

☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

CLC

140

Volume 140

Contemporary Literary Criticism

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



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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 biographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

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- 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.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- 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.
- 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.

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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.

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Yvor Winters, *The Post-Symbolist Methods* (Allen Swallow, 1967), 211-51; excerpted and reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, vol. 85, ed. Christopher Giroux (Detroit: The Gale Group, 1995), 223-26.

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Peter Ackroyd

1949-

English novelist, biographer, nonfiction writer, critic, poet, and essayist.

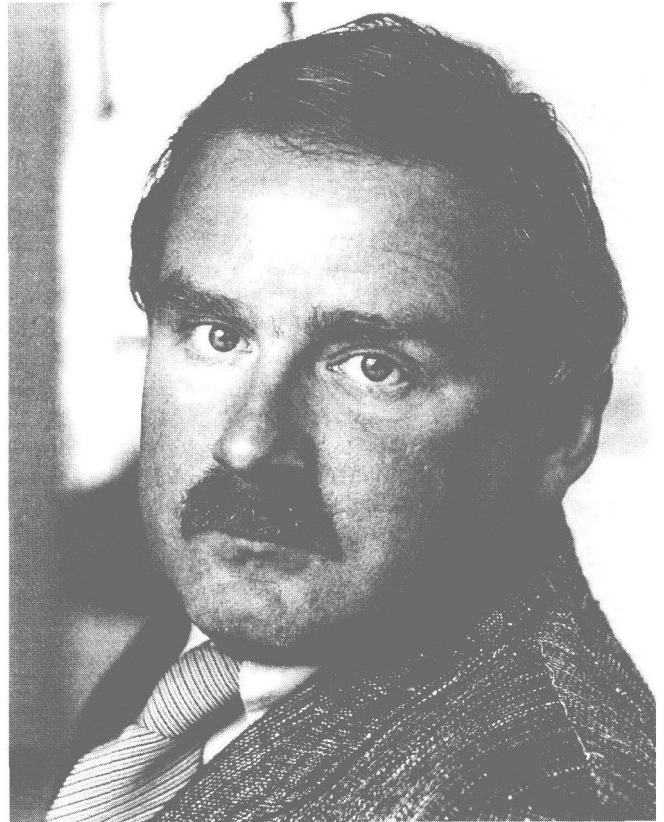
The following entry presents an overview of Ackroyd's career through 2000. For further information on his life and works, see *CLC*, Volumes 34 and 52.

INTRODUCTION

A leading practitioner of "British historiographic metafiction," Peter Ackroyd has built his reputation upon a growing number of challenging novels and significant literary biographies that highlight the interplay of historical time, literary influence, and the problem of authorship. Ackroyd's unique literary vision is marked by a belief that writers find their voice through emulating writers of the past, a corollary to his theory that writing emanates not from life experiences, but from the writing that has preceded it. Accordingly, obscure references to English literature and shifting perspectives among author, protagonist, and other fictional and non-fictional characters abound in his texts. In acclaimed biographies such as *T. S. Eliot: A Life* (1984) and *Dickens* (1990), and novels such as *Hawksmoor* (1986), *Chatterton* (1988), and *Milton in America: A Novel* (1997), Ackroyd celebrates English culture and merges fact and fiction.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

The only child of parents who separated early in his life, Ackroyd was raised by his mother, Audrey Whiteside Ackroyd, and his maternal grandparents in a public housing project in West London. The family was Roman Catholic, and Ackroyd's religious heritage influenced both his critical work and his fiction. Early in life he was determined to escape his working-class origins, and at age ten he received a scholarship to attend a Catholic school in Ealing, Saint Benedict's. In 1968 he matriculated at Clare College, Cambridge, from which he graduated in 1971 with a double first in English literature. He then spent two years as a Mellon fellow at Yale University, where he was influenced by the avant-garde poetry of John Ashbery and Kenneth Koch. Ackroyd's early ambition was to be a poet, and his first published works, *Ouch* (1971) and *London Lickpenny* (1973), were volumes of poetry. While at Yale, Ackroyd produced *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, Ackroyd was hired as a literary editor for *Spectator* magazine. Dur-



ing this time, he produced *Ezra Pound and His World* (1980), the first of several large biographies of noted English authors. After eight years with *Spectator* Ackroyd resigned to devote himself to a full-time writing career. He has received many honors for his work, including the Somerset Maugham award for *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983); the Heinemann award for nonfiction from the Royal Society of Literature for *T. S. Eliot: A Life*; and the Prix Goncourt, the Whitbread award, and the fiction prize from the *Guardian*, all for *Hawksmoor*. In addition, *Chatterton* was short-listed for the prestigious Booker Prize. Ackroyd has since served as the chief book reviewer for the *London Times*, a position he has maintained while producing an extensive body of work, nearly one book a year since 1978. Ackroyd acknowledged that his rigorous work schedule contributed to the massive heart attack he suffered in 1999.

MAJOR WORKS

Most of Ackroyd's prodigious body of work resides in the realm of historiographic metafiction—an experimental, postmodern technique that blurs distinctions between

imagination and historical fact. In particular, Ackroyd's prose explores the convergence of past and present time, and human lives associated with a place—generally London—through successive centuries. In *The Great Fire of London* (1982) Ackroyd began the practice of merging fact and imagination and traversing time through characters and plot. A skilled mimic, Ackroyd identifies strongly with various literary figures. This is especially evident in *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, a novel purporting to be Wilde's autobiographical account of the last months of his life in exile in Paris. Ackroyd captures Wilde's voice, wit, and persona, offering insight into the author's psyche. *Hawksmoor* is perhaps the most successful example of Ackroyd's literary approach. Bold and structurally innovative, the novel transcends time, place, and even characters themselves in a plot that moves between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. Historically, Nicholas Hawksmoor designed several well-known churches in London and lived a comfortable, cultured life. In Ackroyd's book, however, the architect becomes Nicholas Dyer, a Satanist, and the character named Hawksmoor is a twentieth-century detective attempting to solve a series of gruesome murders taking place in the very churches that the real-life architect Hawksmoor constructed two hundred years earlier. It is learned that the evil Dyer sacrificed an innocent young boy on the foundation of every church he created, and the modern murders appear to be connected to these earlier ones. The novel illustrates the similarities between the two protagonists and examines universal themes involving death and regeneration.

Ackroyd's *Chatterton* posits that Thomas Chatterton, the famed eighteenth-century faker of medieval texts, did not commit suicide at age seventeen; rather he fabricated his own death and survived to continue his fraudulent production of antique manuscripts. Ackroyd plays with the ideas of fraud and plagiarism, littering the plot with deceptions at every turn. In the course of the narration, Ackroyd exploits opportunities to examine themes important to him: the cyclical nature of history, the cross-genre aesthetic, and real and imagined people who both transform and are connected through time. The novel *English Music* (1992) contains two distinct narratives: a straightforward story about the early life of protagonist Timothy Harcombe during the 1920s and a series of visions involving encounters with various literary and historical figures. Presented in alternating chapters, Timothy's childhood and psychic leaps serve to evoke the distinct legacy and grandeur of English culture. *The House of Doctor Dee* (1993) mixes ghosts and images of a past historical figure with an imperfectly realized character in the present who stumbles back and forth in time. *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994), published in the United States as *The Trial of Elizabeth Cree: A Novel of the Limehouse Murders* (1995), features multiple narratives set in Ackroyd's favored locale, a squalid area of London. The narrative threads include the text of the trial of Cree, her own interior monologue, her husband's diary, and remarks by an omniscient observer. *Milton in America* places the revered poet in seventeenth-century Mas-

sachusetts, where he engages in various adventures with both settlers and Indians. A work of imagined history, *Milton in America* carries Ackroyd's tendency to mingle fact and fiction to an extreme. Rather than staying in London following the restoration of the Stuart monarchy, as the real Milton did, Ackroyd's creation sails for Massachusetts Colony with a Sancho Panza-like figure named Goosequill. Seemingly more puritanical than the Puritans themselves, Milton changes subtly following a sojourn in the wilderness with Native Americans. Milton's blindness is briefly healed, but then returns when he is shamed by having sexual relations with an Indian maiden. He returns to the Puritan settlement and conspires to start a holy war against a neighboring Roman Catholic village. The Milton of the novel effectively destroys a paradise, echoing the work of the historical Milton, who wrote *Paradise Lost*.

In his biographies, Ackroyd approaches his subjects in unusual and sometimes controversial ways, which notably includes the insertion of fictional episodes, a radical departure from accepted academic practice. In *T. S. Eliot*, a biographical undertaking limited by the highly restrictive rules governing Eliot's estate, Ackroyd used papers held in various university archives to produce a work that reveals an understanding of the poet and his writings. Ackroyd's massive and unconventional biography of Charles Dickens approaches its formidable subject from the standpoint of a fellow creative spirit. Through the unusual practice of inserting imaginative interludes in the text, Ackroyd interweaves lucid critical commentary about Dickens's novels, evocations of Victorian London, and speculation about Dickens's life with exposition on the meaning of biography itself. In the 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. A companion volume, *Introduction to Dickens* (1991), contains useful, authoritative introductions to Dickens's novels. In *Blake* (1995), Ackroyd attempts to elucidate the life of William Blake, the famed poet, engraver, and painter. Ackroyd has also produced the biography *The Life of Thomas More* (1998); *The Plato Papers: A Prophecy* (2000), a work of speculative fiction; and a "biography" of his beloved home city, *London: A Biography* (2000).

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Considered a prolific, accomplished, and highly creative writer, Ackroyd's work is both admired and maligned by critics—evidence of his reputation as a literary experimenter. Ackroyd's work is difficult to classify, perhaps because the author himself is reluctant to distinguish among genres. While many praise Ackroyd's postmodern fiction for its complex plotting, frequent temporal shifts, obscure allusions, and wide cast of historical characters, others find incoherence, contrivance, and epistemological evasions in these same attributes. His best fiction, including works such as *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, *Hawksmoor*, *Chatterton*, and *Milton in America*, display

his favorite themes—the convergence and interaction of past and present time, literary mimicry, and the tenuous relationship between historical reality and fiction. Ackroyd's finest work is considered on a par with that of Salman Rushdie and Rose Tremain, while its transitional nature has been compared to the work of Lawrence Durrell and John Fowles. Ackroyd's body of work insists on the primacy of the English cultural tradition, which he defines as "Catholic, visionary, and transhistorical," characteristics that echo throughout his writings. However, Ackroyd's nostalgic view of English culture—in particular, his suggestion in the widely-panned novel *English Music* that Englishness is historically and racially inherited—has been criticized by reviewers. Many reviewers have taken issue with Ackroyd's loose, interpretative approach to biography. His studies of Dickens, Blake, and More received mixed assessment, with most reviewers objecting to some aspect of Ackroyd's approach, typically his historical methodology or prose mannerisms. Yet, *T. S. Eliot* garnered acclaim for the inventive way Ackroyd handled the material and brought the poet to life, and *Dickens* was commended for its vivid, loving treatment of the great novelist. Even disdainful reviewers respect Ackroyd's wide knowledge, fertile imagination, and remarkable ability to evoke the settings and people of the past in convincing detail.

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 (biography) 1980; published as *Ezra Pound*, 1987
The Great Fire of London (novel) 1982
The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde (novel) 1983
T. S. Eliot: A Life (biography) 1984
Hawksmoor (novel) 1986
The Diversions of Purley and Other Poems (poetry) 1987
Chatterton (novel) 1988
First Light (novel) 1989
Dickens (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 in the United States as *The Trial of Elizabeth Cree: A Novel of the Limehouse Murders*, 1995
Blake (biography) 1995
Milton in America: A Novel (novel) 1997
The Life of Thomas More (biography) 1998

The Plato Papers: A Prophecy (novel) 2000
London: A Biography (nonfiction) 2000

CRITICISM

Joseph Rykwert (review date July 1986)

SOURCE: A review of *Hawksmoor*, in *Art in America*, Vol. 74, July, 1986, pp. 11, 13.

[In the following review of *Hawksmoor*, Rykwert praises Ackroyd's literary skill, but finds flaws in the novel's historical details.]

Christchurch, Spitalfields: St George-in-the-East; St Anne's, Limehouse; St Mary Woolnoth; St George, Bloomsbury; Little St Hugh, Moorfields—18th-century architecture buffs would expect the first five of these buildings to figure importantly in any book called *Hawksmoor*, but not the last one. The first five are among the masterpieces of Nicholas Hawksmoor (whom I think the greatest of all English architects). The last church is a fiction. In Peter Ackroyd's book, it is the miniature crowning masterpiece not of Nicholas Hawksmoor, but of a quite different Nicholas—one Dyer, a supposed contemporary of the Hawksmoor of history, whose life, as told in this novel, bears great similarities to that of the great architect. Born in London a few years earlier than the real designer of the churches, Dyer (like Hawksmoor) is from early youth a clerk to Sir Christopher Wren and is employed in the Office of the King's Works in Scotland Yard when he is killed by "gout of the stomach." But the resemblance is limited. Dyer is a very different character from the historical Hawksmoor, and the key to the difference is given by that last, fictitious church.

The patron saint of Dyer's last church is Little St Hugh of Lincoln (called "little" to distinguish him from the great bishop of Lincoln of the same name)—in other words, he is the ten-year-old boy whose alleged ritual murder launched a persecution of local Jews in 1255, and to whom very few churches anywhere were ever dedicated, though images of him were common enough before the Reformation. The plot of Ackroyd's novel is at the end resolved (if that is the word) in that fictitious church. The story hangs on the similarities between Nicholas Dyer and the character who is in fact called Nicholas Hawksmoor in the novel—a contemporary detective whose 20th-century life runs parallel to that of the 18th-century Dyer: both work in Scotland Yard, both have ambitious assistants called Walter Pyne (each Walter thinks his superior is weird and old-fashioned), and both live in lodgings let to them by sentimental-lecherous landladies. What intertwines these two characters fatally is Dyer's satanism, which leads him to perform a human sacrifice (preferably of an innocent, immature boy) at the foundation of every church he builds.

These sacrifices are echoed in the 20th century by a series of murders carried out by some unknown agent, and Nicholas Hawksmoor is the detective assigned to the case.

The book is divided into two parts; in both, chapters alternate between the 18th and the 20th century. In the modern segments, the author-narrator tells the stories of the sacrificial victims for the first part and of Hawksmoor the detective for the second. Dyer himself narrates the 18th-century chapters of both parts and writes in a sustained 18th-century notation convincingly close to the actual epistolary manner of Hawksmoor the architect. But every now and then quirks of style may bring the reader up short, starting with the "And so let us beginne" of the first sentence. There is, for example, the irritating use of "rubbidge," a word of which Dyer is very fond. "Rubbidge" was a Nottinghamshire dialect form for "rubbish" (which was the way Shakespeare spelled it). As a Londoner, the Dyer of the novel might be allowed "rubbage," but nothing weirder. Then, too, Dyer spends too much time in seedy alehouses and on the close-stool for such a busy man. The main problem I have with Dyer, however, is that he is not a credible designer of the real Hawksmoor churches.

We know how the historical architect lived, and what he read: Descartes, Gassendi, Grotius—not (as Dyer does) almanacs and occultists. Perspective he would not have learnt from the tortured (and in England virtually unavailable) Wendel Dietterlin, as Ackroyd insists, but most probably from Solomon de Caus, well known as having worked with Inigo Jones, or perhaps from another popular master, the Jesuit Jean Dubreuil (whose book was familiarly referred to as "the Jesuit's Perspective") or even from Father Pozzo, two copies of whose book were in the architect Hawksmoor's library at his death; if it had to be a Nuremberger, then the most likely perspective teacher was the most obvious one: Dürer, whose prints Hawksmoor avidly collected. Nor could the architect of such magnificent buildings have lived in squalid lodgings, feeding on meat brought in from the cook-house. Indeed, the historical Hawksmoor lived comfortably, almost opulently, had a large library, a sumptuous collection of paintings, prints and drawings, and worried about the fat buck that was his yearly due when they culled the deer at Woodstock (whence, perhaps, the gout!).

To such details one can add Ackroyd's misconception of the whole business of making designs, and of seeing them built. Inevitably it follows that he has misinterpreted the very nature of Hawksmoor's architecture, which is not melancholy, satanic and tortured, but clear, audacious, even strained in its use of antique precedent, and certainly never perverse or eccentric. In that sense Ackroyd does a positive disservice to the understanding of what all architecture is about—a misunderstanding compounded by the fact that it forms the foundation of his dense, brooding, almost hypnotic book.

On the other hand, even if an architect is half-hero of the book, architecture is not what *Hawksmoor* is about. It is, rather, a knowing meditation on universal themes: on

death, time and recurrence. The novel is sustained by the parallels between Hawksmoor the detective and Dyer the architect, and its continuity is assured by prose *enjambements*, which carry the narrative not only over breaks between chapters and narrators, but also over the gap between 18th-century and modern English. A number of other heterogeneous elements have been welded into an almost "natural" unity in Ackroyd's style—for instance, the recurrent nursery rhymes, which in several cases seem to come out of Iona and Peter Opie's collections and which punctuate the narrative both in its 18th-century and its modern sections. Towards the end of the book, the prose at two points breaks into formal dramatic dialogue. In the modern section, this dramatized speech takes the form of a Beckett-like conversation between Detective Hawksmoor and a tramp from a doss-house (the detective's assistant Walter sets down this exchange in a notebook). Whereas in the 18th century, it is a dialogue between Dyer and a "John Vanbrugghe: An Architect in Fashion." The scene is an imitation Vanbrugh playlet. Here, too, the campy, frivolous Vanbrugh of Ackroyd's book is very unlike the historical figure we know from his own letters and from historical documents such as the actual Hawksmoor's accounts of him.

In the novel, the detective Hawksmoor and the architect Dyer (a two-headed hero) are both obsessive melancholics, one in the way he goes about his killings and the spilling of blood, the other in his gathering of minuscule clues—evidence which convinces him that a series of murders he is investigating, all neat stranglings, were committed by one person. Hawksmoor is made a (deliberately?) cliché figure—neurotic, shabbily dressed, a loner; like Dyer, he is obsessed with dust, is given to biting the inside of his mouth, and considers himself something of an intellectual. Yet it is not until the last three pages of the book that it occurs to Hawksmoor that the scenes of all the murders are churches designed by the same architect. A French, Italian, German, or an American detective would have tumbled straightaway, I think, and I wonder whether this fact alone says something about the place of architecture in English intellectual life.

The book's narrative winds itself round the building sacrifices (which mark the turns in the maze of the 18th-century plot) and the 20th-century murders—their secular and even more sinister mirror-images. In the final resolution of the story, as Hawksmoor meets Dyer, his ghostly double, the sympathetic reader is tempted to suspect that the detective himself was the re-enactor of those 18th-century sacrifices, an unconscious murderer—and that there are yet more cryptic coincidences between Hawksmoor and Dyer than we already know.

As Frazer has noted, building sacrifices were once a universal phenomenon—so common that diabolism need not be invoked to explain them. In fact, I recall that a human building sacrifice was made as recently as the mid-19th century in Britain by a Whig landowner (I wish I remembered his name—I think I read about it in a DNB

biography) who walled up “a very obnoxious person” in the pier of a bridge on his estate. The casting of horoscopes for building operations was also common enough in the 18th century; Christopher Wren, who stands for the enlightened man of reason in Ackroyd’s book, had them cast by the Astronomer-Royal, at least for St Paul’s and for Chelsea Hospital.

Is all this relevant to a work of fiction? Yes, if the work of fiction insinuates itself into a historical situation and draws on history for its interpretation. All narrative must be plotted, *mis en trame*, as it were, but the distinction between fiction and history is finally impassable. Thus, the very ambition of Ackroyd’s book puts the cautious if admiring reviewer on guard. Nevertheless, *Hawksmoor* is a brilliant exercise in the transformation of buildings into prose narration. The power of its writing as well as the continuity it maintains through all of its coruscating variations of surface and style justify one’s making the claim for this novel that it has the consistency of a prose poem—a status that few narrative fictional works achieve (*Ulysses*, of course, is the great exemplar). Whatever its blemishes, Ackroyd’s book must be considered as a high achievement of the storyteller’s art.

Michele Roberts (review date 11 September 1987)

SOURCE: “Marvellous Boys,” in *New Statesman*, September 11, 1987, pp. 27-8.

[In the following review of Chatterton, Roberts finds shortcomings in the dubious intellectual games and caricatures of Ackroyd’s postmodern narrative.]

Just as Georgette Heyer may be said to have reinvented the late 18th century for several generations of modern romantics, so the poet-plagiarist Thomas Chatterton invented the mediaeval period for the early 19th-century Romantics. Finally, of course, he was exposed as a faker of texts, so now Peter Ackroyd offers this thriller-romance [*Chatterton*] about the quest of a modern poet-romantic to discover how and why Chatterton was able to pull the wool over his contemporaries’ eyes for as long as he did.

Georgette Heyer moved her plots along with thrilling hints of sexual ambiguity and cross-dressing; Chatterton provided nostalgic images of a perfect lost world that his fellows, struggling with the implications of the Industrial Revolution, needed to believe; and Ackroyd, for all his postmodernist sophistication about the diversity of linguistic fancy-dress that history provides as disguise, returns us, eventually, to a sweet and perhaps naive vision of the modern nuclear family, maintaining itself in the face of separation and loss. This novel demonstrates how writers and artists may lie and cheat in the interests of their art and their ambition; but, in the end, it shows us a writer’s family in which the good father (or stepfather) and the good mother go on protecting the good child. Certainly this is a myth of great contemporary potency.

The novel’s plot is as tricky and clever as admirers of Ackroyd’s previous novel *Hawksmoor* could wish and, like it, depends on an investigation into the way that the past possesses, informs and alters the present. Charles Wyckwood, a poet with writer’s block, discovers documents and a portrait that suggest to him that Chatterton faked his own death in order more safely to go on supplying the fake mediaeval texts for which his fantasy-hungry audience yearned. Simultaneously, we are granted vignettes of Henry Wallis painting his celebrated picture of the (supposed) death of Chatterton, using the writer George Meredith as model. Parallel to this we see the dishonesty and venery of modern London, in which ageing novelist Harriet Scrope fears exposure as a plagiarist and so plots against Charles whom she suspects has cottoned on to her guilty secret (later, she decides simply to steal his work) and in which the art gallery where Charles’ wife Vivien works as a secretary is unashamedly involved in selling forgeries.

Charles is presented as an innocent doomed by his quest for truth, his unworldliness. As his obsession with Chatterton’s secrets grows, so he is increasingly possessed by the dead poet, with tragic results. Proclaiming his belief in the validity of the dream of wholeness and beauty, the dream. Chatterton could only endorse through fakery, he comes face to face with inevitable mortality; in the end, the dream will be made incarnate by his best friend Philip’s decision to write a book about it all (a novel called *Chatterton*, perhaps).

Ackroyd scrupulously refuses the *traditional* tricks of the storyteller: to enchant us, to weave spells, to sweep us along. His purpose is sterner; he works through shifts, gaps, halts, silences. For all the earnest intellectual frolicking round questions of truth, intertextuality, plagiarism and inspiration—or perhaps because of it—this remains a curiously cold novel. Why, for example, should two women (Meredith’s wife and Miss Slimmer, a poet) who have just witnessed a fire and the near-death of a child by burning immediately engage Meredith in a discussion of illusion? All right: Ackroyd tries to eschew naturalism, the simple reproduction of surfaces, when describing the past; but he’s happy to give us his awful pastiche of Chatterton’s memoir (yes, a fake) and, when painting the present, to rely on young-fogeyish, creaking pantomime—in which old women are spiteful hags; gay men are grotesque, silly queens; a wife is little but a slavish adorer of her husband’s non-work; and waiters in an Indian restaurant serve up brown goo and talk funny. These caricatures throw into relief the purity of Ackroyd’s heterosexual heroes, fundamentally decent chaps for all their old-fashioned eccentricities. If, as Tony Tanner has brilliantly shown, the 19th-century male novel’s narrative was often driven along by questions of adultery, the 20th-century male novel seems to be equally obsessed by resultant notions of illegitimacy. Does a male author really father his own text? Or is his child really someone else’s? Ackroyd plays with uncertainty on the level of literature but can’t confront the problem squarely in terms of his modern characters:

anxieties about masculinity are soothed as Vivien serves up raspberry ripple.

Peter Ackroyd with Amanda Smith (interview date 25 December 1987)

SOURCE: "PW Interviews Peter Ackroyd," in *Publisher's Weekly*, December 25, 1987, pp. 59-60.

[In the following interview, Ackroyd discusses his literary career, his imaginative historical fiction, and the inter-relationship between his work as a biographer and novelist.]

At 38, Peter Ackroyd has stakes planted in several literary camps. Ackroyd came to prominence four years ago with his biography of T. S. Eliot. Since then, his novel *Hawksmoor*—a dark, violent tale that slips between past and present, rendered partly in 18th century prose—has become a cult phenomenon in his native England. His new novel *Chatterton*—based in part on the life of the literary hoaxer—was shortlisted for this year's Booker Prize.

Ackroyd talks to *PW* in his London flat—modern, spare, but discerningly decorated. For a man who writes chilling scenes of young lads having their throats slit by mad architects in churchyards, Ackroyd has a particularly jolly sense of humor. His works range from a book on esthetic criticism to a nonfiction book on cross-dressing, and include biographies of Ezra Pound, four novels, among them *The Great Fire of London* and *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, and a good deal of poetry published by small presses.

It's unusual, *PW* comments, to be biographer and fiction writer. "I think there's not much difference between them," Ackroyd says. "They're much the same process. Fiction's often more factual than biography and far more precise. You can insist that things happen the way they ought to happen. Biography has to be an act of interpretation. No one ever knows what happened. I can't remember what I did yesterday; imagine trying to reconstruct what happened 200 years ago.

"Certainly writing fiction and biography takes many of the same skills. You're interested in plot, character, action, theme. All the so-called technical accomplishments of fiction are also present in biography. And that, for the writer, is the most important part of anything, the technique of it. In that sense there isn't much distinction to be drawn between the two.

"People are beginning to realize that you can introduce experimental devices into biography. There's no reason why you shouldn't present the same scene three different ways in a biography; there's no reason why you shouldn't admit defeat at a certain point: I don't know what happened next. There's no reason why you shouldn't use pastiche or parody of the subject's style within the biography."

Ackroyd is currently working on the biography of Dickens he began while writing *Hawksmoor* (this, he says, will be his final biography) as well as a novel concerned with archeology and astronomy. "I'm a biographer by chance and a novelist by choice. Someone said I was a biographer by trade, which I thought not only an insult but also untrue in terms of practically any standard you want to measure—income, time spent or vocation. It doesn't really matter, of course, but I hate being called a biographer—it's like being called a private eye."

Ackroyd writes fiction in the mornings, biography in the afternoons and journalism in the evenings. "One needs some kind of challenge doing these sorts of things. Everyone told me I shouldn't do Eliot—it couldn't be done because of all the restrictions on the estate. The more obstacles that were put in my way, the more I decided that was the best thing for me to do. I did by chance discover that most of Eliot's letters were in the public domain. Most people fell at the first fence: after getting a strongly worded letter from the widow Eliot, they panicked and gave up, so they didn't know this stuff was available.

"Similarly with Dickens. Everyone said I shouldn't do Dickens because he had been done so many times. Again, it was the element of jumping the hurdles that made it interesting for me."

Born in 1949, Ackroyd grew up in a council house estate of a working-class suburb of London. His grandfather was a van driver for Harrod's, his father left home when he was young and he was brought up by his mother and grandmother. "It was a perfectly ordinary childhood," he maintains. Probably the "biggest jolt" came when, at 10, he won a state scholarship to a Catholic public school. "I was lifted out of the environment I knew and placed in an environment of learning and study and ambition.

"It sounds like Barry Manilow," Ackroyd jests. "I was just reading his autobiography. He had a childhood very similar to mine." Peter Ackroyd, the Barry Manilow of English writers? *PW* asks. "The Madonna of English writers," he counters.

Ackroyd went on to Cambridge, where he read English Literature, then to Yale on a Mellon Fellowship. He speaks of his time in the States as having "a sense of romance, because I got introduced to people I'd always admired: John Ashbery and Kenneth Koch and a young poet called David Shapiro. It was a revelation to me to meet these people, and the artists and writers I met through them. I was very young, 21 or 22. It was my first contact with the literary world."

Once Ackroyd left Yale, he went back to England and at 24 was offered the position of literary editor of the *Spectator*, the prestigious English weekly. "I don't know why they offered me the job," he says. "Looking back, it was a very peculiar thing for them to do. I think they were desperate. But I enjoyed doing it. The entry into journal-

ism was a godsend, because it taught me vaguely how to write for an audience.” Ackroyd subsequently became joint managing editor of the *Spectator*, where he remained until 1981, when he took up writing full-time. Now, too, he is the chief book reviewer for the *Times* of London, covering primarily nonfiction.

The counterpointing of past and present is a device Ackroyd uses often in his work. “Certainly in *Chatterton*, the imagination feeds off of these images of the past,” Ackroyd says. In *Chatterton*, the painting of the dead poet by Henry Wallace, which hangs at the Tate Gallery, features prominently. “I use that painting as a way of organizing my material, a source of inspiration. My original idea was that Chatterton had faked his own death and was carrying on writing. I began with that story. The rest of it emerged as I started to write.

“My general obsession with the past—I don’t understand it; it just suddenly started happening. That’s the curious things about these books: I’ve never understood what they’re really about. I eagerly wait for someone’s reaction to tell me, since they always rather baffle me. All these themes which apparently appear—I don’t impose them consciously on the books, they somehow just emerge. It wasn’t until I began writing the Oscar Wilde book that I realized I was able to understand the past in a kind of concrete way, think myself back into it. It’s been a sort of education at the public’s expense. I discover what I’m interested in as I write.

“This business about not knowing what I’m doing doesn’t mean that I’m romantically tearing out my hair or drinking absinthe. I don’t agonize over it. It’s almost like having an office job. I just sit there and write it as it comes. I’ve kept the same routine since I began writing novels; it seems to be the only way I can work. As soon as I leave the room, I stop thinking about the novel. Next day, I see where I stopped the day before, and it seems to come straight away.”

Ackroyd writes so evocatively about eccentricity and violence that readers often wonder about him. “Everyone thought that I must be very weird to have written a book like *Hawksmoor*. One of the people who worked in my publishing house wouldn’t have the book in her home because she thought it was too spooky. I thought, oh my God, what have I unleashed upon the world? People started making tours around the churches in East London [which provide settings for the novel’s murders] and someone wrote in an essay that she’d seen this character whom I created in a dark robe inside one of the churches. So I had to write a comedy after this, just to convince everyone I wasn’t a cross between Alistair Crowley and whomever. For me, it was really a technical exercise. The moment people started being horrified by it, and in some cases, not wanting to read the book, I realized it had much more effect than I’d ever intended.”

Ackroyd shies from discussion of the meaning of the writer’s psychological state in his work. “If anything, I

draw my inspiration from the English inheritance. Someone said that the novels I write really have no connection with the novels of my contemporaries, or even with the period itself. I think that’s probably true. I was always interested in the Victorian novel, which is very heavy and symbolic and colorful, with a variety of moods going from grotesque farce to tragedy.”

The theme of plagiarism figures largely in *Chatterton*. “In fact, Chatterton did plagiarize as well as fake,” Ackroyd says. “The history of English literature is really the history of plagiarism. I discovered that when I was doing T. S. Eliot. He was a great plagiarist. He borrowed texts from other writers. I see nothing wrong with it; I would do it myself. I’m always looking for someone I can steal from. The novel I’m writing now is partly set in Dorset, where I live half the time. I’m reading Thomas Hardy’s novels to see what I can take, because it saves me the trouble of doing it myself. Everybody does it, but some people pretend not to. People get so hung up on the idea of originality and authenticity and sincerity, which is a very modern concept, and they fail to see the beauty of theft.”

One of the characters in *Chatterton* eats paper, a trait, Ackroyd says, that was stolen from Oscar Wilde. “That was one of his habits. He used to take off bits of wallpaper, too, and put them in his mouth. I use it as a joke. In one of the reviews someone said it was a symbol of what I did with my own fiction—take bits of other people’s books and eat them.”

Ackroyd is often cited for writing what some refer to as pastiche. “I don’t think of it as pastiche; it’s just another way of writing. Certainly that’s the way I wrote *Hawksmoor*. The only way of getting a grip on the past as far as I was concerned was to write in the language of the past. The pastiche element never occurred to me. I never thought that was what I was doing, I was simply writing a new kind of historical fiction. In the novels in which it does occur, it had a serious purpose: to suggest the difference between past and present in terms of language. It’s actually a lot of hard work; pastiche makes it sound easy. You have to immerse yourself in the period for months and months. The whole end of it, of course, is to write it as easily as you write modern prose, and that takes a while to achieve.”

Ackroyd’s life revolves almost exclusively around his work. “School and university and this—it’s been a constant slog. But I hate writers who complain about their lot. They could easily do something else—be bus conductors if they wanted. They don’t have to be novelists. So I’m not complaining [although] I don’t have much of a life. I never did want one particularly. I have no friends, no social life, no interests, no hobbies.” We offer our disbelief. “I go out for dinner in the evenings occasionally,” Ackroyd relents with a twinkle. “But ever since I was a boy, the thing I most do is work.”