

“Like a Furnace Burning and Turning” – London in Peter Ackroyd’s *The Great Fire of London*

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Abstract

Unlike the two subsequent novels, *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983) and *Hawksmoor* (1985), Peter Ackroyd’s first novel, *The Great Fire of London* (1982), was not published to high critical acclaim. However, the novel establishes its author’s concept of his fictional London, which focuses primarily on the city’s unofficial, off-the-record history. The aim of this article is to demonstrate that although it is a seemingly unambitious work and a relatively raw text, especially due to its explicit treatment of the theme of male homosexuality and the story’s bleak ending, *The Great Fire of London* can be understood as a kind of a “proto-text” containing all the major defining aspects of its author’s fictional city, which are explored in more in-depth ways in his later, more mature London novels.

Keywords: *London; the city; Charles Dickens; loneliness; heterogeneity; intertextuality; irrationality*

1. Introduction

When the beginnings of Peter Ackroyd’s career as a novelist are discussed, two of his breakthrough works, published to high critical acclaim, are always highlighted: *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983), awarded the Somerset Maugham Award in 1984, and *Hawksmoor* (1985), awarded the Whitbread Novel Award and the Guardian Fiction Prize in 1985. His first novel, *The Great Fire of London* (1982) is, if at all, usually only briefly mentioned as a biographical fact. It is true that it did not win any prestigious literary prize, though it was well received by most reviewers, and even Ackroyd now dismisses it as being “so long ago and so of its time” (O’Mahony). In spite of this, it has a very specific position in its author’s oeuvre both in terms of its narrative structure and thematic composition as it anticipates the narrative strategies and thematic concerns of his later novels.

Ackroyd’s London novels can be divided into three categories, according to which role a particular time period plays within their narrative structure: novels set in the past with no time overlap with other historical periods, such as *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994), *The Clerkenwell Tales* (2003), *The Lambs of London* (2004) and *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein* (2008); novels with two parallel yet intertwined plots, one in the past and one in the present, such as *Hawksmoor* and *The House of Doctor Dee* (1993); and novels taking place in contemporary London, yet whose plot is determined by some other historical period, such as *Chatterton* (1987), in which London’s past is used “as a trope for the repressed underbelly of modern life and identity” (Phillips, 2011, p. 96). Two major tendencies of the historical turn in contemporary British fiction can be traced in his novels: adopting “historical settings and characters in order to address a wide range of present-day concerns”, and as inviting “a felt sense of connection with people, places, and events of the past” (Keen, 2006, pp. 176, 177). Ackroyd’s first published novel, *The Great Fire of London*, despite its intentionally misleading title, belongs to the third group as it does not concern the famous apocalyptic event of 1666 but revolves around a contemporary film director’s unsuccessful attempt at making a film version of Charles Dickens’s *Little Dorrit* (1855-57), culminating in a final scene during which the film sets and the surrounding part of the city burn down in a great fire started by one of the novel’s characters. However, even though the story touches on current themes such as film-making, homosexuality and homelessness, its central concern is Dickens and his London, together with the various connections between the Victorian and the present-day city, exemplifying thus a typical Ackroyd “device of anchoring the past to a familiar theme or network

of ideas and then disrupting expectations” (Bradford, 2007, p. 82).

The choice of the prominent Victorian novelist as the catalyst of Ackroyd’s first novel is not surprising as he has always shown considerable admiration for Dickens, whom he considers one of the most outstanding London writers, and about whom he has written several fictional and non-fictional books, namely the impressive biography *Dickens* (1990). Ackroyd believes Dickens to be one of the city’s most sensitive observers as he, “of all novelists, knew that the city (Ackroyd, 2004, p. 320), a view that forms the basis of Ackroyd’s conception of the metropolis. “The theatricality of Dickens’s city, its energy, and its colorful inhabitants affected Ackroyd profoundly” and his “own novels, too, seek to convey this sense of excitement and busyness, of noise and happenstance” (Lewis, 2007, p. 162). Structurally, *The Great Fire of London* “follows the characteristic multiplot pattern of Victorian fiction” (Onega, 1998, p. 27) as in the opening chapters it introduces a miscellaneous cast of characters in the best Dickensian tradition, including various eccentric or otherwise peculiar figures, whose fates are later brought together through their involvement in making the film or simply by their inhabiting the same area in which *Little Dorrit* is set and its latest film version shot. The interconnectedness between Dickens’s and present-day London is further reinforced by the power of the *genius loci* under whose spell the more sensitive characters fall. This transhistorical parallelism is also suggested by the names of the characters that evoke those of Dickens’s: Little Arthur evokes Arthur Clennam, the half-wit with a drooping mouth Pally is the contemporary equivalent of Little Dorrit’s friend Maggie, and Audrey Skelton through whom the eponymous character appears to be speaking and who believes herself to be Amy Dorrit. Rowan Phillips, a Canadian, Cambridge-based homosexual academic and novelist specialising in Dickens may be taken as a parodic version of Ackroyd himself (Onega, 1998, p. 28). Moreover, in a similar fashion, “many of the secondary characters have names that point to their condition as types” and “are masterfully characterized in a few brush strokes that underline some outstanding physical trait or peculiarity” (Onega, 1999, p. 20). It is the perpetually implied affinity between the modern and the Victorian worlds that give the story its particular tension and dynamism and make it a highly original and witty first work.

Although a relatively short and seemingly unambitious work, *The Great Fire of London* is remarkably complex and profound in terms of its central theme – London and the possible consequences living in this city brings. Like his character Spenser Spender, Ackroyd also found his theme in the city “which could draw him further forward, eliciting pictures and images, probing the mystery” (*The Great Fire of London*, 1988, p. 12; Note 1). The novel can therefore be read as a certain elementary text, one which outlines, explores or at least touches on almost all the crucial themes Ackroyd deals with in his subsequent London novels, constructed as “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, p. 31). These themes are: loneliness, isolation and the resulting anxiety and despair of the main protagonists; the city as a state of mind, a reflection and a metaphor of its inhabitants’ individual as well as collective psyches, the image of the city as a body, the sum of its dwellers’ fates; the exploration of the city’s undersides, both territorial and social, and a depiction of how these heterogeneous forces, though mostly banished from view, perpetually emerge and disrupt the city’s public face; crimes and criminality as inseparable components of city life; the power of the *genius loci*, assuming a psychogeographic perspective of scrutinising the atavistic forces through which certain areas have retained their peculiar atmosphere and energies that incessantly affect what happens in them; the related concept of cyclical or mystical time, the idea that the city, namely due to the two above-mentioned properties, defies temporal linearity in favour of various recurrent circular or spiral time patterns; a focus on London’s mystical, occult or otherwise irrational manifestations and the persuasion that without acknowledging these the eternal mystery of the city remains beyond comprehension; London’s noticeable theatrical nature, determined namely by the limitless opportunities for play acting and assuming diverse identities life in the city provides; and, last but not least, the distinctly literary nature of the city approached as a vast and incessantly expanding intertextual and palimpsestic network, “an infinite mass of texts that have no logical organization” as well as “an infinite mass of associations that lie beyond any form of comprehension” (Murray, 2007, p. 7). Ackroyd believes that literary representations of London may be particularly helpful in imagining and comprehending the city which often appears too confusing and volatile, but which is “also a set of representations constituted through the spatial and temporal orderings of narrative; the experience of the one could be filtered through the orientation provided by the other” (Ball, 2004, p. 19). His London novels can be taken as an attempt at creating an imaginative interpretative framework of the disorderly urban world.

2. Walking across Shadows in the Dark Streets – Ackroyd’s Lonely Londoners

One of the distinctive features of Ackroyd’s London novels is the number of lonely or isolated individuals who inhabit his capital. These loners, both forced and willing, fictitious and real historical personages, strive, with varying success, to make their way in the ambivalent city which is simultaneously liberating as well as alienated and hostile. “The city is a mix of freedom and constraint. It is designed to promote certain ways of behaving, of moving, of thinking. [...] Yet its very complexities make it also the place of greatest disorder, its multiple systems of control and discipline open up gaps where life can be lived out of control, beyond discipline” (Fiske, 1991, p. 204). Many of Ackroyd’s characters end up isolated because they become somehow possessed, in the good and the bad sense of the word, with an idea, a vision, or with what they perceive as a personal quest of finding their place within such an ultimately contradictory and inconsistent environment. Similarly, one of the underlying themes and motifs of *The Great Fire of London* is that of loneliness and isolation. There is no one central protagonist in the novel but a cast of miscellaneous characters whose fates become gradually interconnected through their involvement, direct or indirect, conscious or accidental, voluntary or imposed, in Spenser Spender’s project of making a film version of *Little Dorrit*. The common denominator of all these characters is their, often growing, feeling of being left alone in a world which seems to offer very little consolation for those who prove incapable of coping with the demands of modern city life. However, at the same time, they grow intensely “self-conscious that even when [they] are alone, [they] are haunted by the social”, and that in the modern city, “with increased daily contact with a variety of strangers, the capacity to separate oneself, to be ultimately alone, becomes much more difficult” (Finkelstein, 2007, pp. 112-113). As a result, as they wrestle with their anxieties, worries and frustrations, they look for or devise various escapist strategies and protective mechanisms, such as searching for new sexual relationships, having recourse to spiritualism, abusing alcohol, and absolute devotion to work, to which they desperately stick and in which they find refuge from what appears to them as a dead-end life situation. The effect, however, is mostly minute and short-lived, if not downright counterproductive, and they eventually find themselves even more alienated from their close environment.

The most grotesque member of this cast is Arthur Feather, or Little Arthur as he is nicknamed due to his dwarfish stature, an eccentric, caricature-like half-wit conceived in the best Dickensian tradition. Little Arthur suffers not only from social isolation resulting from his physical handicap, but also from a serious form of psychosis which does not manifest itself only thanks to the fact that Arthur devotes his whole existence to his job as an operator of the “Fun City” amusement arcade. When the arcade is closed Arthur’s despair knows no limits, his wounded psyche soon loses touch with reality and his mental disorder comes to the surface, with fatal consequences – he accidentally kills a little girl from the neighbourhood in what he believes to be an act of saving her innocence from the snares of the hateful outside world. Yet, not even prison confinement restores peace to Arthur’s semi-insane mind, as when the film crew arrive in the prison in order to shoot some scenes for Spender’s film, he identifies in the actress playing Little Dorrit the same girl whom he tried to “save” earlier and decides to repeat the altruistic act, this time by short-circuiting the electricity system of the prison, by which he merely sets the other inmates free.

Audrey Skelton is a young lady very much discontented with her life: she feels bored and unfulfilled in her job as a telephone operator and so she spends much of her time daydreaming about being some other person, rich and famous, imagining in detail what such a life would be like, a desire no one else around her seems to understand. As an extraordinarily sensitive person, Audrey is prone to succumbing to alluring fantasies and other outcomes of her vivid imagination which allow her to free herself from the constraints of her troublesome conscious existence. She often lapses “into a kind of trance”, as if “possessed”, and thus represents a mystery even “to those who knew, and loved, her best” (*GFL*, p. 8). And so, after she visits the site where the prison which features in Dickens’s novel used to stand, she at first starts dreaming about living in the novel’s story and later, when she attends a spiritualist seance, she comes to believe herself to be some sort of reincarnation of Amy Dorrit, a medium through which the poor little girl attempts to pass on some secret. This, however, throws Audrey into an even greater isolation as she becomes paranoid, fearing that “the clever ones” from the outside world want “to get hold of the secret” (*GFL*, p. 113), which she therefore must protect.

Thanks to his carefree and optimistic nature Tim Coleman, Audrey’s boyfriend, feels no worries concerning his life, most importantly because he has an adorable and loving girlfriend. All this, however, proves to be very fragile and collapses like a house of cards when Audrey becomes possessed with the spirit of Amy Dorrit and loses all interest in her previous life, her boyfriend included. Having been repeatedly rejected or ignored by his girlfriend, Tim finds distraction and solace in the company of Rowan Phillips, at first in the form of searching for the lost London of Dickens’s novels and later in drinking, followed by tentative, non-coital homosexual practices. However, when Rowan discovers that for Tim he is a mere intimate surrogate for the lost Audrey he refuses to see him again, which throws Tim into a more intensified state of helplessness and confusion, in which he so much identifies himself as a

victim of external circumstances that he even comes to sympathise with Audrey and her peculiar behaviour. Filled with “feelings of rejection and uncertainty” (*GFL*, p. 142), hurt by how unjustly the outside world has been treating him, Tim desperately looks for any kind of crutch that would help him through the troubled waters of his sudden emotional and sexual frustration. Audrey and Tim thus represent two different kinds of lonely Londoners who, in effect, face a similar situation – they have lost their former self somewhere in the tides of the city life’s currents and are unable to recover it by themselves.

Rowan Phillips is no more successful in coping with the pressures of the city than Tim and Audrey. Dissatisfied with the provincialism and academic sterility of life in Cambridge, he goes to London with the belief that it can provide him with what will fulfil him most - sexual freedom and limitless opportunities to find an accessible object for his erotic fantasies. This he disguises under the “official” reason of moving to the city in order to be “close to his ‘material’” (*GFL*, p. 19), that is Charles Dickens, about whom he is supposed to write a critical study. However, his frenetic searching for a sexual partner brings him no satisfaction, joy or ease, and he eventually really does turn to his work on Dickens, both for his study and the script of Spender’s film, so as to “rescue himself from the day” (*GFL*, p. 21), from the growing sense of emptiness and futility of his own miserable existence. Moreover, his despair deepens when he becomes strongly attracted to Tim, who cannot and does not return his affection in the manner he would like him to do. The frustrated Rowan bitterly realises that neither his night expeditions to gay bars nor his scholarly research can help him escape from himself, from his unhappiness resulting from the fact that what he actually longs for is not one-night, anonymous sex, but to care for someone who loves him back, which only intensifies his feelings of loneliness and rejection.

At first sight, Spenser Spender seems to be a different case as he has a job he likes, a wife he loves, and, moreover, he is offered a chance to fulfil his professional dream of making his beloved Dickens’s novel, *Little Dorrit*, into an artistically valuable feature film. He thus engages himself fully in realising his vision of making a film that would capture the very spirit of Dickensian London. However, he gradually becomes so absorbed in this project that he even starts to disregard his own wife Laetitia, or Letty, who at first tries in vain to bring Spenser back to reality, and then seeks what she has been denied at home – attentiveness, tenderness and courtesy – from the polished and elegant, yet ultimately self-important, pompous and egotistical, Andrew Christopher, with whom she eventually moves in after she leaves her seemingly unconcerned husband. Spenser’s personal loss is accompanied, as is often the case, with professional ones: the Film Finance Board is cutting funds for his film and he is forced to reduce the script and drastically limit his creative aspirations. On top of this, the film crew go on strike for better working conditions after one of the technicians gets hurt in a minor incident by a fallen arc-light. There is a gleam of hope for him when Letty, after a failed suicide attempt, returns to him and the two realise how much they love and need each other, yet Ackroyd lets him die in a futile attempt to save the film’s London sets from burning in a fire set by the psychically disordered Audrey and a group of homeless vagrants whom she persuades to be her accomplices in this mindless arson.

Most importantly, what all these characters also have in common is the fact that their unhappiness and disturbed states of mind are always directly, literally as well as metaphorically, connected with London, and, as in all of Ackroyd’s London novels, the city “is posited as affecting not only the conscious development of its inhabitants, but also their unconscious gestures” (Murray, 2007, p. 76). In his own psychogeographical manner, Ackroyd thus shares a universal postmodernist “belief that we must turn to the city in order to examine the distinctive conditions of contemporary life” (Brook, 2005, p. 209). The only “city” Little Arthur’s mental disorder enables him to safely inhabit is his Fun City, a semi-virtual oasis of light and order over which, unlike the disorderly and insidious city outside, he can exercise sufficient control. For Audrey and her fragile psyche the city is hostile from the very beginning, as, for instance, when she and Tim set out to play games in Fun City: “And so into the dark streets they went, walking across shadows, scuttling against the wind which tried to push them back. Into the amusement arcade” (*GFL*, p. 9). Later on, when she identifies herself as Little Dorrit and is dismissed from her job, in which she has lost all interest, she scarcely leaves her home at all, save for occasional night wanderings over the site of the old Marshalsea prison in order to discover who her newly emerging identity is, “looking for clues, some kind of old marks” (*GFL*, p. 97), and the two instances when she attempts to sabotage the film through which she believes “they” intend to take hold of the poor little girl’s souls: she at first physically attacks the actress who is playing Amy Dorrit and eventually, when she feels such sporadic actions have little impact on the evil plotting of her abstract arch-enemies, she sets the film’s London sets on fire. Symptomatically, she is assisted by those representing the underside of the city – the tramps who loiter around the area where the film sets are located. Audrey intuitively asks these people whose fates and, consequently, relationships with the city are in a way similar to hers, for the tramps “had been neglected so universally and for so long that they no longer felt responsible for their actions” (*GFL*, p.

161). It is this feeling of being neglected and downtrodden by the outside world, of which the city becomes the most convenient and obvious materialisation, that unites the paranoid, baffled girl with the homeless men in their incendiary act. In effect, though for different reasons, they all believe that by burning down the sets “[t]hey would be doing London a favour” (*GFL*, p. 162): making it a better place for Audrey/Dorrit by destroying the unnamed, nefarious machinery; a rightful vengeance for the tramps by doing to the city what it has done to them already.

For Tim, London at first represents a familiar habitat which, nevertheless, always offers something new to discover, especially when he is assisting Rowan in tracing its lost places, like the original site of the Marshalsea Prison. Although the intellectually uninvolved Tom understands it merely as a game and shows little interest in the historical facts behind the lost areas, seeing them as “stories, fairy tales, not connected with the reality of any place” (*GFL*, p. 31), he still considers it an amusing complementary activity to his routine life. Yet for him, London quickly transforms from an exciting puzzle to a confusing maze when he loses Audrey, and later Rowan as well, and suddenly finds himself searching not for the enigmatic, lost city, but for a firm point in the actual city that would help him find his former, light-hearted and self-assured, self: “he was baffled; he needed guidance, and he would take it from wherever it came” (*GFL*, p. 143). The novel does not say what kind of guidance Tim eventually clings to, and where it comes from, but the reader can easily predict that the role the city is to play in such help will be far from comforting.

Rowan, on the other hand, is lured to the city by its otherness, openness and diversity, which in his mind he imagines as always rewarding, easily obtainable and taken for granted, which is reflected in his initial zealous and would-be worldly-wise approach to searching for where the Marshalsea prison used to be. His pre-experienced London is thus an idealised, fantasy construct inevitably doomed to be challenged in direct confrontation with reality. Therefore, when he realises how superficial and spiritually unfulfilling his one-night sexual adventures are for him, he blames London rather than his foolishness and naivety, as if in other big cities the effects of anonymous sex are different: “The night in London promises nothing; it is a bland darkness which gives as little as it promises. In other cities the night is full of movement and possibility; in London, it is like a cloth placed over the cage of a bird. But Rowan was attempting to escape from himself, and darkness was an appropriate cover” (*GFL*, p. 73). In actuality, no city is big enough to allow Rowan to hide from himself, from his inability to admit and accept the true cause of his despair – the need for a genuinely affectionate relationship. He understands this when he falls for Tim, yet when the heterosexual/bisexual Tim, though drunk and emotionally frustrated, eventually agrees to intimate contact with Rowan, the latter feels uneasy and abashed again, this time from the possibility of getting what he has long been yearning for, fearing potential disappointment, and comparing Tim, ironically enough, to the city that has already disappointed his expectations: “Tim had been an emblem of what for Rowan had always been unattainable, romantic even; that vast chaotic urban life which had before existed for him only in books. Now, however, the unattainable was becoming all too attainable” (*GFL*, p. 130). Due to his obstinate dwelling in the world of fantasies and his unwillingness to abandon it and face up to the sometimes bitter reality, Rowan fails to understand both the city and Tim, who for him inevitably becomes a detached, theoretical construct, too perfect in its abstract form to retain its quality when given some practical shape.

Letty’s states of mind are also closely linked to how she perceives the city, its life and its inhabitants. When she starts her affair with Andrew she suddenly feels free to do what she likes regardless of the prospective consequences for other people’s lives, and she identifies this careless and morally evasive freedom with the condition of the metropolis. “She would brave the city” (*GFL*, p. 65), she thinks when she finds it impudent to stroll around London on Andrew’s arm while she is still officially living with her husband, suggesting that her private morality, no matter how hypocritical, is superior to what she assumes to be a norm in the city. It is only the disclosure of what Andrew is really like that opens her eyes and she is able to look at the city in a less prejudiced way during her, now more and more frequent, long walks through the streets. Letty realises that her view of the city has been rather simplistic, and that its true nature could possibly be looked into only through its other dwellers, and so she keeps scrutinising the passers-by’s faces “as if they contained some secret of life which she might summon up within herself” (*GFL*, p. 115), looking for “signs of an unhappiness similar to her own” (*GFL*, p. 134), as only during these aimless wanderings without purpose “the fullness of the city presented itself to her” (*GFL*, p. 116). She strives to glance at herself in this great psychic mirror, and she soon understands this is impossible with the outwardly knowing but emotionally shallow and spiritually sterile Andrew. At this point, she seems to understand that the city’s vigour and energy stem not from the glamorous yet humanely blurred pomposity and vanity of the milieu of the rich and powerful, but from its common streets and the millions of ordinary people who inhabit them.

Letty’s city transforms, just as Ackroyd views it, into the sum of all its dwellers, their fates and experience, famous and ordinary alike, as these people transmute in her imagination into all the individual, defining features of modern

urban life, no matter how minute and insignificant as single entities they might appear in comparison with the vastness of the metropolis:

She saw all of these people on her journey, flashing across her vision so rapidly that they became types: they represented this city, they existed in no other place. The strength and the darkness of London had compressed itself into these tiny, wandering forms. She could have drowned in it, she thought. (*GFL*, pp. 134-135)

In this process of drowning she thus becomes part of the collective psyche of the city which, in effect, becomes a city of her mind, a telling reflection and indicator of the very state of her mind. When she feels abandoned and betrayed by Andrew, her despair is suddenly detectable from all she observes around, which intensifies her suffering but, at the same time, offers her certain comfort as “the whole city was undergoing some fundamental deterioration which marked its inhabitants like the evidence of some ugly disease” (*GFL*, p. 135). Paradoxically, her awareness that the city produces pain and distress not only in herself but in other people brings consolation to Letty, especially when she reaches a deadlock concerning the direction her personal life should take. Therefore, in Letty’s case the city assumes an ambivalent role - it is both a call for help and a source of rescue, a symptom of a malady as well as a means of its curing.

Once again, the parallel with Dickens’s *Little Dorrit* suggests itself here, as the mood and atmosphere of some of the novel’s city scenes reflect its author’s current state of mind. In the final days of 1885 Dickens worked on the depiction of the heroine’s passage through the wastes of London. It had been a hard year for the writer, he had been slowly recovering from a bad cold and eye infection, while simultaneously moving between London and Paris, and so he felt tired, overworked, and depressed, associating his distress with the urban milieu. And so, under these circumstances, he became absorbed in the gloomy tones of his narrative and it soon grew much beyond its intended scope: “The rushing tide and the shadows. The sounding of the clocks. The homeless. The drunken. The vision of Whitechapel Workhouse is here enlarged and deepened, bringing with it all of the weariness and sadness which Dickens now associated with the city (Ackroyd, 2002, p. 390). Such imagery resembles Rowan’s and Letty’s mental images of the city. It is notable that the text which serves Ackroyd as the thread sewing together the unfortunate fates of his London characters was in part written for autotherapeutic purposes, one in which the city becomes a self-reflective metaphor of not only its characters’ but also its author’s troubled psyche. The setting of *Little Dorrit* thus transforms into the city of the mind as much as that of *The Great Fire of London*, yet in positive as well as negative senses.

The character who has the most optimistic, almost cordial, attitude to the city is Spenser Spender. For him, London is an infinitely fascinating puzzle whose diverse mechanisms no one can ever fully know, but which is still worth exploring. He is very sensitive to those elements of the city which are somewhat mysterious, obscure, ambiguous, or which defy purely rational explication, such as, for instance, the pentagram formed by the imaginary line drawn between all of Nicolas Hawksmoor’s churches. Spenser also believes that Charles Dickens was one of the few who were close to understanding the city and its inhabitants’ ways and acts. As a film director, his ambition is to make a film about his beloved city which would authentically capture its spirit, and so he chooses to film Dickens’s *Little Dorrit*, from which he would remove all the parts that take place outside London. Having conceived this plan, he is already imagining the particular London scenes and sequences, as a result of which he becomes so excited that he suddenly sees himself as being part of one, great London tradition, linked with all its other inhabitants, present, past and future, which endows him with invincible vigour and vitality. Having reached an exceptionally perceptive state of mind, he feels himself in the focus of the city’s lines of force:

Spenser Spender was filled with a sensation of lightness, as though his own body were moving out, too, across the water, implicated in the lives of these human beings who trudged slowly through the dark. Each human figure seemed to emit its own brightness, so that the bridge itself resembled a line of energy, and one of irresistible momentum and sweetness. Spenser Spender was too elated to reflect then upon this experience; but he knew that it would remain with him, if he took care to nourish it. (*GFL*, p. 37)

Spenser becomes aware that belonging to this immense continuum of experience, wisdom and energy is not only unavoidable but, above all, beneficial for all those who are able and willing to recognise their role, cultivate it, and appreciate its consequences. Although rather intuitive and sensual than rational, Spenser’s realisation makes him the only person in the novel who can actually relish the city, one whose personality is the least susceptible to the impacts of its negative manifestations.

Spenser thus wishes his film to be a homage and a paean to London, a celebration of its diversity, energy and lack of

restraint. He is well aware that the challenge of such a film is to “give formal expression to this kaleidoscopic consciousness” and “the overlapping discontinuity” of the metropolitan life which must be, above all, based on “the multiplication of perspectives” as a means of “acknowledging the existence of simultaneous realities and also the condensation and intensification of time in the street” (Donald, 1995, p. 84). In order to capture these qualities, he is planning contrast the city and its most effective penal institution, as he believes that the city and the prison “were the ones which would lend it atmosphere and authority” (*GFL*, p. 106). As with the novel’s other characters, the idyll is violated by some aspect of the city’s life, in Spenser’s case by the Film Finance Board’s decision to substantially cut the funding of his film. And, like the other characters, he contemplates his sudden unhappiness while walking aimlessly and half absent-mindedly around London. At the moment of crisis, Spenser proves to be a much stronger personality, especially thanks to his open-minded and unbiased attitude to the city. He is aware it is his mind, not the milieu, that has been affected by the bad news: “The street seemed the same, the traffic crawled past in its usual manner, but Spenser’s relationship to the world has been subtly altered” (*GFL*, p. 153). Therefore, he is far from blaming the city for his misfortune but, on the contrary, he seeks support and refuge in it. However, he knows that the city can only help those who “deserve” it, in other words, only those who are mentally and emotionally strong and balanced enough to stand on their own feet. The shattered Spenser finds such balance in his love for Letty, which he finally realises after she leaves him. No matter how complicated the mechanisms of city life are, or at least appear to be, Ackroyd suggests that in order to cope with them people can always rely on the most essential, and thus universal, human and humanistic values, such as love, kindness and compassion towards other people. Equipped with a confidence and assertiveness springing from his regained love, feeling that his despondency “was replaced by a settled conviction that his own fate was simply one of millions upon millions tumbling upon each other like a mountain of crystals” (*GFL*, p. 155), Spenser is ready to move freely in his London again and fully enjoy this freedom of mind and spirit.

Once he feels comfortably embedded in the abstract, countless mass of people who have composed and will compose the might of the ongoing London tradition, it is at once easier for Spenser to accept his fate as part of common human destiny, and thus something natural and ultimately inescapable. He comes to understand that it is preposterous and pointless to fight or defy the city rather than to comply with its demands, and that a much more convenient strategy is to arrange for a contented personal life and make use of what the city has in stock for its inhabitants. If the city devours the weak and the insecure but caters for and props up the balanced and the self-assured, all one must do is to avoid being in the first category, and Spenser is suddenly filled with the persuasion that he is one of those who are capable of benefiting from the city’s bright sides:

And then he was startled by an irrational happiness that rose up in him. The structures of his problems and difficulties fell away, as the metal supports do from a rocket launcher. And that sense of harmony and completeness, which had rested with him on Charing Cross Bridge so many months before, returned now. He had walked for some miles, and when he looked back he saw the sky glowing with that orange which is the city’s reflected light. It was like a furnace burning and turning, destroying everything it touched, but becoming also a source of energy and light. (*GFL*, pp. 155-156)

Indeed, Spenser draws much of his creative and working energy from the city, and it is the city that gives him the strength and optimism for his planning of the final grand, panoramic London scene of his film, despite the restrictive financial measures of the film company’s financial managers. Though reconciled with the fact that his original project has been doomed, he still, at least in his imagination, projects a vision “of London, crowded, packed with life, with the figures of Little Dorrit, Mr Dorrit and Little Mother the simpleton moving haphazardly through the crowd – but not lost within that crowd, rather sustained by its energy and momentum, feeling the impetus of a shared life” (*GFL*, p. 157). Despite all the odds of his life, Spenser tries to comprehend, embody and creatively capture the very spirit of the city, to praise the power of its *genius loci* and the momentum of its *modus operandi*. As such, he could be potentially ranked among what Ackroyd labels “Cockney visionaries”, i.e. people whose fate as well as creativity stand prophetically ahead of their time and, simultaneously, are rooted in the essential London imagination, and whose work exemplifies what can be denoted a “London style” based on hyperbole and imaginative extremity, a measure of latent cynicism and aggression, an appetite for extravagance and theatricality (Ackroyd, 2004, pp. 307-308). All the more surprising then is the tragic fate which Ackroyd prepares for his hero, letting him die in a fire which burns down his film sets, symbolically ruining all his professional hopes and aspirations. The fictitious Great Fire of London thus also assumes a symbolic meaning apart from that of a mere physical catastrophe: “It destroyed much that was false and ugly, and much that was splendid and beautiful. [...] It was popularly believed to have been a visitation, a prophecy of yet more terrible things to come” (*GFL*, p. 165).

It is as if there was no justice in the London of the novel: on the one hand, the unhappy yet likeable characters such as Tim and Rowan are left without prospects or consolation, Little Arthur opens the doors of the prison for the other inmates to flow into the streets but himself stays motionless inside, and the only person who has shown some understanding and appreciation for the city dies during a futile attempt at saving the scenery from the fire. On the other hand, the irrational, subversive and obscure forces triumph: the insane Audrey manages to sabotage the sinister “conspiracy” of the outside world, the homeless vagrants complete their vendetta upon the indifferent and uncaring city, and the prisoners can enjoy, at least temporarily, the air of freedom. The role of the fire is ambiguous, like the nature of the city – it is destructive as well as cleansing, it brings about devastation as well as rebirth, evoking Ackroyd’s favourite image of a phoenix-like city, “translating itself and rising as other from its ashes to produce itself anew” (Wolfreys, 2004, p. 14). Yet, above all, it is a raised finger, a warning about what can happen if the heterogeneous elements of the city are suppressed, ignored and neglected for too long. Whether positive or negative in its effect, the event will irreversibly find its way into the city’s collective imagination and narrative heritage, eternalised in its countless retellings and renderings whose deliberate or unintentional altering of the original version will forever free it from any constraints of factual historicity.

3. “The pattern was one, within and without” – the City’s Irrational Manifestations

In order to explore the subversive undersides of the metropolis, most Ackroyd’s London novels are set in its poorer, less presentable, parts, especially in the East End, as for him the “eastern reaches of the city have come to represent again, as they did in the late nineteenth century, a spatial idea – a highly complex socio-political and economic microcosm of urban England” (Newland, 2008, p. 154), as well as “a microcosm of London’s own dark life” (Ackroyd, 2003, p. 665). His focus on the heterogeneous is reflected in his fascination with crime, most notably murder, typically committed in these areas of the city. In *The Great Fire of London*, crimes are committed by mentally deranged loners: Audrey’s arson and Arthur Feather’s child murder. In a severe fit of compulsive obsessive psychosis, the pitiable Little Arthur kills a little girl from the neighbourhood with a bread-knife when she resists his attempts to “save” her from those who control the spiteful and hostile world around. The roots of his harmed psyche can be traced to his childhood when, aged eight like his victim, he learns that he will not grow. For the rest of his life his stature exposes him to ridicule and scorn, mainly, yet not only, from other children, for whom he feels, perhaps because of their similar physiognomy, the greatest affinity, resulting in his paranoid mistrust of other people. Moreover, his feeling of isolation is intensified by the anonymity and emotional indifference of city life, which forces him to take refuge in the secure shell of his fantasies. Arthur chooses the girl also because her photo appeared in the local newspaper, which he cuts out, and gradually in his imagination he makes the girl into an almost consecrated embodiment of purity and innocence. The loss of his amusement arcade, the only objective source of happiness and fulfillment, caused by, for him abstract and undefined, economic forces, triggers his psychosis and he decides to act before the girl is “taken by them” (*GFL*, p. 42), too. Driven by his anxieties and persecution mania, he in fact does not wish to kill the girl but the demons of his desperate mind, which explains the peaceful and “unabashed” (*GFL*, p. 44) look on his face when the police find him lying in the park beside the girl’s corpse.

Paradoxically, the murder in a way really does set Arthur free despite his subsequent imprisonment: he eventually finds a soul mate and an accomplice in Pally, another unfortunate victim of the ruthless outside world, and discovers meaning in his life in fighting the wicked system, now materialised in the prison. “The lowly will be exalted” (*GFL*, p. 166), notes Arthur to Pally, foreseeing the carnivalesque effect of his completed defiance in the form of opening the prison cells by causing the electricity to cut off. The novel’s final scene thus assumes a larger, symbolic meaning of demonstrating the significance of the subversive forces for the city’s viability: Audrey and the tramps are taking delight in watching the fire devouring the hated city, the inmates are streaming out into the London streets towards freedom as “[n]o force on earth could have halted them, perhaps, in that moment when the system failed” (*GFL*, p. 169), while the cheerful Little Arthur is sitting among the cables in the empty prison. Short-lived and transient though such a situation and the happiness and relief it brings might be, it stills represents an alarming disruption of the customary practices, conventions and hierarchies of the city’s life. Such a reversal, Ackroyd suggests, is a vital reminder that the seamless-looking status quo is in fact rather fragile and far from taken for granted, and thus functions as a necessary catalyst of the city’s revival and reinforced continuance.

An incessant encountering and clashing of the rational with the irrational defines Ackroyd’s vision of London as he shares Donald’s (1995) conviction that the “uncanny specific to modern metropolis arises in the disquieting distinction between the city as object of government and the city as frame of mind” (p. 83). Therefore, some territories of his London, both real and fictitious, function like focal magnetic fields which for centuries have been

drawing and attracting certain kinds of people to live in them and certain events to happen there. These areas possess an exceptionally strong *genius loci* whose power allows the atavistic forces to repeatedly emerge and manifest themselves in them, as a result of which they have maintained their distinctive atmosphere and character. Ackroyd thus practices what Mengham (1999) calls an “archeology of the imagination” which explores “the historical layering of experience that has accumulated in a particular place” (p. 4). Spenser demonstrates that he is well-aware of this phenomenon when he is explaining to his wife why London should play an essential role in his film: “There’s something strange about London, love [...] That’s why the Romans built their ruins here and everything. I’m sure there is something to it, some kind of magic or something” (*GFL*, p. 16). The place which most emits such energies is the old, no longer used, wing of the prison where Spenser and his crew are shooting the film:

As they walked across the central area of the prison, or banged their cell doors, or ran up and down the metal staircases, to prearranged signals, a tremendous shout rang out. The landings shook under their feet, and the cries and noises echoed around the old building, sending the small birds screaming out through the roof. It was as if all the ghosts of the prison had risen up together, creating that bright, unearthly light which shone from the wing and corrupted the daylight outside. (*GFL*, p. 121)

The former site of confinement seems to harbour the spirit of its past inmates, as if spellbound by some age-old, vicious forces that still affect the actions taking place within its walls. The effect is similar to that of the acts committed by those who once inhabited the cells – the thwarting of other people’s plans, the breaking of laws and the violation of the steady order of things: and so the mysteriously loosened arc-light ruins the shooting of the crucial scenes inside the old prison, and, in the very same place, Little Arthur short-circuits the prison’s electric generator, opening thus the gate that safeguards the law-abiding citizens from those who pose a threat to their peaceful sleep.

The theme of the power of the *genius loci* goes hand in hand with an unorthodox understanding of time and how this concept of time manifests itself in and impacts the city. Ackroyd’s understanding of time comprises a combination of cyclical, spiral and labyrinthine organisation that resists traditional chronological temporality which distinguishes strictly between the past, present and future. In Ackroyd’s London events and actions reduplicate, echo and reinforce one another in recurrent cyclical or spiral patterns, their occurrence to a large extent controlled by the energies of the places where they happen rather than merely by chronological successiveness. Sometimes, however, these events and actions take place in a haphazard manner, and even though they still do tend to repeat, they do so in patterns rather random and chaotic than circular or spiral. This labyrinthine aspect is caused by the human factor: although what most people do is driven by the momentum of the cyclical space-time continuum, Ackroyd believes there are a few exceptionally strong personalities, his “Cockney Visionaries”, who manage to assert their visions and ideas in spite of these potent forces. Through their ability to defy the city’s tendency to shape its dwellers into its image, characters like John Dee, Nicolas Hawksmoor, Thomas Chatterton, William Blake and Charles Dickens add yet one more dimension to the psychophysical structure of the city. Ackroyd’s space-time model of his (not only) fictitious London is thus a very specific variant of the Bakhtinian chronotope, one in which space and time form intrinsically connected inseparable, complementary and mutually determining quantities (time being the fourth dimension of space), fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 184), that crucially affects both the happenings in the city and its presentation. As the chronotope functions as “the primary means for materializing time in space”, it also emerges as a crucial constitutive agent of the narrative, “as a force giving body to the entire novel” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 250). In this sense, Ackroyd’s London as a social space falls into the literary tradition of late modernity whose heterogeneous city “allows for multiple interpretations, multiple representations of space in the same site”, rather than to that of postmodern social space where only a few or even “no new concepts are applied, no vision of the city as a whole is produced” (Smethurst, 2000, p. 53).

In *The Great Fire of London* this complex model is only suggested and rather fragmentarily outlined, yet both the defining aspects of Ackroyd’s time, the circular/spiral and the labyrinthine, are presented in the novel. When Spenser is contemplating the sinister atmosphere of the old prison, he comes to the conclusion that the very existence of sites of confinement is a product of the city’s temporal cyclicity: “Such places will always exist – once the Marshalsea, now here. Only a small time – an historical moment – separated the two; and they represented the same appalling waste of human life. Nothing had really changed in society which had such places as its monuments” (*GFL*, p. 57). The two physically and temporarily different places are therefore connected through their metaphysical affinity, as they are merely two recurrent materialisations of the same mental conception, and as such they are in fact not separated by some substantial historical time distance. However, Spenser also feels himself part of a much less graspable pattern of the city, one defined by the third, human, dimension. When walking around the crowded streets, he has the sensation that other people “also, became part of him – as though he contained them all within himself at

the same time as they directed him forward. The pattern was one, within and without” (*GFL*, p. 37). This dimension makes the time structure of the city even more amorphous, directionless and unpredictable, rooted not only in its territorial properties, but also in its inhabitants’ imagination and creativity. Therefore, imagination and creativity, Ackroyd seems to propose, are the only means through which human beings can possibly make their imprint on the larger space-time framework of their existence.

The Great Fire of London presents the theme of literary London in relation to another favourite Ackroyd aspect of the city – its compulsive and persistent concern with the occult and the mystical. While some of Ackroyd’s later London novels literally revolve around the themes and motifs of occultism, occult rituals and practices, in his first novel the author’s approach to this subject matter appears more restrained, treating it rather within the notion of the city’s intertextual character. This is already suggested at the beginning of the novel, when the slightly drunk Spenser is trying to explain to his unconcerned wife why he believes Dickens best understood London and its inhabitants: “He was a great man, you know, he knew what it was all about. He knew that in a city people behave in different ways like, oh, I don’t know, like they were obsessed” (*GFL*, p. 16). It is as if Spenser talked about himself and some other characters from his story as they all give way to or even become addicted to some irrational obsessive mania, be it filming a book, seeking sexual adventures, fighting an abstract conspiracy or tracing the identity of their new internal voice. The connection between the literary and the occult is made clear during the seance Audrey attends and where, with the help of Miss Norman, a “clairvoyant and spiritual counsellor” (*GFL*, p. 38), passes out and starts speaking the words of Amy Dorrit, in spite of the fact that she has never read the novel. Later she even has fits when she becomes Little Dorrit, and “she would kneel on the floor, and pray for her father and for herself, pray to God that they would reap their just reward and that it would not be taken from them” (*GFL*, p. 113). The occult and the mystical therefore play a twofold role in the novel: while Spenser’s epiphanies when he comes to see himself part of London’s supra-temporal spiritual continuum enable him to understand the city and his own position in it better, Amy’s psychotic possession has a devastating effect upon her as she grows more and more insecure and paranoid about her own identity.

What Ackroyd shares with Dickens, among other things, is the conviction of the essentially theatrical nature of London, that “[s]pectacle and melodrama are intrinsic aspects of the London vision and thus, by extension, of the English imagination itself” (Ackroyd, 2004, p. 320). In *London: The Biography*, Ackroyd mentions a number of literati who commented on and relished the city’s theatricality, such as William Wordsworth, Charles Lamb, Thomas Babington Macaulay and James Boswell. The most notable of these, however, was Charles Dickens, for whom London “was the ‘magic lantern’ which filled his imagination with the glimpse of strange dramas and sudden spectacles” (Ackroyd, 2003, p. 142). In this view, the life of the city consists of an infinite number of more or less unrelated scenes in which the citizens temporarily turn into performers, assuming various roles, disguises and identities, which is why, Ackroyd believes, “London has always been considered to be the home of stock theatrical characters” (Ackroyd, 2003, p. 142). This theatricality reinforces another characteristic feature of the city’s public life – egalitarianism: the city as an anonymous stage helps to remove some of the social differences between individuals as it allows them to escape from their identities and, at least for a short while, to present themselves as the persons they would wish to be. The very plotline of *The Great Fire of London* in fact reflects this aspect of London, which even makes Gibson and Wolfreys (2000) claim that in the novel “we find not a real world but one composed of mannerisms, performances” trying “to show a city full of interlocking coincidences leading inexorably to tragedy” (p. 84), as it is constructed as a series of scenes, short performative spectacles with often very loose relevance to one another, and introduces a cast of characters insecure about their own identities, such as Rowan, Audrey and Letty, who try to find or recover their lost or wounded selves through assuming alternative roles in the city life.

Spenser at first tries to do without these little dramatic scenes from Dickens’s novel in his film since he considers them too pathetic and sentimental, but he soon realises how mistaken he has been: “It turned out that the melodramatic elements had been essential to the story of *Little Dorrit*, and Spenser had decided to make a cinematic virtue out of necessity by emphasising the theatrical, almost caricatured, elements in the plot” (*GFL*, pp. 105-106). He understands that it is the theatricality of the city that would lend his film both the right atmosphere and an air of authenticity. This is the reason why he also plans the last scene to be a complex, “final panoramic vision” (Ackroyd, 2003, p. 157) of London pulsing with life, conceived in a series of rather juxtaposed separate images or little performances which would dramatise and vivify the city’s energy and diversity. Ackroyd’s irony is that while Spenser’s film remains unfinished as the director dies and the final scene is never filmed, the novel does have a panoramic finale, though of a different kind and design, yet one that does not lack theatricality. The great fire becomes a focus around which several little scenes are staged: the tramps are cheering and drinking a toast to their

act of rebellion; in her trance, Audrey at first gapes at the fire and then starts running around, laughing insanely; Spenser throws himself into the flames in a vain attempt to save some of the film sets, watched by the motionless Rowan who is too afraid for his life to help him; and Rowan, annoyed by being stared at by Audrey and moved by his conscience, is turning tale to the fire site. It is a drama in which madness, rage and impulsiveness prevail, as if suddenly everything broke free from any rational control, a scene whose sole director is the city itself.

4. When Certain Things Follow from Other Things – Conclusion

Ackroyd's London is primarily a literary city whose texture is woven from a limitless number of texts it has produced or inspired to be produced. This city is distinctly intertextual and palimpsestic, as the individual texts are not only variously related to one another, but they are also layered on one another, each new text trying to rewrite some of the previously created ones. Therefore, his persistent "interrogation of the connection between identity and place is, simultaneously, an investigation of the referential capacities of literature" (Head, 2002, p. 202). In *The Great Fire of London*, the city's literariness is explored through the personality of Charles Dickens, whose work Ackroyd considers visionary if not genius, and his novel *Little Dorrit*. Dickens is here celebrated as a writer who indeed did understand London and the complicated mechanisms of the city's functioning, and as such becomes an object of both adoration and serious academic research (reflecting, in fact, Ackroyd's own attitude to the great Victorian writer). Moreover, his *Little Dorrit* not only inspires the structure and character construction of *The Great Fire of London* through the already mentioned plot and character parallelism, but it also, to various degrees, directly and indirectly, affects the fates of most of its main protagonists. Therefore, *The Great Fire of London* can be understood as a homage to Charles Dickens as a London writer, one of the few who was able to capture and render the city's spirit in his novels, and also able to portray the multifaceted and ambivalent personality of its dwellers.

Compared to Ackroyd's later novels, *The Great Fire of London* might at times appear to be a rather raw text, especially due to its explicit treatment of the theme of male homosexuality, which in his other works is either treated indirectly, with ironic distance, or only hinted at, the author's self-projection into one of the characters, and the story's bleak, or even hopeless, ending, which appears to offer very little prospect or consolation to the reader. However, seen in the same context, the novel proves central to understanding the fictional world of Ackroyd's best London novels as it presents his concept of the city by outlining its very founding features, namely London as a state of mind, the belief in the power of the spirit of a place and the related non-linear models of time, the city's literary and intertextual nature, a focus on its dark, occult, obscure, and otherwise subversive forces, a fascination with its crimes and criminality, and its essential theatricality. It is true that except for the first mentioned, these aspects are not elaborated on to a profound extent, which can perhaps be attributed to the fact that the aspiring novelist was trying to find his voice, as well as to establish and render his major theme, London, from as many perspectives as possible. Given the length of the text, some hundred and seventy pages, it logically means that most of these points of view are approached in a concise, random and episodic manner. On the other hand, his later London novels revolve around or accentuate only a selected few of these characteristic features, and so *The Great Fire of London* can be taken as a kind of "proto-text" containing all the major defining aspects of its author's fictional city, which are to be scrutinised in more in-depth ways in his subsequent novels, and establishing "many of the echoic principles upon which [his] subsequent fictions and biographies build" (Lewis, 2007, p. 18).

Such a construction of London inevitably evokes "a sense of both inheritance and broken filiations", as certain "privileged subjects of the city [...] provide a singular, momentary provisional identity to the city, which cannot be generalized" (Wolfreys, 2004, p. 127). *The Great Fire of London* depicts a city which is, above all, impossible to know or understand completely, it is not only a place and space, but also an ingenious mechanism and a complicated system of signification, a human construct which, through its various irrational manifestations, defies being subdued by the control of purely rational reason. "No one knows how a city works [...] But no one really knows what it's like. What has it done to me, or to you, Letty? What has it done to all the people in here?" (*GFL*, pp. 16-17), explains Spenser to his wife, by which he, on the one hand, shows an exceptional sensitivity towards the metropolis and its texture that is so foreign to the novel's other characters, but on the other hand, unconsciously anticipates his own tragic fate. The London of Ackroyd's first novel is a merciless urban milieu of potent and often contradictory forces, sparing no one, not even those who strive to approach it in an open-minded and unbiased manner. Yet, at the same time, Ackroyd suggests that the functioning of such a vast, multilayered and heterogeneous organism does follow a certain logic, though this might in some cases be of a different kind to that of people's habitual expectations and preconceptions. "This is not a true story, but certain things follow from other things" (*GFL*, p. 169), he concludes evasively, without being any more explicit concerning the mentioned causality. The statement thus, at this point,

reads more like a promise of further explorations and mappings of the city, a promise generously fulfilled in the author's mature works.

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Note

Note 1. In the subsequent references to *The Great Fire of London* the abbreviation *GFL* will be used in the parentheses before the page number.