and explained in the wider and precise' (***TSE*** 70).

Ackroyd's first published novel, ***The Great Fire of London*** (1982), was received by the critics as an interesting development in the career of the poet and already well-known 'incisive and abrasive reviewer'.[5] ***The Great Fire of London*** is the first of a whole series of fictional and non-fictional books prompted by Ackroyd's admiration for Dickens, to whom he devotes his formidable, 1,195-page-long biography ***Dickens*** (1990).

Structurally, the novel follows the characteristic multiplot pattern of Victorian fiction. In the first four chapters of Part One, an external narrator introduces in succession each of the different main characters: Little Arthur, Audrey Skelton, Spenser Spender and Rowan Phillips. The ensuing chapters progressively develop the complex net of relationships that knit together the lives of these four main characters to each other and to innumerable other characters whose paths meet either because they are interested in making a film version of *Little Dorrit,* like Spenser and Phillips, or because they live in the area where the plot of *Little Dorrit* was set, like Little Arthur and Audrey Skelton.

As the plot develops, the more intuitive characters come to realize that they are only the latest generation living in an area of London that has been inhabited for thousands of years in an unbroken chain of successive generations of men and women whose traces are still recognizable on the faces of the people as well as in the alleys, the squares and the buildings frequented by them. Some vaguely intuit that they are somehow connected to the past of the city and that a better understanding of the history of London would help them come to terms with themselves.

This feeling of 'transhistorical connectedness' is expressed in the names of the characters. Spenser Spender's name, for example, simultaneously evokes the poet of the thirties Stephen Spender, the founder of evolutionist philosophy Herbert Spencer, and the Renaissance poet Edmund Spenser. Likewise, Little Arthur's name simultaneously evokes Little Dorrit and Arthur Clennam, while Audrey's friend Pally, a half-wit with a drooping mouth, would be the contemporary equivalent of Amy Dorrit's friend Maggie. Another of the main characters, the script writer Rowan Phillips, is a Cambridge-based Canadian academic and novelist with a passion for Dickens who may be described as a parodic version of Peter Ackroyd (***GFL*** [***Great Fire of London***] 19). But the most complex example of transhistorical or 'reincarnated' character is Audrey Skelton, the telephone operator whom Rowan Phillips believes to be schizophrenic because she is constantly day-dreaming and has memories from the past, like the one in which she 'remembers' the fire that destroyed the Marshalsea Prison on 14 December 1885 (***GFL*** 25), that is, about the time when Dickens started writing *Little Dorrit.* Audrey had a crucial experience the day she attended a seance near Ealing Common and was invaded by the spirit of Little Dorrit. From then on, Amy Dorrit starts speaking through her and Audrey believes herself to be the Victorian heroine.

Another character obsessed with Dickens is Spenser Spender, whose project of filming *Little Dorrit* is based on his belief that 'Dickens understood London', and

he is convinced that the film might help him solve some kind of mystery connecting London to his own life. Indeed, the film maker is fascinated with the ancient city, and the weird power it exerts over him:

> 'There's something strange about London, love . . . [. . .] I'm sure there's something to it, some kind of magic or something. Did you know if you drew a line between all of Hawksmoor's churches, they would form a pentangle?'
>
> (***GFL*** 16)

The idea the drunken film maker is trying to transmit to his bored wife, Laetitia, is that London has a transhistorical mystical and/or magical side whose spirit Dickens succeeded in capturing in his fiction. His theory perfectly complements the impression produced by the characters' names that they are transhistorical types, made up of accumulated literary and historical echoes.

The characters who are involved in the film project, like Rowan Phillips, Job Penstone (the Victorian academic), and Sir Frederick Lustlambert (the director of the Film Financial Board), are interested in Dickens as a means of recovering London's history. However, as Spender is surprised to discover, their approaches to *Little Dorrit* are puzzlingly divergent and incompatible with his own interpretation: 'each time a new interpretation of *Little Dorrit* was sprung upon him, it subtly devalued his own and it took a conscious effort of will for him to reassert it' (***GFL*** 85). Interestingly, a similar feeling invades Little Arthur, Pally and Audrey Skelton, that is, the characters who appear to be the reincarnations of the Victorian protagonists, as well as the numberless outcasts that crowd the Marshalsea prison and the nearby area of London where the exteriors of *Little Dorrit* are being filmed. Eventually, these characters (and also the tramps) become convinced that they must put an end to the filming of *Little Dorrit* because the film is hopelessly 'misreading' the real spirit of London. As soon as Audrey makes up her mind to burn down the stage by the river where the exteriors are being filmed, the tramps enthusiastically agree to help her set fire to it (***GFL*** 162).

Within a realistic logic, the reader instinctively assumes an ontological difference between the 'real' world in which Ackroyd's characters move and the 'fictional' world of Dickens's characters. Therefore, the transmigration of the soul of Little Dorrit to the body of Audrey Skelton can only take place if we accept either the 'fictionality' of the visionary telephone operator, or the 'reality' of the Dickensian character. The same ontological incongruence lies behind the assumption that Audrey Skelton might be a 'reincarnation' of a real Renaissance poet, or Spenser Spender of various real writers and thinkers. Therefore, the only possibility would be to accept the fact that, in the world of ***The Great Fire of London,*** the boundaries between fiction and reality are nonexistent, that the difference between 'fictional' characters and 'real' people, and between 'real' and 'fictional' worlds, simply does not hold.

This interpretation gives the novel a baffling *regressus in infinitum* structure that enhances its condition of *writing*: Peter Ackroyd writes a sequel to *Little Dorrit* in which Rowan Phillips writes a script of *Little Dorrit,* for Spenser Spender's film version of *Little Dorrit,* to which Job Penstone and Sir. Frederick Lustbambert would like to contribute their own versions of *Little Dorrit,* all of which are equally subjective and distorted 'misreadings' of the original novel. Thus, ***The Great Fire of London*** reveals its condition of an autonomous and self-begetting linguistic universe, endlessly yielding different versions of itself and constantly begetting derivative characters and derivative authors alike.

As the novel reveals its textuality, the liberation of the reincarnated Dickensian characters by the 'great fire' with which the novel ends loses its apocalyptic dimension and becomes the futile rebellion of unfree fictional characters against their god-like creator: they succeed in burning their way out of the cardboard prison-house of Spenser Spender's film version of their world only, however, to find themselves trapped within the walls of Peter Ackroyd's textual world. But the joke is two-edged, for also imprisoned within the cardboard walls of the novel and incapable of conceiving his own transcendental escape is the god-like Author himself, whose fictionality is suggested by the identification of Ackroyd with Phillips and the fact that his own version of *Little Dorrit* is an equally distorted and subjective 'misreading' of Dickens's original text.

To sum up, in ***The Great Fire of London*** Ackroyd writes his own overtly literary and fragmentary version of *Little Dorrit* 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'. Time and again, Ackroyd will try to find a

way out in every new novel, progressively refining his own imaginative answer to the modernist 'inward turn'.

In keeping with the modernist definition of writing as 'free play', Ackroyd, in ***The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*** (1983), consciously blurs the boundaries between biography and fiction: he assumes the voice and style of his much admired Irish writer and aesthete in order to write a 'fictional autobiography'. In it Oscar Wilde is supposed to give his 'own' version of the events that led to the scandal and trial that ended with Wilde's imprisonment and ruin, with his social ostracism, the estrangement from his family and his premature death in exile. In a characteristic pendular swing, Ackroyd will likewise 'fictionalize' his most ambitious biography, ***Dickens*** (1990), undercutting the traditional chronological arrangement of the narration of Dickens's life from birth to death by the interpolation of seven metafictional 'Interludes' in which the boundaries between past and present and between the historical events lived by Dickens and the fictional episodes the Victorian writer imagined in his novels are consistently mixed up.

Formally, ***The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*** follows the literary tradition of the 'confession' of a repenting sinner. Although, in keeping with this tradition, Wilde's 'confession' is explicitly addressed to a 'you', the reason he gives for writing it is a desire to spell out the truth and real meaning of his life to himself, for, as he reflects, 'I have lied to myself. Now I must try to break the habit of a lifetime' (***LTOW*** [***The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde***] 3). Structured as a daily journal, Wilde's confession runs from 11 August 1900 to 24 November 1900, includes a few newspaper cuttings from Wilde's lecture tour to the United States (***LTOW*** 95-6), and also a series of tales narrated by Wilde that may be said to function as iconic variations on certain episodes in Wilde's life. It ends with the reproduction of his deathbed feverish 'talking taken down by Maurice Gilbert' (***LTOW*** 184-5), from 26 November 1900 until the day of his death, 30 November 1900.

Mary Montaut has pointed out how 'The novel is painstakingly researched'.[6] Indeed, a diligent comparison with the standard biographies and collected letters of Oscar Wilde would reveal a surprising exactness and the sheer bulk of the biographical data contained in the novel. This, together with the wonderfully accurate effect produced by the clever stylistic imitation of Wilde's witty, paradoxical and ironic style, function as strong realism-enhancing mechanisms that forcefully impel the reader to sympathize with Oscar Wilde—that is, to 'pardon his sins'—and to lament the fact that the novel does not have a happy ending as 'Ackroyd plainly wants Wilde to have'.[7]

At the same time, however, Wilde's narration is rendered in wholly literary terms, as a Faustian descent into hell originally motivated by the aesthetic desire to 'sin beautifully', to try all forms of sensual pleasure as a way of refining his intelligence. Wilde narrates his transformation from aristocrat and artist to convict and tramp as a pilgrimage along the labyrinthine and dark recesses of a London that is presented as mythical and atemporal (***LTOW*** 108). And, describing his fateful relationship with Bosie (Lord Alfred Taylor), he underlines the decisive role played by his imagination in their sensual pursuit of pleasure and the progressive unreality of the whole relationship and of the city itself, in words that bring to mind *The Waste Land* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*:

> As we became more frenzied in our pursuit of pleasure, London itself became an unreal city, a play of brilliant lights and crowds and mad laughter. My boldness infected Bosie [. . .]. He wished to become precisely the portrait of him which I had formed in my imagination and so he became terrible, because my imagination was terrible also.
>
> (***LTOW*** 127)

Musing about his impending death, Wilde wonders whether he will remain alive in the memory of the people, or whether his martyrdom, like that of St Procopius, will be 'wonderfully increased by each succeeding legend'. He concludes that distortion of the historical facts is inevitable, that, as soon as Maurice starts to take down what he is dictating, 'he will invent my last hours'. That is, Wilde is perfectly aware that each successive version of his life will be the subjective 'misreading' of each future biographer. However, unlike Spenser Spender or Audrey Skelton, he is not at all worried by this prospect and, in fact, prefers the 'misreadings' to the original version, as he believes that 'it was the legends that worked the miracles, not the bones.' (***LTOW*** 180).

A few days before his death, Wilde remembers the picture of a prince he has seen in the Louvre and wishes he could go back to that past, that he could 'enter another man's heart', for, as he explains, 'In that moment of transition, when I was myself and someone else, of my own time and in another's, the secrets of the universe would stand revealed' (***LTOW*** 181). His ironic suggestion that he wishes he could assume the personality of the figure in a picture, and not the other way round—as happened in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*—may be read as evidence that he