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Where Everything is Connected to Everything Else and Anything is Possible: London in Peter Ackroyd's *Three Brothers*

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Abstract: In his London novels, Peter Ackroyd creates a distinct and original fictional world with a number of idiosyncratic features. Such characteristics include: a presentation of the city as a reflection of its dwellers' minds, a belief in the power of its *genius loci*, the concept of mystical time challenging the traditional notion of temporal linearity, a focus on the dark sides and heterogeneous tendencies of the city, the theme of crime and criminality, an exploration of the city's irrational manifestations, such as mysticism and occultism, its essentially theatrical nature, and its literary—particularly intertextual and palimpsestic—texture. This article demonstrates the various ways in which Ackroyd presents and explores London in his latest novel, *Three Brothers* (2013), and attempts to establish its position within the overall body of his London writing, arguing that it bears a notable affinity especially with his first novel, *The Great Fire of London* (1982).

Keywords: Peter Ackroyd, London, *Three Brothers*, coincidence, inheritance, London visionary tradition, self-referencing

Peter Ackroyd is arguably the most acclaimed and prolific contemporary British chronicler of historical and literary London. His most ambitious literary-historical project is to compose a biography of London, to reconstruct the city through the texts it has created, incited or inspired. He has done this both in his fiction and non-fiction, which always echo and respond to one another and, consequently, can be read as complementary and interconnected images and renderings of the author's idea of the capital. In his London novels, Ackroyd creates a distinct and original fictional world

with a number of idiosyncratic features. His work may present the city as a reflection of its dwellers' minds. It may explore a belief in the power of its *genius loci* or the concept of mystical and labyrinthine time challenging the traditional notion of temporal linearity. It may focus on the dark sides and heterogeneous tendencies, the theme of crime and criminality, or explore the city's irrational manifestations, such as mysticism, esotericism and occultism, its life's essential theatricality and its literary nature as a 'text that is endlessly recomposed' (Mengham 2003: 63). It is a fictional realm constructed through 'multiple-world fantasies, fabulation or Gothic repetition, involving paranormal happenings, uncanny historical echoes or rhymes of earlier events, and apparent transhistorical identities of characters separated by centuries' (Robinson 2011: 31). This London is a particular chronotope revolving around what Ackroyd perceives as the characteristic underlying properties of the city: the uncanny, the felonious, the psychogeographic and antiquarian, the theatrical and the literary. Moreover, his novels are also notable for their narrative and stylistic playfulness and inventiveness, achieving 'their effect through a deliberate display and deployment of artifice, role-playing, pantomimicry, palimpsest, parody, pastiche, intertextual referentiality, […] which disjoins ahead of the game all the conventional reader-text relationships' (Gibson and Wolfreys 2000: 2).

What connects all of Ackroyd's works is the author's interest in the nature of the past, in the ways of rendering this past in the form of written history, in the processes through which we obtain our knowledge of what happened in times beyond our memory and life experience, and, perhaps most importantly, in the intricate relationship between the past and the present. The past in his novels thus operates as a double agent—an object of inquiry and subsequent re-presentation as well as a crucial means of casting light on the present and on the human condition in general, 'a trope for the repressed underbelly of modern life and identity' (Phillips 2011: 96). That Ackroyd sets his London within a temporal, and sometimes supratemporal, continuum in which the past and the present are not treated as clearly distinguishable or separate entities, and which 'brings together conflicting forms of time' (Smethurst 2000: 194), allows him to depict subjective particularities while also contemplating patterns and connections that transcend the existence of an individual. In so doing, he 'continually creates collisions between our sense of the past and our notions of ourselves' (Bradford 2007: 83) and undermines orthodox conceptions of history.

At the same time, Ackroyd is traditionally listed among the foremost contemporary representatives of British psychogeographic writing, though he himself is rather dismissive of the term. His approach differs from those of his more prominent fellow psychogeographers, such as Iain Sinclair or J. G. Ballard, both in scope and form, not so much in his non-fictional *London: The Biography* (2000), but all the more noticeably in his novels, which present 'a kind of eternal recurrence in which the flux of the present is subsumed within a mystical sense of eternal stasis that renders all political engagement redundant' (Coverley 2006: 127). His treatment of the relationship between his protagonists' psyches and the urban territory they inhabit or move through can be more appropriately described as psychogeographic antiquarianism, as it is based not only on reflecting the characters' mental states, but

also on collecting texts re-enacting the city's long accumulated experience and probing its varying impact on the minds of the dwellers, thus establishing 'a felt sense of connection with people, places, and events of the past' (Keen 2006: 177). Seeing the city as a mass of collective human experience, as much as a vast (inter)textual network, Ackroyd presents in his London novels diverse and often directly unrelated fragments of this mass in the form of stories and other textual representations of the city's assorted inhabitants' fates.

The aim of this article is to demonstrate the various ways in which Ackroyd presents and explores London as a setting, metaphor and theme in his latest novel, *Three Brothers* (2013), in the context of both his previous London novels and his non-fiction writing on the city, and thus to attempt to establish its position within the overall body of his London writing. Ultimately, the essay shows that *Three Brothers* contains all the above-mentioned characteristics of Ackroyd's other London novels. However, in terms of its narrative organisation, cast of characters and subject matter, *Three Brothers* bears a strong resemblance to his debut novel, *The Great Fire of* London, originally published in 1982, as it revives or re-presents its predecessor's major narrative and thematic concerns.

Communion, Coincidence, Inheritance and the Great General Drama of the Human Spirit

The most manifest of the characteristics of Ackroyd's London in *Three Brothers* is the felonious one, as all its main characters get involved in some criminal, or at least fraudulent, activities. Unlike his other novels, with perhaps the exception of the William Exmewe subplot in *The Clerkenwell Tales* (Ackroyd 2003b), *Three Brothers* is set against a backdrop of organised crime. The capital's underworld is depicted as dominated by a network of various local gangs whose bosses have absolute command of most of their area's dishonest and dark dealings, from prostitution and blackmail to arson and homicide, yet which also includes a few solitary petty criminals, pimps, swindlers, small-time thieves and pickpockets, who are trying to grab their bit of the action without interfering with the gangsters' plans. The novel also depicts the seemingly more refined, yet no less unscrupulous, environment of the economic and political criminality of the rich and powerful, which mostly takes the form of white-collar crime, such as divulging secret information for gain, profiteering from government properties and real estate, fraud and bribery. Moreover, as is often the case in reality, the novel shows these two criminal worlds as notably interconnected as the interests of those who pull the strings often converge and overlap, thus composing the image of a city where 'money and blood run together' (Ackroyd 2003a: 295).

Despite this intricate background of lawlessness, the story of the three Hanway brothers is framed by crimes of a personal nature, independent of any kind of organised criminal structures. In the beginning, their family breaks down when the mother is sentenced to three months' imprisonment for soliciting and offending public morals (Ackroyd 2013: 19) after she resumes occasional prostitution in order to help

the family's funds—an activity with which she had supported herself even before she met her husband. In the end, Harry, the most ambitious and successful of the brothers, but also the most cold-blooded and calculating, murders his superior's wife, who is also his mother-in-law and mistress, when she threatens to reveal their affair to his wife/her daughter. Paradoxically, his own journalistic career gets started when he prevents a crime by stopping a deranged man from setting a church on fire. He writes a story of the incident for the local newspaper where he has served as an ordinary messenger boy up to that point and consequently becomes a social news reporter, rushing 'after stories of burglaries and assaults' (Ackroyd 2013: 18), for which he obtains information at the magistrates' court, where he also discovers the real reason his mother left the family. Daniel, the most gifted and reflective of the brothers, unwittingly becomes involved with the city's criminal underworld when he meets, and later starts an intimate relationship with, Sparkler, a pickpocket, con man and gay prostitute. Due to his emotional indifference, Daniel shows little if any interest in his lover's personal life, his criminal activities included, seeing him rather as a source of relaxing pleasures and someone who provides him with entrance into London's gay community.

However, what truly connects all the story's protagonists' struggles in the city is the fact that they are affected by the far-reaching consequences of the almost omnipresent network of organised crime. That most of its criminal and obscure activities happen in and around Limehouse links the novel with Ackroyd's earlier novels *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994) and *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein* (2008), in which the area also functions 'as a powerful spatial idea' and 'a microcosmic manifestation of a wider idea of the East End' (Newland 2008: 106, 107). The person who connects London's underworld and the sphere of political and economic criminality is Asher Ruppta, a notorious gang leader and one of the city's powerful criminal masterminds, the smart yet ominous figure responsible for most of the twists in the fates of the three brothers. Ruppta most noticeably interferes in Harry's life, first when Harry, with the help of his girlfriend Hilda, tries to investigate the secret illegal cash flows between Ruppta and Cormac Webb, a junior minister in the Department of Housing, and later when Harry's investigative report is turned down by Sir Martin Flaxman, the proprietor of the *Chronicle*, as he himself has a score to settle with Ruppta and does not want to irritate his former business ally needlessly. Eventually, Ruppta destroys Harry, though posthumously. When in collaboration with another gang leader, Pincher Solomon, they blackmail Flaxman, and the infuriated newspaper owner murders Ruppta in his own house. Yet the whole incident leaves Flaxman's nerves shattered and in effect causes his massive heart attack, making him unable to manage his company, thus driving Harry into the insidious arms of the unpredictable and vindictive Lady Flaxman. Sam, the most withdrawn and peculiar of the brothers, is employed in Ruppta's office, unaware that his mother once lived with his employer and even had his child. As he never asks questions and always does what he is told, he gets 'promoted' to courier, which means the 'odd-job boy' (Ackroyd 2013: 125) collecting rent from the tenants of Ruppta's properties, through which he befriends Sparkler who is one of these tenants in Britannia Street. Although Daniel never gets in touch with the criminal boss, even his life gets changed by

Ruppta's enterprise. After Pincher Solomon's 'jackdaw' steals Sparkler's diary with a list of his clients, which includes Sir Martin Flaxman, the devastated Sparkler leans on Daniel, who soon loses interest in his once slick but now emotionally volatile boyfriend and abandons him in his distress. And so, ironically, the innocently ignorant and unconcerned Sam is the only one who survives physically and mentally intact. However, in his dreams he sees that in a darkened space he and his two brothers 'began to disintegrate, like clouds, and to become part of the darkness' (Ackroyd 2013: 245).

Uncanny elements play a determining role in *Three Brothers* and the narrative establishes their significance at its very beginning by pointing out that Harry, Daniel and Sam Hanway were born 'with a year's difference of age […] at the same time on the same day of the same month' (Ackroyd 2013: 1). As a result, apart from features springing from their natural affinity, such as similar gait, posture and manner of speaking, they have developed a certain 'invisible communion' (Ackroyd 2013: 1). This is all the more interesting and important because of the considerable differences of character, temperament and affection between them. Harry is ambitious and forceful, Daniel reflective and insightful, and Sam withdrawn and dreamy. The only character trait that they have in common is their loneliness, which in the case of the two elder brothers is in part caused by their insensibility, as if the void that surrounded them after their mother's disappearance could never be filled by another person. Thus, when they reach puberty and adulthood the three brothers have such dissimilar personalities that they would probably never make any connection with one another were they not related by blood. Yet, when Hilda is walking with Harry and they meet Daniel, she immediately notices this communion as 'something harder and deeper, something almost impersonal' (Ackroyd 2013: 33). It is an instinctual, innate, unconscious bond, some kind of a sixth sense through which they perceive the physical presence of the other brothers without seeing or hearing them. They can hear them without being in their presence and have an indistinct foreboding of what might happen to them in the near future. It is a capacity beyond any rational control, one they do not actually wish for, yet one they cannot but submit to.

The absent-minded and unsociable Sam is especially prone to irrational behaviour and various forms of escaping the mundane reality of his disagreeable domestic life and routine job in a local supermarket. Endowed with exceptional sensitivity and imagination, he frequently inhabits a timeless, 'floating world' (Ackroyd 2013: 46), where physical laws do not apply and material and immaterial things lose their essence and melt, and where imaginary people and places exist as if they were part of the real world. He therefore feels as if he has been chosen to experience miracles, such as seeing a stone post hovering several feet above the ground or tears running from the blue eyes of the statue of a lady in the church of Our Lady of Sorrows. This propensity culminates when he becomes a handyman in the convent adjacent to the church as the abbess, Mother Placentia, has grown fond of the extraordinary 'young man who sees visions in the heart of London' (Ackroyd 2013: 50). In this way, Sam tunes in to London's spiritual, mystical and mythical tradition and enters what Ackroyd sees as the city's perpetual continuum of imaginative vision,

existing parallel with and inseparable from its material reality, which it complements and to which it often imparts meaning.

In accord with Ackroyd's 'concept of London as a site of material history, and London as the site of a timeless vision' (Murray 2007: 93), the reader does not know how long Sam's eerie stay at the convent lasts in reality, but the tranquil days of gardening and feeding tramps and beggars end abruptly. One day after having an ominous vision of fire and destruction he discovers that the convent and all its nuns and homeless people have vanished. As he believes that 'anything is possible' (Ackroyd 2013: 244), Sam's mind is occupied with such visitations and daydreams almost constantly, but his far more rational and pragmatic brothers are not immune to them either. Harry experiences two such occasions, the first when he observes a luminous form rising from and taking the shape of his sleeping, would-be wife, Guinevere, the second when he spots a fierce-looking apparition of his late father in the back garden of his luxurious home, as if the ghosts of the two people he has betrayed most come to prevent him from taking any further treacherous steps. Daniel encounters a nun in Limehouse who seems to be coming to look after Sparkler, and who tells him to be grateful for his good spirit, yet whether this nun is real or a mere product of Daniel's imagination remains unclear. Similarly unclear is the identity of the good spirit, although an interpretation of an appeal to Daniel to appreciate Sparkler as a close friend suggests itself. The circle of enigmatic coincidences resulting from the brothers' communion closes when they leave the material world at about the same time, two literally and physically, one spiritually and mentally. Ackroyd sees London as a city whose 'magical energy survives still' (2003a: 507). Thus, symptomatically, Harry and Daniel, who did not obey the otherworldly warnings and advice, die, while the visionary Sam receives a letter from Our Lady of Sorrows suggesting that he come back to live in the convent.

The Hanway boys are true Londoners as they grew up in the borough of Camden, spending their childhood 'securely in their world of brick and stone' (Ackroyd 2013: 3), happily unaware of the neighbourhood's poverty as long as it provided a 'source of curiosity, of surprise, and, sometimes, of delight' (Ackroyd 2013: 4). It is only when they are old enough to realise the destitute situation of their family's everyday reality that, especially for Harry and Daniel, the 'forlorn calm' (Ackroyd 2013: 4) of the district is transformed into a burden they are so ashamed of that they not only try to flee from it as soon as possible, but they even pretend that it was never a part of their lives. Though in different ways, all the brothers' fates, as well as their psyches, are to some extent determined and influenced by the city in which they have lived. Harry seems to be most at ease in the bustling city as he pragmatically moves in and inhabits only those areas he finds useful for his career and social mobility, cherishing brashness, exuberance and opportunism as the qualities he admires most in other people. The secret of his journalistic success is to behave like an ordinary Londoner rather than a journalist, a 'perpetual echo' (Ackroyd 2013: 60) with no opinions of his own, a strategy that makes him trustworthy in the eyes of those who can supply him with intimate and confidential information for his gossip column or investigative articles. His problem is that he adopts a similar attitude in his

personal life, which he understands as a necessary extension of, or complement to, his professional career. As a result, he ends up a puppet in the hands of those with wealth and power, namely Sir Martin Flaxman and, later, Flaxman's wife. After moving into the new house Flaxman bought him and Guinevere in Mayfair, he definitively loses touch with the city that made him, feeling uncomfortable and embarrassed when accompanying his wife, who works as a social worker, to see the poor who live in the dilapidated terraced houses of Limehouse. Yet not even this high social status assures his happiness. After his homicidal act he walks out into the streets, his mind once again 'completely clear and untroubled, doing nothing more than receiv[ing] the impressions of the world around him' (Ackroyd 2013: 233), and, in panic, he starts running away from a fearful pursuer, only to realise that it is he himself who is haunting his mind. Having reached Westminster Bridge and briefly contemplating taking a river-boat to one of the less well-off, suburban parts of London, he chooses death as he knows that there is no way back to the city that he has disowned.

As is typical in Ackroyd's London novels, most protagonists of *Three Brothers* are distinctly lonely individuals, solitary by both choice and circumstance, the two most important being Daniel and Sam. Both brothers are predestined to solitude by the disposition of their characters. Due to his 'natural propensity for study, and a love for reading' (Ackroyd 2013: 9), Daniel soon becomes a stranger in the Hanway household, even more so when he, out of contempt for the shabbiness and commonness of the working-class council estate, develops the habit of walking as far as possible from a place where he feels he does not belong intellectually. Moreover, as a homosexual with a profound dislike for any team sport activities, he does not fit in well with his schoolmates, and so it is in Cambridge that he believes his new life begins. Yet a purely academic career does not satisfy him and it is only back in London that Daniel discovers his true life when he gets acquainted with the city's gay community and also moves into its literary circles when he becomes a scathing reviewer and later a published scholarly author writing about the city. As he sees Sparkler regularly and enjoys literary parties, London turns for him into 'an unfamiliar city, brighter and more colourful than the one he had known as a youth. It had become a place of promise as well as of pleasure' (Ackroyd 2013: 122). Yet this idealised, isolated view of the city is just a small segment of the whole, which he is only able to approach theoretically in his book. It is only when he fails as a literary commentator in a television show that he manages, though only temporarily, to establish a sensual, instinctive connection with the city in its social and temporal complexity, suddenly feeling that 'the obduracy of London began to enter him' and was 'held up by the remains of an unimaginable past' (Ackroyd 2013: 237, 238). However, like his elder brother, he eventually repudiates his roots definitely by rejecting Sparkler, the last remaining link between him and his low London origin, though much of his book is devoted to lower-class influences upon London writers. The city of his origin finally tracks him down when he dies of a stroke at seeing the rejected Sparkler sitting naked and playing small drums on the lawn beneath the window of his Cambridge office, as if reminding him that the past cannot be escaped fully. The two brothers' trajectories through London evince 'a sense of both inheritance and broken filiations, where the pasts of the city arrive as so many active

ruins and fragments of urban anamnesis' (Wolfreys 2004: 127). '[I]f we lose sight of our city—if we lose sight of our inheritance—then we lose sight of our own selves as well', notes Ackroyd (2002: 351), and both Daniel and Harry seem to get punished because they renounce the city of their origin and their inheritance.

Sam is even more solitary as he, 'absorbed in some private world, of rage and affection, which did not encircle other people' (Ackroyd 2013: 42), prefers his own company. A natural psychogeographer without knowing it, he spends most of his time in aimless and inconsistent wanderings around Camden, examining minute details and objects 'with wonder and concentration, absorbing them within his being, before discarding them' (42). While Harry and Daniel see life as a struggle, though differently as the former relishes fighting and the latter does not want to fight, Sam, as Daniel points out, does not see any need to live his life by measuring himself against anyone else and is therefore happy. He is the only one of the brothers who likes walking, not only around his home estate but also in unfamiliar parts of the city, by both day and night, talking freely to vagrants and beggars, giving them all the money he receives from his mother. He also likes his job as Ruppta's rent collector as he enjoys communicating with Sparkler and other poverty-stricken tenants in Britannia Street. When his employer is killed he has no reason to stay and, as a genuine wanderer, he sets out for the city:

> So in the waning light he went towards London Bridge. The street lamps shone on the crowd, casting long shadows across the brightly lit hoardings and shopfronts. It was a procession in torchlight, celebrating all the haste and fervour of London. He walked into the middle of the crowd, and slowly his anxieties began to subside. The touch of the stone beneath his feet, and the presence of the people, calmed him. He could feel the forgetfulness of the city rising within him. It was as if individual fear had no place in this concourse, where the great general drama of the human spirit was being displayed in the light of the street lamps. (Ackroyd 2013: 242)

Although he is not successful professionally or academically like his brothers, and, paradoxically perhaps, he would not be able to describe himself as such, Sam most fittingly and forcefully personifies what Ackroyd identifies as the London spirit or genius. He enjoys the city in its full vibrancy, with all its heterogeneity of sounds, images, movement and people; it soothes him, as a result of which he understands its energy, variety and darkness (cf. Ackroyd 2002: 346). At the same time, it fills him with a vision which he pursues regardless of other people's disapproval or lack of understanding, yet never by antagonising or hurting them, unconsciously knowing he is 'part of something much larger than [his] own self' (Ackroyd 2002: 350). He intuitively understands what it takes to become part of London's timeless continuum of human experience and imagination and is thus the only one of the brothers allowed to survive by and in the city.

Unlike most of Ackroyd's other London novels, *Three Brothers* does not feature any form of staged or at least consciously theatrical or performative acts, with the exception of the brief mention of Daniel's interest in the significance of the music hall tradition while completing his book on London writers. Instead, the city is presented as a grand stage on which a number of miscellaneous little scenes from its diverse life are enacted, mostly interconnected through a series of more or less improbable and bizarre coincidences. The dramatic use of chance and mischance, as Ackroyd suggests through the character of Daniel, reflects the very 'condition of living in the city', where the 'most heterogeneous elements collide', and where 'everything is connected with everything else' (Ackroyd 2013: 240). Under these circumstances, theatricality is a characteristic of London, which is why it 'has always been considered to be the home of stock theatrical characters' (Ackroyd 2003a: 142). In *Three Brothers*, this interconnectedness causes these protagonists to meet one another, but always somehow separately, in twos or threes, as if on various smaller stages, but they never get all together in one final panoramic scene in which the intricate web of coincidences could be rationally disentangled. So, for instance, Harry never meets Sparkler even though they both see, for different reasons, Sir Martin Flaxman and his daughter. Daniel does not meet Sam even though they both see Sparkler. And Harry does not meet Sam even though they both come into contact with their mother and Ruppta. This makes the characters of Sparkler, Ruppta and Flaxman the embodiment of the unconscious connections between the brothers. Thus, typically for Ackroyd, and for what he sees as the tradition of London writing, the novel's plot does not follow a single, coherent plotline providing an in-depth insight into the characters' psyches, or a meditation on their values and beliefs, but instead comprises three parallel subplots consisting of particular scenes, concerned with their protagonists' acts rather than their inner life, many of them notably theatrical in nature. Some of these acts are full of verbosity, role-playing and overacting, such as Sparkler's boastful monologues, Sir Martin Flaxman's cynical diatribes, or the pretence of London's literary parties. Others are almost without words, yet their performative effect is carried through facial expressions, gestures, movements or sounds, such as Sparkler playing his drums in a London street and in Cambridge, the jackdaw's ostentatious caution towards Sparkler, the penniless Sam's visit to Hilda's coffee shop, or his acts of giving money to vagrants. Yet all of them are pieces in the colourful mosaic of the city's spectacular 'drama of the human spirit'.

The London in *Three Brothers* is also a literary city, one which has provided a limitless source of inspiration for narratives, and therefore one which has produced and drawn a large number of writers who have made the city the primary object of interest in their texts. On an amateur and a sub-literary level, the novel presents the city's potential to generate incessantly material for storytelling through Sparkler and Harry, through whom the novel asserts its antiquarian dimension most forcefully. As his nickname indicates, the former keeps sparkling with stories and gossip about the various events and members of the London underworld, jokingly suggesting to Daniel to write them down under the title 'The Sparkler Papers' (Ackroyd 2013: 83), possibly an ironic reference to Ackroyd's playful futuristic experiment *The Plato Papers* (1999). 'There is nothing about London I don't know. I'm on first-name terms with the

sparrows and very chummy with the pigeons', says the watchful and meddlesome petty thief to Daniel, pointing to the double function of his ability (Ackroyd 2013: 152–153). His half true and half made-up stories may show him in a better light while, simultaneously, entertaining the listener, and thus perhaps contribute to the popular urban imagination and mythmaking, but, much more importantly, they are only a by-product of his general survival strategy in the unscrupulous and callous criminal world—to have information someone else may need. The latter's transformation of the city's happenings into narratives, though differently motivated, is in fact similar as his job is to report crimes and collect rumours about celebrities and politicians, first for a local Camden newssheet and later for a more ambitious London newspaper. As they have no literary pretentions, his reports have no other purpose than to increase sales by being amusing and sensational.

The literary aspect of the city is represented by Daniel who, after completing his doctorate in English literature at Cambridge, becomes a junior fellow and supervisor at his college, a reviewer for literary journals and supplements, and a television commentator. Using his own experience as book reviewer and broadcaster, Ackroyd satirically portrays the often pretentious, hypocritical and volatile milieu of London's literary circles, especially the pomposity and rivalry of those who dominate them. Daniel's interest in the London literary tradition is instigated when he is offered, as an expert on English literature and a Londoner born and bred, the chance to write a book entitled 'The Writers of London'. In spite of his initial doubts concerning the academic profundity of such an enterprise, he gradually becomes fascinated by the theme. However, unlike in Ackroyd's other novels, the literary London of *Three Brothers* is not very intertextual, metafictional, palimpsestic or apocryphal, but rather autobiographical and self-reflective. It does not revolve around some recognised authors or their texts, but around a literary project and scholarly research strikingly similar to its author's own. Paradoxically, Daniel realises that a crucial component of the city's literary genius is to be found outside the domain of the official culture, in the experience and imagination of those on the margins of society or in popular cultural forms. Thus, even though in reality he is not in the least interested in the city's low-class idiosyncrasies, he concentrates in his research on the novelists whose work explored the nineteenth-century Limehouse opium dens and on London popular culture, such as penny dreadfuls and music halls, whose performers he calls 'the real heroes of London', and whose songs he considers '[f]ar better than the poetry of the period' (Ackroyd 2013: 184). Moreover, he becomes aware of the significance of the *genius loci*, the atavistic power concentrated in a certain place that causes similar events to occur in the area and which draws likeminded people to settle there:

> One of the themes of Daniel's book concerned the patterns of association that linked the people of the city; he had found in the work of the novelists a preoccupation with the image of London as a web so taut and tightly drawn that the slightest movement of any part sent reverberations through the whole. A chance encounter might lead to terrible consequences, and a misheard word

> bring unintended good fortune. An impromptu answer to a sudden question might cause death. (Ackroyd 2013: 185)

All these features of Daniel's book loudly echo Ackroyd's concept of London—the patterns of resonance and continuity, the existence of mythical time, the power of the *genii locorum*, the Cockney Visionaries, the music hall tradition invigorating the popular imagination and producing outstanding monopolylinguists, the city's spiritual radicalism and occultism—as if Daniel were his younger, less experienced alter ego. Only very slowly does Daniel come to understand that the city is a densely knit network, an immensely convoluted and heterogeneous system of relationships, influences, associations, energies and forces. This network combines and reconciles opposites and contradictions, which cannot be separated from each other without losing their true meaning, and whose on-going contact generates the most unexpected coincidences. However, before he can grasp the city in its complexity, he becomes prey to one of its snares: his panic-stricken reaction to Sparkler's sudden declaration of love in effect brings about his untimely demise. Thus, the novel contains a metafictional as well as an intertextual element as it comments on a tendency of London writers which it later employs itself, and the expression 'the great general drama of the human spirit' comes directly from Ackroyd's 1993 lecture 'London Luminaries and Cockney Visionaries'.

Towards Autobiographic Self-Referencing

Three Brothers contains the defining attributes of Ackroyd's fictional London in general: lonely characters roaming its streets in order either to enjoy or to cope with their solitude, a focus on the city's undersides, including crime and criminals, various uncanny and irrational manifestations, a reflection of the urban experience in the protagonists' minds, an urge to transform this experience into stories and narratives, the city life's inherent theatricality, and London's distinctly literary nature. Yet it bears a particularly strong affinity with his first novel, *The Great Fire of London*, 'which establishes many of the echoic principles upon which Ackroyd's subsequent fictions and biographies build' (Lewis 2007: 18).

First of all, both novels take place entirely in one period during the present or not so distant past, and neither has any features of a historical narrative. Both present a cast of miscellaneous characters, many of them eccentric, whose fates are brought together and interconnected through a central motif and a series of often improbable coincidences, showing that 'certain things follow from other things' (Ackroyd 1998: 169). This breaks the novels into several parallel plotlines conceived through often separate, more or less related, scenes in which these characters encounter one another, a narrative strategy in 'keeping with the nineteenth-century multiplot fiction' which weaves 'into an intricate pattern of relationships a plethora of characters' (Onega 1999: 60), that Ackroyd also employed in *Chatterton* (1987). Moreover, they both have unhappy endings in the form of the tragic death of one or more of the protagonists who, in some way, have become victims of their

misconception or misapprehension of the city, while, at the same time, its heterogeneous and ungovernable forces, personified by Little Arthur, Sparkler and the vagrants, prevail and persist. Yet, in this respect, *Three Brothers* offers a more hopeful resolution as Sam, the brother most in accord and compliant with the city's nature, lives on to perpetuate his vision.

However, the most striking resemblance rests in the stories' autobiographic element which, with the exception of the self-ironic authorial voice in the final chapter of *The House of Doctor Dee* (1993), does not appear in Ackroyd's other London novels. Central to this resemblance is the character of a gay literary scholar associated with Cambridge University whose interest is identical with its creator's. Rowan Phillips, the Cambridge-based academic and novelist with a passion for Dickens in *The Great Fire of London*, 'may be described as a parodic version of Peter Ackroyd' (Onega 1998: 28). However, he differs from his author in several respects. He is not only not British or a Londoner, but Canadian, and his coming to London to be closer to the place where the subject of his academic research lived and wrote is merely a pretext for his true motivation—to enjoy the sexual freedom of London's gay community under the veil of the anonymity of a big city. Moreover, he is always at odds with city life. He does not like its bustle and pace, and his love life is a frustrating failure, as a result of which he not only feels lonely and alienated there, but he also cannot fully understand Dickens's imagination no matter how much he studies his life and writing.

Daniel Hanway, on the other hand, resembles Ackroyd much more. He is a Londoner who earned an excellent degree from Cambridge, who works as a literary reviewer, critic and commentator, and who comes to be interested in writers who wrote in and about London. He is thus a differently parodic image of his creator, who puts statements and phrases into Daniel's mouth which seem to come directly from his own non-fictional texts about London, especially those about the city's undersides, about the music hall and its performers and songs, about the power of the *genius loci*, and the supratemporal 'patterns of inheritance' (Ackroyd 2002: 343). The most distinctly (self-)ironic feature about Daniel is his inability to transform his theoretical propositions and findings into practice and transfer them from his book to his own life, for which he is granted the most severe destiny by Ackroyd.

While in Ackroyd's other London novels the literary aspect revolves around the texts of writers such as Dickens, Chatterton, Gissing, de Quincey and Mary Shelley, in *Three Brothers* it centres around its author's own scholarly and literary production. Although the novel is gripping and fits perfectly into the body of his London novels, it does not offer much that is new and original and, in terms of the conception of its chronotope, is rather a reprise of the fictional London created by Ackroyd more than thirty years earlier. And, perhaps symbolically, by replacing his beloved Dickens with himself, Ackroyd intimates his own affiliation with what he identifies as the city's Cockney visionary tradition which 'amongst the noise and mire of London' manages to 'glimpse the spiritual destinies of humankind' (Ackroyd 2004: 309). Nevertheless, with all due respect for Ackroyd's achievements and the legitimacy of such a claim, the absence of other than a self-referencing literary framework or a historical dimension

means that *Three Brothers* lacks a great deal of the vividness and imaginative playfulness of its predecessors.

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