

# *The Literary London Journal*



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## **Review**

**Berkem Güreñci Saglam, *Representations of London in Peter Ackroyd's Fiction: The Mystical City Universal Lampeter*: Edwin Mellen Press, 2011. Hardback, 184 pages, ISBN-13: 978-0773425781. £89.95**

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*The Literary London Journal*, Volume 10 Number 1 (Spring 2013)

*Representations of London in Peter Ackroyd's Fiction: The Mystical City University*, which grew out of a thesis submitted for Berkem Güreñci Saglam's doctorate, addresses the question of the knowability of London as manifested in Ackroyd's novels, placing the presentation of the city within his rewriting of history. Indeed, for Ackroyd, 'contemporary London cannot be set apart from its history' (6). Just as from the postmodern point of view history is known through the interpretation of texts, so the London Ackroyd presents is a composite of texts produced by artists who are themselves products of the city. London thus becomes a construct, based on an accumulation of literary portrayals which contain specific motifs, particularly that of performance, a subject close to Ackroyd's heart.

With the emphasis on history, Güreñci Saglam focuses on how Ackroyd parodies two literary genres, the biography and the detective story, each constituting a form of enquiry into the past. Sadly, she focuses on them a little too long: London occupies a comparatively peripheral space in a study whose title promises that it will be at the centre. Inasmuch as Güreñci Saglam takes time to ground her two themes of the parodied detective and the (auto)biography on a foundation of secondary literature, her study makes some interesting points. She sets out how Ackroyd's biographical parodies are manifested in the plethora of historical characters he presents, while she applies the motif of the detective loosely to embrace characters who follow a quest to unearth the truth about a person or thing. To this end she centres her examination on four novels: *Chatterton*, *The House of Doctor Dee*, *Dan Leno* and *the Limehouse Golem* and *Hawksmoor*. The remaining novels are dealt with in the study's conclusion.

Ackroyd's parody of biography is shown to be based on the self-consciously textual nature of the novels under examination. Güreñci Saglam lays great stress on the discrepancies between recorded historical details and the corresponding details in

Ackroyd's narratives, asserting that these discrepancies are intended to be conscious reminders that the transmission of the past comes through the interpretation of texts. She unfortunately neglects the most textual moments in the quests of Charles Wychwood and Matthew Palmer, moments at the heart of her argument. Both, as they read biographies of Chatterton and Doctor Dee respectively, are confronted by their variety of interpretation, an explicit statement of the unknowability of the biographical subject. Nevertheless, Güreñci Saglam explores closely the prominence of Ackroyd's use of biographical parody, an appropriate activity for a biographer with such an original approach to his work.

Meanwhile the unknowability of the past is shown to inform the parody of the detective. Charles Wychwood is wrong-footed by forgery in *Chatterton* so that he devotes the last days of his life to a wild goose chase; Nicholas Hawksmoor tries to apply forensic investigative methods to a case which disrupts normal expectations. The enquiries of John Dee and Matthew Palmer, on the other hand, are compromised by their approaches. So ineffectual is the detective figure that it is the reader who becomes 'the all-knowing, classic detective' (71). Here, however, Güreñci Saglam goes too far in applying the Holmes-Watson motif. For instance, though she sees Philip Slack as 'the reverse Watson figure' in *Chatterton*, Philip in fact initiates Charles Wychwood's quest by identifying the Joynson portrait as Chatterton in middle age and is as enthusiastic about the quest as Charles, only finding out about the forgery after Charles's death because Cuthbert Joynson tells him the story.

Güreñci Saglam's arguments are straightforward and her elaboration of the parodic presentation of the genres of biography and the detective as closely related aspects of the metafictional tradition is interesting. However, she does retread some old ground. After all, Susana Onega (whom Güreñci Saglam quotes at various points) has pointed out already that Ackroyd has been practicing historiographic metafiction while claiming to be 'the inheritor of a very innately English sensibility' (Onega 4). Ackroyd's intertextuality moreover has been understood since Laura Giovanelli's 1996 study *Le vite in gioco*, where she speaks of the echoes and references – 'un formulato codice di echi e referenti' – which recur in Ackroyd's work (20).

Aside from the lack of a radical approach, there are problems with the study's overall structure. Of the four novels Güreñci Saglam examines, she comes to *Hawksmoor* last, though chronologically it is the first, without explaining why. Without explanation, there is the danger of missing Ackroyd's development of his parodic approach. The study's conclusion, moreover, is largely a disconnected review, in no clear order, of Ackroyd's other novels; *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein* (2008) seems to have been added as an afterthought, since she refers to *The Fall of Troy* (2006) as 'Ackroyd's latest' (167). This is presumably because a review of the later novel was included after Güreñci Saglam's submission of the initial thesis which became this study. Moreover, the promised discussion of Ackroyd's work 'in relation to other contemporary British authors' constitutes just over two pages (174-6), only one paragraph of which is devoted to writers who are not Iain Sinclair, if a quote each from Martin Amis and Michael Moorcock can be called devoting time to them.

Indeed, there is a feel of carelessness about this study. A glaring error is the description of 'a pentagram or pentangle' as a 'six pointed star' (50), but there are errors which seem to display a lack of detailed engagement with the texts she is studying. Two examples which occur during the muddled conclusion should suffice. It is unfortunate that when referring to a moment of conversation in *Milton in America*, Güreñci Saglam asserts that Goosequill's 'American country wife' Kate is contrasting '[t]he expanse and width of America' with her husband's 'tightly-knit city of London' (154-5). Kate is English and is referring to her home county of Devon. Talking of *First Light*, Güreñci Saglam describes the first body found in the tumulus as 'the ancient body found hanging upside

down' and that it is 'nicknamed "The Old Barren One"' (168). Not only was the body a desiccated shell, almost too fragile to handle let alone hang upside down, but it isn't Old Barren One, whose coffin is at the centre of the underground complex and who exerts a mystical power through a cult of ancestor worship which is at the centre of the narrative.

Gürenci Saglam's readiness to agree with secondary sources is unfortunate. For instance, she swallows Dennis Porter's generalisations about crime fiction so readily that when at one point she needs to fit Charles Wychwood, protagonist of *Chatterton*, to Porter's profile of the classic detective, she calls him bizarre for talking to a dog and a cat, a practice many people would find quite normal. This lack of questioning leads her to perpetuate the idea, espoused by Onega, that the narratives of *Hawksmoor* and *Chatterton* are based on cyclical time, an argument which leads to some confusion. [1] Cyclical repetition would suggest for instance that *Hawksmoor* is the reincarnation of Dyer, when the more likely candidate is the Architect. She follows Onega's lead in describing Dyer as 'dying and being reborn numerous times' (141), a statement for which there is no support in the narrative itself. Thus she makes the bald statement that at the end of the novel, 'Hawksmoor comes face to face with his predecessors and is engulfed' (21): he in fact meets only the Architect. Her quote, 'And when I went among them', is a statement by the narrator rather than by *Hawksmoor*, whose narrative is a third-person one.

Gürenci Saglam's study is then one which is interesting to read, though to do so leads to some disappointment. Her exploration of Ackroyd's literary presentation of London is not developed nearly enough to justify the book's title, particularly the subtitle 'The Mystical City Universal': though she refers at various points to the mystical nature of Ackroyd's London there is no sustained gathering together of the threads to examine explicitly what Ackroyd is doing in the light of the transcendent nature of his visionary approach, an approach pointed out already by Onega (19). Moreover, while it was perhaps a lack of Italian which prevented Gürenci Saglam from making use of Laura Giovanelli's study which has not (yet) been translated, she has not taken the opportunity to review her dissertation to make use of the two more recent book-length studies by Alex Murray and by Barry Lewis, both published in 2007.

## Notes

[1] Indeed, Ackroyd has denied that he proposes a cyclical picture of time in a 1989 interview with Julian Wolfreys which Gürenci Saglam quotes a number of times. Julian Wolfreys suggests that his presentation of timelessness is based on a cyclical model, but Ackroyd counters this: 'I used to believe in the cyclical theory of time, but it's much more complicated' (*The Ludic and Labyrinthine Text* 255-6).

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### **To Cite This Article:**

David Charnick, 'Review of Berkem Güreñci Saglam, *Representations of London in Peter Ackroyd's Fiction: The Mystical City Universal*. *The Literary London Journal*, Volume 10 Number 1 (Spring 2013). Online at <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/spring2013/charnick.pdf>.

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ISSN: 1744-0807 | <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/>

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