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THE LANGUAGE LABYRINTH IN PETER ACKROYD'S FICTION

Liliana HAMZEA[1]

Abstract: *Peter Ackroyd's fictional devices are analyzed with a view to reveal the postmodern frame of mind that informs novels such as "Chatterton" and "Hawksmoor". Special attention is given to frame breaking, linguistic games, intertextuality and the issue of authenticity and forgery. The hybridity of the fictional genre, namely the anti-detective and pseudo-historic form, is seen as another device for enhancing the postmodern atmosphere of confusion, indeterminacy and ambiguity.*

Key words: *linguistic games, frame-breaking, plagiarism, intertextuality.*

1. Introduction

Of all the contemporary British writers, Peter Ackroyd is probably the most disquieting with respect to those coordinates the reader expects to find in the fictional universe that make it recognizable, if not similar to the "real" world one knows or thinks to know: the flow and flux of time, the boundaries of the human being and the limits of human experiences, to name just a few. Critics and reviewers noticed his difference from the contemporary landscape and the peculiar position he holds with most of his novels, a difference that the novelist himself insisted on. Edward J. Ahearn includes Ackroyd in the category of "protean novel" which is associated with visionary and apocalyptic impulses, exploding "the stabilities of world and person, time and space, consciousness and sexual identity". The critic views apocalyptic writing as a central genre in the twentieth century not only in literature but in philosophy as well, due to the shattering events and the relativistic frame of mind that characterize it.

Apocalyptic or not, Ackroyd obviously subverts the mainstream fictional tendencies, the realistic mode in general and the historical novel and detective story in particular. His 'heretical' fictional devices include the breaking of frames between art and reality, past and present, literature and painting, literature and history, or even between well-contained sciences like archeology and astronomy.

2. Moving Across Genres

In his first successful novel *Hawksmoor* (1985) for example, a seemingly detective story turning into an anti-detective one, "fiction and history fuse so thoroughly that an abolition of time, space, and person is, one might say, inflicted on the reader" (Ahearn 2000).

[1] Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, *Transilvania* University of Braşov.

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Another powerful device in enhancing the effects of his temporal games is the use of archaic forms of discourse and spelling, which Ackroyd studied intensely at the British Museum and which, paradoxically, add the flavour of authenticity to these novels in which authenticity is one of the most debatable notions.

And yet, probably less noticed at first sight, nevertheless effective device in Ackroyd's fiction, is the poetic expression. Lidia Vianu insisted on this lyrical dimension of the discourse in an interview with the novelist published in România literară (2002).

Ackroyd's connection with poetry is a deep one, including his career as a poet before becoming a novelist, and a lifelong admiration of and dialogue with the work of T.S. Eliot. The other poet he greatly admired was Ezra Pound, to whom he dedicated a biography, *Ezra Pound and his World* (1980). One could say that Ackroyd's writing career is a very complex one, including five biographies, nine novels and a "biography" of London simply called *London: The Biography* (2000) and the complexity is enhanced by the author's flouting of conventional distinctions between genres. He considers that both biography and fiction are "constructions of character and atmosphere", interpretations of history and fictions at the same time. Ackroyd also wrote two critical works, *Notes for a New Culture* (1976/1993), and *Dressing Up: Transvestism and Drag, the History of an Obsession* (1979), in which he supports the view that a novelist should have theoretical insights, especially as far as language is concerned. Besides the view of language as a self-referring entity by means of which identities and subjects are constructed, Ackroyd also insists on the idea of intertextuality as informing all writing and running across historical ages or cultural spaces. This postmodernist view will be developed in this chapter with the analysis of his most successful novel so far, *Chatterton*.

Another major influence of theory on Ackroyd's fiction is his self-reflective approach, that is the metafictional mode of novel writing, which is focused on especially in *Hawksmoor*. To be more precise, his novels could be categorized as historiographic metafictions, presenting real characters alongside fictional ones, mixing reality and fiction. Chatterton, Oscar Wilde, Thomas More become fictional characters but are recreated with such care for authentic language, that they assume a double status of historical and imaginary persons. The 1983 novel *The Last Will and Testament of Oscar Wilde,* which recounts the last months in the writer's life, imitates his style so perfectly that, according to some critics, it is difficult to say where Wide ends and Ackroyd begins. Even well-known aphorisms are plagiarized and rewritten.

One could therefore assert that Ackroyd is a distinctively postmodern novelist, whose self-conscious, quasi-critical fiction demonstrates that there is no longer a clear-cut distinction between art and theory, no totalizing genre of narration and no unitary coherent world or human identity to focus upon. Accordingly, he is one of the recent novelists who tries to find "other ways of telling stories", as Andrew Sanders (2004) put it, taking into account Bakhtinian theories of form and language plurality and theories of "textual worlds" as put forth by most postmodernist theorists, among which Brian McHale.

3. The Art of Intrusion and Multi-layers: *Chatterton*

Of all Ackroyd's novels, *Chatterton* is probably the most complex and clearly interactive with contemporary theory as expressed by Julia Kristeva, Roland

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Barthes or Harold Bloom among others. Besides, Bakhtin's idea of the polyphonic novel seems to inform this novel in multiple ways, displaying a variety of discourses that open up multiple perspectives on other 'worlds'. The major issue is that of the possibility of authenticity in an age that is over-conscious of intertextuality and intersubjectivity, possessed of "the anxiety of influence". The postmodern notions of the fictionality of history and the dissolution of the boundaries between art and reality, between different forms of art, and ultimately between past and present are at the chore of this novel. As Adriana Neagu pointed out, it establishes Ackroyd as a postmodern "*eccentric 'unmaker' of conventional notions of certainty, truth and originality"* (115).

As if pointing to its existence as both fiction and critical commentary, the text seems to be a mixture of temporal levels as well, the two historical ages interpenetrating in *Hawksmoor* increasing to three in this case, and the dialogue of related texts and subjectivities multiplying in an endless chain.

Taking Chatterton, a celebrated Romantic poet as focus, the novel deconstructs the idea of an original text and an originating subjectivity, presenting a continuous game consisting of acts of fakery of various degrees, types and styles, exploding the very notion of originality and authenticity.

Chronologically speaking, the three temporal levels of the novel, intersecting and recurring in an overwhelming way for the reader, are the eighteenth century, focusing on the poet Chatterton, the mid-nineteenth century with a special frame including the writer George Meredith posing for the painter Henry Wallis who paints a scene of Chatterton's death, and the present time when another poet, Charles Wychwood investigates the truth of some manuscripts and a supposed painting of the same Chatterton. The present also includes other writers who in their turn contribute to the complexity of refracted mirrors and voices that the novel reveals: Philip Slack, a failed novelist who most clearly embodies the contemporary writer's 'anxiety of influence' and accordingly gives up writing, Harriet Scrope, who plagiarizes the plots of a Victorian writer, and Andrew Flint, who writes a biography of Meredith. There is an intricate maze of intertextual borrowings in the works or projects of all these writers, pointing to an endless connectedness and also an impossible assertion of pure originality or originating creativity. And all this is possible through the exploration and ingenious exploitation of language and the invention of multiple language games that Ackroyd seems to master to an unusual degree.

Firstly there is his ability to mimic the language of the fifteenth, eighteenth or nineteenth century, a skill which the writer acquired by studying manuscripts at the British Museum and which he uses for recreating voices of the past. He believes that language always contains previous levels of speech which can be traced by the knowledgeable person. This is the basis of Chatterton's forgery of some 'medieval poems' which he writes, and he publishes them with the name of a fifteenth century monk, Rowley, mastering perfectly the medieval style and language. This eighteenth century 'pastiche' is contrasted to the opposite kind of imitation, taking the topic and expressing it in new language, as operated by Harriet Scrope. If Chatterton was first rejected but then rediscovered by the Romantic poets, including Worsdworth, who dedicated a stanza to this neglected genius, the contemporary plagiarist is not condemned by Charles, who sees her act as a legitimate literary appropriation. The line of 'appropriations'

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is continued with Charles himself using half of a sentence from an exhibition catalogue for the opening paragraph of his book on Chatterton, an "intratextual plagiarism" as Adriana Neagu calls it (122). And the games continue with other forms of internal plagiarism, Ackroyd himself using sentences from his other works, like *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde.*

Linguistic games become ironical or even comical sometimes, like the game of Latin quotations played by Andrew Flint in a conversation with Harriet Scrope at Charles' funeral. Andrew Flint is the extreme case of 'influence' and of the Nietzchean view of the autonomy of the language, as the novelist expresses himself throughout the novel through quotations from classical writers, endlessly worrying about their correct source. Unlike the other writers in the book, he cannot rise above the influence of intertextuality in order to offer a genuine response to life. This inability is obvious in the difference of opinion expressed in a dialogue between Andrew and Charles with respect to Chatterton: the former considers the Romantic poet "the greatest plagiarist in history", while the latter "the greatest poet in history" (94), Charles being able to overcome the limitations of a general label and see the authentic emotional response that identifies true poetry.

Ackroyd's linguistic games include repetitions of sentences from one chapter to another, from one time frame to another, from one story within the novel to another. Thus words from Nicholas Dyer's accounts in *Hawksmoor* are repeated in Hawksmoor's accounts, creating a puzzling sense of interconnectedness between apparently separate temporal frames and characters. Just like in the previous novel, each chapter of the first part in *Chatterton* ends with a sentence which is to be found in the text of the next chapter in the form of italicized fragments inserted without punctuation marks and apparently disconnected from the narration: *'oh yes if this is real this is him"* (Chapter one), *"whereof we cannot speak thereof we must be silent"* (Chapter two), *"the dream unfolds… the sleeper awakes,… but still the dream goes on"* (Chapter five).

This device of insertions of lines from Chatterton's poems into the fictional discourse, added to a complicated game of mottos, creates a variety of effects. For the reader it creates a feeling of mystery and suspense that is a major ingredient of Ackroyd's best novels; for the postmodern seeker, it demonstrates that there is no firm borderline between poetry and fiction, their discourse may be in fact similar. At the same time this echoing of eighteenth century poetry into a twentieth century story may also be taken for the postmodern tenet that there is no distinction between art and reality or between fiction and history. Language is the all powerful tool uniting them all and breaking down imaginary frame lines which were traditionally designed by rational lines of thought. Of all the characters, Charles is the most involved in this kind of linguistic-imaginary-mysterious game.

4. Loose Borderlines

Frame breaking is seen by Ackroyd as a more general artistic device which allows not only immersions into different periods of time, and textual or identity interchanges, but also a wider dialogue between various arts, like literature and painting. Out of the several paintings referred to in the novel some are demonstrated fakes, but at the same time they are not imitations of other paintings, only palimpsestic acts of imagination which are revealed as authentic, though obscure creations. Painting as palimpsest becomes a sort of metaphor for what

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Ackroyd attempts to demonstrate at the level of literary discourse by means of all the above mentioned devices. The gap between the 'authentic' picture and its later additions or forgeries is the gap between truth and reality. The ambiguity of all the frames and historical layers makes reality ungraspable, authenticity impossible or irrelevant, and truth impossible to assert.

All these games and devices contribute to creating not only a vast web of textuality from which no one can escape, but also identities that are no longer clearly shaped and fixed, Charles identifying with his study object (Chatterton), Meredith with the same as the real 'subject' of the painting his is posing for, and Chatterton himself identifying completely from the artistic point of view with the medieval authors he imitates.

The novel explores a wide range of plagiarisms, as well as the borderline between authenticity and plagiarism, dramatizing the impossibility of giving a verdict or making a clear-cut distinction. Even the clearer case of Harriet Scrope's 'borrowing' plots from an obscure Victorian novelist, being presented from her own point of view and with the potential of free indirect style, manages to render this kind of plagiarism as remarkably creative: Scrope can make her own connections and create her own style by using old plots as simple "vessels".

Harriet feels her imagination is liberated only after this initial forgery. That is why she feels no remorse, and calmly tells Charles that "*novelists don't work in a vacuum. We use many stories."* (104). It seems to be perfectly true of the modern and postmodern age in which parody was one of the most flourishing genres. This attitude echoes another one, having Chatterton as protagonist and describing the moment when he discovered that he could do more than transcribe the medieval manuscripts he discovered in the muniments room; he could continue writing in the same style on his own.

The intertextual games Ackroyd plays in this novel go as far as to make Chatterton anachronistically utter the lines from the end of Eliot's Waste Land *("These fragments I have shored against my ruins"),* and the replacement of "ruins" in Eliot's text with "Genius" marks the difference between the Romantic perception of the poet and the modern sense of identity. The reversal of the time direction in the intertextual equation completes the series of distortions operated in this novel.

In *Chatterton* the issue of forgery extends from literary texts and painting to the autobiographical account of Chatterton's life, which is in fact faked by the poet's publisher, and so the series of forged texts multiplies and includes several frames. With the endless chain of forgeries and forgeries of forgeries, Ackroyd's investigation of the notions of intertextuality, style, originality, plagiarism and hybrid literary genres acquires dramatic intensity.

Besides the motif of forgery, the novel also focuses on death scenes. The three scenes in each of the time sequences seem to re-enact one another, not chronologically though. The fictional construct reverses the order, historical Chatterton's death occurring at the very end of the novel, after the painting with this subject was completed by Wallis and after Charles's own death which mimics the posture represented in the nineteenth century painting. Thus life imitates art in a true postmodern fashion, and the death of the historical poet seems to re-enact the contemporary failed poet's death in an equally postmodern dissolution of boundaries and chronology. But death is also focused in the novel through the research carried by one of Harriet Scrope's friends, Sarah Tilt, who pursues the

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imagery of death in English painting. Her minute investigation and the expertise she acquires are reminiscent of another postmodern fictional scholar, Julian Barnes's character in *Flaubert's Parrot*. In fact the comparison is sustained by the ironical stance adopted by both writers with respect to the uselessness of scholarly competence and investigation and by the similar conclusion. In *Chatterton*, not only Sarah is incapable of bringing her book on death to an end in spite of her efforts, but so is Wallis in his painstaking attempt to reconstruct the very setting of Chatterton's death chamber. Ackroyd and Barnes, in their different ways, come to reject mimesis and realistic conventions, considering them vain enterprises which only distance the writer from reality. But reality is just one of those elusive terms, just like originality, as Charles states in a suggestive conversation with Harriet.

Credit is due to interpretation, to re-workings and arrangements of old forms which in Ackroyd's view is a manifestation of the imagination. One might even say that in rejecting realism, postmodernism comes closer to the romantic belief. Ackroyd certainly is coming in that direction, for, as Adriana Neagu (2002:142) insightfully notices:

> *Where Ackroyd's position differs from the postmodern theory of the finitude of newness and the refuge of the contemporary mind in the recycling of pre-existing forms is in the indication that the new and the original are after all the coming together of imaginative, interpretive and experiential acts.*

5. Conclusion

One may wonder about Ackroyd's own position with respect to the notions intensely dramatized in his fiction: intertextuality, originality, plagiarism.

The answer is probably best given in the realm of the relative instead of a firm position that would suit pre-modern times. His novels are in the first place a sort of hybrid genre, using the detective convention to a large extent, but then turning even the most obviously detective of his fictions, *Hawksmoor*, into an anti-detective novel. Ackroyd borrows just the basic convention of the genre, mainly the investigation of details, and gradually subverts this very convention in order to construct a postmodern universe of confusion, indeterminacy and ambiguity but which can accommodate the more challenging investigation into the nature of truth or human identity.

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