



Petr Chalupský, *A Horror and a Beauty: The World of Peter Ackroyd's London Novels* (Prague: Karolinum Press, 2016), ISBN: 9788024631615, 301 pages, 380 Kč

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Chalupský's study has much to recommend it. His approach is thorough; maintaining his focus on the London portrayed by Peter Ackroyd he presents this portrayal against a variety of contexts, giving the reader an authentic experience of the visionary city to be found in Ackroyd's narratives. Chalupský explores Ackroyd's London as a chronotope, place as an embodiment of time, but it is one which 'reaches beyond the limits of the traditional chronotope' (47). This is an authentic approach to Ackroyd's London, where time is undermined so often by place and the conventional gives way to the transcendent.

A significant contribution made by Chalupský's study is his stress on reception and imagination when approaching Ackroyd's narratives. The latter's narrative style is idiosyncratic to say the least, and Chalupský reminds the reader of the need to approach Ackroyd on his own terms: 'it is necessary to be acquainted with the underlying postulates' (16). Reflecting on English literary sensibility, Chalupský claims that it is 'available for and close to anyone sensitive and sensible enough to let themselves be inspired or guided' (19). Applying such an immersive approach to Ackroyd's work allows an appreciation of his visionary style, which is a heterogeneous mix of literary elements that often defies categorisation.

Chalupský claims that creative vision comes from a 'rejection of traditional categorisation' (24) and it is through such a transcendent approach that the reader can appreciate the 'fictitious construct of alternative, or "heightened" [...] reality' which underlies Ackroyd's presentation of London (30). On many occasions in this study Chalupský points out Ackroyd's focus on 'Cockney Visionaries'; through their visionary

approach they can appreciate the perpetual nature of London: 'they understand the distinct temporal and spatial nature of their city' (46–7), and only 'a very blinkered culture' would ignore them (26). Ackroyd's approach realises itself in 'the proposing of an alternative conception of reality based on a mystical interpretation of events' (111), making use of the uncanny elements that London has produced, and which in turn have shaped London (68), 'the paranormal mechanisms at work in the capital's texture' (97).

It is true that Ackroyd has disclaimed any serious attempts to theorise about the nature of time, but Chalupský draws together the imagery he uses which presents time as 'at times circular, at times spiral, at times haphazard': above all, Ackroyd's time defies 'the traditional categories of the past and the present' (21). He sees Ackroyd the historian operating as a narrator, 'claiming allegiance to the English tradition which considers historical writing to be a manifestation of literary skills as much as, or even more than, scholarship' (37). Indeed, London's history provides narrative material for Ackroyd, rather than imposing a framework within which he is required to operate. In his narratives, the past is 'constantly amalgamated into contemporary experience to suit the needs of such experience' (35).

This has a structural implication. Chalupský points to the marginal level of Ackroyd's subject matter, which is drawn from areas 'outside the official cultural and intellectual spheres' (21) and foregrounds 'the city's "unofficial" history' (68). So for instance the characters who share the narrative duties of *The Clerkenwell Tales* are 'marginal in terms of their historical significance' (38). Moreover Ackroyd operates within 'the lower and popular rather than the official cultural forms, those mostly ignored and dismissed by the intellectual elites' (26). By avoiding more mainstream narratives Ackroyd has room to speculate as he 'violates the plausibility maxim' by sidelining inconvenient history and presenting the 'blind spots of the past' usually ignored by more conventional approaches (44, 45).

Chalupský makes much of the marginal aspect of Ackroyd's settings, and how they illustrate a more authentic portrayal of London. Crime for instance is for Ackroyd an essential part of London's 'unofficial' story; crime and violence are 'deeply embedded in the city's texture' (118). Thus Chief Inspector Kildare, the investigating detective of *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*, fails because 'he does not [...] understand that crimes are inseparably connected with the areas in which they are committed' (138).

Similarly the theatrical elements of Ackroyd's narratives are skewed towards popular types of performance, whether the 'civic display' of medieval London (*The Clerkenwell Tales*) or 'the subversive potential of theatrical performance' to be encountered in the Victorian music halls (*Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*). Such popular forms of performance underlie more general expressions of London's theatricality, especially that 'ultimate spectatorial body of urban dramas', the London mob (231).

Another aspect of sidelined London is its underclass. Ackroyd includes in his narratives 'peculiar loners who explore and map the city's topography' (155). However, Chalupský differentiates between the genuine loners, who project their sufferings onto the streets where they hope to find solace (176–7) and 'compulsive and sensitive London walkers' who experience the alternative rhythms of London (186–7). This seems to betray a lack of subtlety which causes him to miss the significance of the vagrant, particularly as portrayed in *Hawksmoor*. When the detective Hawksmoor breaks his glasses and goes among a group of vagrants, Chalupský comments that the 'city of his

mind' becomes like that of the vagrant: 'a dreary, inconsolable landscape of desolation and solitude' (191).¹

Inevitably the reader can find fault with this study. For instance, there are occasional lapses which suggest an insufficiently thorough proof reading. For instance, Chalupský describes George Gissing's feelings for his wife in *Dan Leno* as potentially a 'humanistic concern for the fallen girl' rather than a humanitarian concern (206). Moreover Chalupský speaks of the popular enjoyment of a murder case 'being unsolved', rather than solved (130).

Occasionally Chalupský takes background information too uncritically. His review of the rise of the occult in London (69–73) relies too much on Merlin Coverley's *Occult London*, particularly in its portrayal of a darker reading of the work of Christopher Wren. Coverley cites Ed Glinert's uneven *East End Chronicles* to claim that the post-Great Fire London created by Wren 'was to be measured in accordance with principles laid down in the Old Testament Book of Numbers' with its apex at Wellclose Square (42–3).

This is disproved easily. As Leo Hollis points out, Wren's plan echoed other plans such as John Evelyn's, and while bold in its ambition was 'unashamedly European'.² Moreover, Wellclose Square was never included in Wren's plan or anybody else's. The Liberty of Wellclose was created by James II, and the square was laid out by Nicholas Barbon from 1683. While such details have no immediate effect on Chalupský's overall argument, they show an insufficiently rigorous approach which may perhaps be considered Ackroydian but does not sit well in such a study.

Chalupský's omission of *The Plato Papers* is a curious one which, like his treatment of the vagrant, seems at odds with his championing of Ackroyd's visionary approach. He describes *The Plato Papers* as 'a playful futuristic experiment which [...] does not elaborate much on Ackroyd's particular chronotope' (14). However, to illustrate his exposition of Ackroyd's 'mythic time' (74) Chalupský refers to two studies of the novel by this reviewer which hold up *The Plato Papers* as depicting 'perpetual time'.³ Ironically he claims that Ackroyd's concept of perpetual time which informs his chronotope includes the possibility that 'the past can be found [...] in or underneath the present reality' (14) – the narrative thrust of *The Plato Papers* is Plato's journey to the past (the reader's present), which is literally underneath the present (the reader's future). It would seem that *The Plato Papers* is an explicit illustration of the chronotope Chalupský is espousing.

English Music is omitted too, although much of the narrative takes place in London, juxtaposing the city with the countryside. Although initially he does so without comment, Chalupský goes on to dismiss both *First Light* and *English Music* as bearing 'no features of a historical narrative whatsoever' (29). Leaving aside the definite exploration in both novels of time past relative to time present, Timothy Harcombe's quest to investigate his own past bears significantly on his appreciation of London's past through his visionary episodes.

The omission of *English Music* is perhaps symptomatic of the tightness of Chalupský's focus. For instance, while he refers to *Milton in America* as an example of Ackroyd's playing with history (44–5), he does not refer to the theatricalities of Mary Mount when he turns to the theatricality of London. Mary Mount is of course in New England rather than London, although the London credentials of Mary Mount and New Milton are stressed, but the performance by the Catholic colony opposed by the Puritan neighbours illustrates beautifully the point Chalupský is making about theatrical London

being brought to a temporary halt by the Puritan Commonwealth (198–9). Moreover, he has pointed out already that Ackroyd ascribes London's theatricality to its Catholic heritage, though noting that this has its limits (20–1).

To sum up then, Chalupský's study espouses a sympathetic reading of Ackroyd's London-based novels; the reader is to eschew traditional preconceptions of narrative structure and style in favour of a freer, more receptive approach. He shows how Ackroyd's portrayal of London embraces a variety of contexts, yet remains idiosyncratic and structurally sound. While acknowledging the undeniable playfulness which prompts Ackroyd to present not just alternative but completely fictional versions of the past, Chalupský shows that this practice has valid artistic intent, and expresses a close and deep relationship with the nature of London unappreciated by too rigorous an application by the reader of standard categorisations.

Notes

1. Cf. 'The Trope of the Tramp'.
2. *The Phoenix: The Men Who Made Modern London* (130).
3. 'Out of Time: Peter Ackroyd's perpetual London'; he cites also 'Peter Ackroyd: *The Plato Papers*'.

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