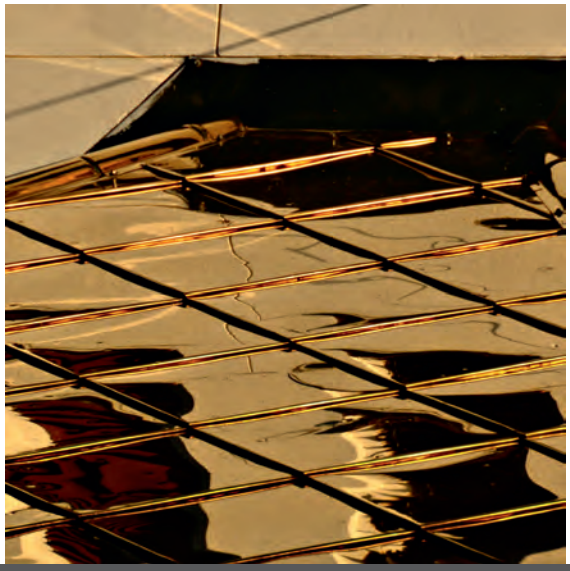
MEDIATED FICTIONS 6

Marta Komsta

Welcome to the Chemical Theatre

The Urban Chronotope in Peter Ackroyd's Fiction



PETER LANG
EDITION

Marta Komsta

Welcome to the Chemical Theatre

The book discusses the evolution of the urban chronotope in the selected novels by Peter Ackroyd, an acclaimed British author. The examined narratives illustrate the transformation from the postmodern tenets of historiographic metafiction into a unique urban mythopoetics by means of a semiotic analysis.

In her book, Marta Komsta meticulously analyzes the evolution of the urban chronotope in ten of Ackroyd's novels written over more than thirty years. In doing so, it takes an unusually nuanced position in the ongoing debate about postmodernism's relation to history, demonstrating how Ackroyd's flagrantly metafictional and performative works are at the same time deeply, complexly and sincerely historiographical.
John M. Krafft
Miami University, Ohio

This is an authoritative but accessible study of London as the place at the heart of Ackroyd's fiction. Deftly combining semiotic models of space with theories of theatricality, performativity, carnival and grotesque body in her insightful readings of his major novels, Komsta traces the evolution of Ackroyd's representation of the city from self-reflexive textualisation towards mythopoeic affirmation of its metaphysical dimension. She thus co-gently demonstrates that the palimpsestic urban chronotope constitutes the site of convergence for all the key elements of Ackroyd's exploration of multiple relations between the city, history and identity.
Grzegorz Maziarczyk
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Welcome to the Chemical Theatre

MEDIATED FICTIONS

STUDIES IN VERBAL AND VISUAL NARRATIVES

VOLUME 6

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Introduction:
The Urban Chronotope in Peter Ackroyd's Novels

1.

In the realm of alchemy, the Chemical Theatre is a potent symbol of balancing the seemingly incompatible. Described by Andrew J. Welburn as the "great imaginative theatre," it denotes a process of interpenetration in which fundamentally antithetical elements, "different natures," are allowed to co-exist within the net of various "references and allusions" (2). In his 1980 book, *The Chemical Theatre* (the title derives from a 17th-century collection of alchemical treatises), Charles Nicholl applies the same name to a process in which the alchemist attempted the "mounting of symbolical chemical events," "his vessel" constituting "an arena in which invisible and magical potentialities were visibly enacted" (6).

But there is more to the concept of the Chemical Theatre than just a haunting name; it is also a powerful metaphor of transformation through merging, of perfection enabled by the unification of individual elements. In Peter Ackroyd's 1992 novel *English Music*, one Timothy Harcombe recounts his childhood alongside the impoverished father, Clement, who struggles to support their dwindling household by conducting mediumistic séances at the Chemical Theatre, a dilapidated building in Hackney, London. The site of the old Theatre functions in the narrative as the locus of reminiscence: for the participants, the séance constitutes a ritual of remembrance in which they are allowed to reach out to the past and make peace with it. It is also a collective endeavour connected with the act of reclaiming their shared heritage, a ceremony of unification that enables each member of the audience to transcend mortality. The *place*

of the Chemical Theatre shelters, then, the *space* of the transcendental complemented with the sacred *time* that contravenes linear temporality.[1]

For Peter Ackroyd, a London-based writer and biographer, the city constitutes his personal Chemical Theatre as a palimpsestic literary structure capable of sustaining the pattern of collective cultural continuity. It is also a clear reference to Ackroyd's creative method based on incorporating numerous cultural associations within the framework of fiction, balancing the dense network of inter- and intratextual allusions with the metaphysical supra-layer of meanings. In effect, the city is the driving force behind his work, a multilayered meaning-generator which bestows identity upon those individuals who are endowed with the vision of cultural entirety. Born in 1949 in London, Ackroyd, whose readers are repeatedly challenged with a paradoxical combination of intertextual games of hide-and-seek with the metaphysical striving towards the divine, has become something of an institution on the British literary scene. Anyone attempting to face the writer's immense (and ever growing) oeuvre should prepare for a complex and often confusing collection of novels, poems, scathing literary and film reviews (from the times when Ackroyd became the youngest editor in the history of *The Spectator*), short stories, essays, biographies, and rewritings of the classics of English literature (as well as children's books and TV shows), produced at an almost frightening pace.[2] His passion for research (symbolised by Ackroyd's critically acclaimed *London: The Biography,* which has the ambiguous honour of being the book that almost killed its author) has given the writer the reputation as "our own, contemporary John Stow," epitomizing an almost obsessive encapsulation within the letters of the

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1 In *Space and Place* Yi-Fu Tuan identifies space as inherently open and devoid of any prefigured meanings, "a blank sheet" to be endowed with signification (54). Place, on the other hand, is an "enclosed and humanized" space, constituting as a result "a calm center of established values" (54). The idea of physical enclosure is important here since it points to the interconnectedness of the two concepts: *place* contains *space* in a transcendental relationship between the tangible and the abstract in Ackroyd's novels.

2 Ackroyd openly admits to an unremitting writing schedule throughout the entire year; a good example of the writer's formidable work ethic is his bipartite 'division of labour': "I tend to work two or three books ahead. [...] Normally the idea is that I alternate prose fiction with ordinary prose narratives. So that has technical reasons because I do novels in the morning and in the afternoons I research for the next book or biography" (qtd. in Schütze 166).

past combined with the inveterate propensity for exploring various aspects of one's historical heritage (Self, "Don't have").[3]

His repeated attempts to establish multiple connections between the then and the now have allowed critics to classify Ackroyd as a writer belonging to the broad current of historiographic metafiction, a term coined by Linda Hutcheon for a typically postmodernist literary model that "in an ironic and problematic way […] acknowledges that history is not the transparent record of any sure 'truth'" (129).[4] Ackroyd has been incorporated into what has been branded "The New Historical Fiction" (Suzanne Keen) or "British Historiographic Metafiction" (Susana Onega), a literary trend emerging in Britain in the 1980s which "tells stories about [the] past that point to multiple truths or the overturning of an old received Truth, mixes genres, and adopts a parodic or irreverently playful attitude [to] history over an ostensibly normative mimesis" (Keen, "The Historical Turn" 171).[5] Along with other texts of the same period by John Fowles, Graham Swift, A.S. Byatt, Martin Amis, Kazuo Ishiguro and Julian Barnes, Ackroyd's novels have been described as "characterized by a foregrounding of the historical consciousness, most often through a dual or even multiple focus on the fictional present and one or more crucial 'pasts'" (Janik, "No End").[6]

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3 In 1999, immediately after writing the monumental London biography Ackroyd was taken to hospital and diagnosed with a heart attack. "London very nearly killed me. [...] Perhaps the city, which I regard as an organic being in its biography, wanted my death as payment," he commented later (qtd. in Lewis 1).

4 John Peck observes that "Ackroyd is a writer with an interest in the past, who is skilled at historical reconstruction, but who is more than just an historical novelist as he is concerned with larger questions about the relationship between the past and the present" (442).

5 Conversely, Janik observes that Ackroyd's novels should rather be treated as "the new type of historical novel[s]" which transcend the limitations of the postmodernist approach by means of "an affirmation of the importance of history to the understanding of contemporary existence" ("No End").

6 It is generally accepted that the publication of Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* in 1969 marks the beginning of the new turn in British historical fiction, followed in the 1980s by a surge of novels that reconsider the approach to history. Brian Finney describes the trend as based on "deconstructing traditional history's controlling myths" while the said narratives "refrain from substituting their own controlling myths" (18). Apart from Ackroyd's early narratives, other representatives typically include Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983), Julian Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), and Kazuo Ishigu-

Nevertheless, the tenets of historiographic metafiction produce certain disadvantages that originate precisely from its supposed advantages, namely the insistence on the plurality of historical perspectives, heterogeneity, the sense of parody and playing "in" literature. According to Susana Onega, "[b]y depriving history of its pretensions to absolute truth, the New Historicists and the postmodernist creative writers after them have negotiated the reunification of self and world, but have apparently simultaneously deprived this reunification of ultimate significance" ("British" 52). The postmodernist derision of meaning has not been lost on Ackroyd, who persistently refuses to be branded a postmodernist. "I have never really internalized that belief," he says in an interview, claiming instead that he belongs to "[a] certain kind of London Cockney tradition which combines farce, pathos and melodrama" (qtd. in Schütze 172). The sense of constituting part of a greater cultural whole is a recurrent trope in Ackroyd's work based on the concept of "English sensibility" which the writer himself has repeatedly identified as the core idea in his texts (Ackroyd, "Englishness" 340). Conveyed by the image of the artistic "line of force," the most pervasive element of the English cultural legacy, Ackroyd's oeuvre foregrounds a process of intense cultural exploration in which the writer's sense of Englishness is a compass guiding him towards the aspects of national heritage that he considers fundamental to its sustenance (Ackroyd, "Englishness" 340).

First and foremost, though, Peter Ackroyd is an urban writer, for whom the city, "the landscape of [his] imagination," constitutes the central meaning-generating mechanism in his writing ("London Luminaries" 346). Hailed as "the Pearly King of [the] metropolitan novelists," Ackroyd seems to have established an intensely intimate relationship with the city (Lewis 181); according to Barry Lewis, "London is never just a passive setting in [Ackroyd's] books but a major presence and determinant of the events that unfold through the windings of time in its streets and suburbs" (181). One of the key aspects of Ackroyd's approach to London is a particular sort of its dwellers: the artists whom he calls "Cockney visionaries." Such men (and it would seem *only* men: William Blake, William Turner, William Hogarth, Dan Leno, to name a few) retain and pass forward a unique "London sensibility," based on merging "pathos and comedy, high tragedy and low farce" (Ackroyd, "London Luminaries" 345). Considered together, these artists represent

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ro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989). For further information, see Malcolm, "That Impossible Thing," Bradford, "The Novel Now" and Bentley, "Contemporary Novel."

"a definite pattern of continuity" (Ackroyd, "London Luminaries" 346) correlated with a "London visionary tradition" (Onega, "Interview").[7] Ackroyd regards himself as an heir to the legacy of the city:

> I often wondered where my novels came from – or rather, I knew where they came from, but I never understood why they took the form which they did. I am always accused of mixing the comic with the serious, of creating theatrical caricatures, of treating fiction as if it were some kind of intellectual or cultural pantomime. This puzzled me because I really couldn't help myself. It just happened. Now, at last, I know why it happened. I was coming into my inheritance. (Ackroyd, "London Luminaries" 346)

The theme of retaining one's heritage and drawing a pattern that provides the individual with a sense of belonging to a greater whole constitutes one of the fundamentals of Ackroyd's approach to literature, broadening the perspective imposed by historiographic metafiction. At the same time, Ackroyd's insistence on the significance of the relationship between the city and its inhabitants makes him one of the most significant urban novelists in Britain.

2.

Despite a plethora of critical analyses, there are few more relevant comments on Peter Ackroyd's oeuvre than Barry Lewis' remark on the writer's 1992 novel *English Music,* which the critic praised for highlighting "a close association with place, a love of theatrical spectacle, and an acute awareness of historical and cultural continuity" (66). It is, indeed, an apt synopsis of Ackroyd's "territorial imperative" (qtd. in Lewis 128): the city becomes a stage upon which the writer's games with history take place during the process of creating "transhistorical

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7 "All of them were preoccupied with light and darkness, in a city that is built in the shadows of money and power; all of them were entranced by the scenic and the spectacular, in a city that is continually filled with the energetic display of people and institutions. They understood the energy of London, they understood its variety, and they also understood its darkness. But they are visionaries because they represented the symbolic dimension of existence in what Blake called 'Infinite London' – in this vast concourse of people they understood the pity and mystery of existence just as surely as they understood its noise and its bustle." (Ackroyd, "London Luminaries" 346-347)

connectedness," a pattern of cultural unity developed throughout English history (Onega, *Metafiction* 107).[8]

The notion of theatricality, the performative nature of the city, is the cornerstone of Ackroyd's understanding of the idea of the polis. What the writer apprehends as "a native English spirit" ("Englishness" 328) emphasises his predilection for "a certain kind of romantic or melodramatic vision, for high spirited heterogeneity, for theatricality, for spectacle" (335). Harking back to the Catholic tradition, the English love of ritual encompasses an act of carnivalesque defiance against the Protestant rite through the infusion of "the pantomimic, the theatrical, the scenic and the spectacular" (336). The intrinsically English amalgam of the comic and the serious underlies Ackroyd's carnivalesque understanding of the nature and function of fiction *sensu* Bakhtin, in which various modes of discourse and semiotic binaries come together in a flurry of meanings engendered by and within a great city.[9] The city is immersed in the temporal flux of "*becoming* constantly," for the past

8 Susana Onega observes that "Ackroyd attempts to transcend the modernist 'inward turn' along the lines set by Pound and Eliot, that is, by postulating the transcendental component of writing [i.e., an Absolute Logos (MK)]. However, unlike the high modernists, he will find it extremely difficult to make the crucial act of faith, to pledge his trust in the existence of an absolute and transcendental ideal world outside or beyond the textual world itself, so that, in keeping with the contradictory nature of postmodernism, his novels characteristically hesitate between pattern and randomness, unity and fragmentation, paradoxically managing to affirm and deny simultaneously the possibility of transcendence" (*Metafiction* 19). It seems thus, as Onega asserts, that the only valid way of balancing the eponymous "metafiction" with "myth" is to accept the co-existence of both elements as a necessary condition of understanding Ackroyd's novelistic output, which the critic describes as discovering one's own "transcendental ladder to heaven" in a "numinous experience" of reading Peter Ackroyd (191). For Onega London might be described as "the cultural palimpsest gathering together the wisdom of the English race at large," implying that Ackroyd "suggests that the recovery of the lost wisdom is the necessary prerequisite for a true understanding of the plight of contemporary man" (32). The city, therefore, becomes a text to be decoded by the uniquely gifted individuals (the aforementioned Cockney visionaries) in a painstaking process of both textual and transcendental recovery.

9 As Adriana Neagu states, "[i]n Ackroyd's poetic reasoning, elements of an English Catholic culture live on in the continuing predilection of English artists for ancient forms of creativity based on imitation, the predisposition for showmanship, the music hall tradition, pantomime and vaudeville, pantaloonery […]" (223). For further information, see Susana Onega's "Interview" and Suzanne Keen's "Peter Ackroyd and Catholic England."

makes itself known through various traces, apparitions, signs and signals that "maintain themselves and reiterate themselves, even while those traces are themselves transformed through temporal transmission, so that each 'memory' becomes a palimpsest of its earlier manifestation, while also being a translation" (Wolfreys 21). London seems then a construct, an entity that defies any attempts at "generalization, summarization, or finite identification," being innately resistant to any form of thematization or categorization (4).[10] Generically, Ackroyd's novels are often hybrids of various forms and modes, frequently relying on ontological disruptions in order to produce the effect of "stylistic heteroglossia and recursive structure," typical of carnivalised literature (McHale 172).[11] What Gibson and Wolfreys call "ludic destabilization" (9) is therefore an indication of Ackroyd's serio-comic mode, in which the comic element "breaks down boundaries between forms [and] plays with the identities for which it has no respect [;] its playful laughter is not produced in the same manner each and every time, and yet it produces its effects constantly" (15). In effect, even the most disruptive of Ackroyd's texts reveal the profoundly carnivalesque paradigm based on the dialogue between the postmodernist vision of the city-text and the metaphysical allure of the Eternal City.[12]

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10 The intensely spectral vision of the city does not, however, account for the inherent intricacy and, more importantly, the extensive *materiality* of the megalopolis since, as Sebastian Groes expounds in his rebuttal of Wolfreys' phantom urbanscape, London "can never be reduced to an abstract theory or to hyper-reality [...]: the weight of its history, its Old World heritage and its unending materiality are too much there, too much present" (3). The omission of the very notion of materiality results therefore in failure to confront London, leaving instead only a patchwork of allusions and intertextual traces to be followed in a futile and frustrating ghost hunt. Absent here are the sensuous vitality of the great city, its creative potential and restorative powers that have allowed it to survive the calamities and hardships of the past, the image of the city as the living tangible force continually reshaping itself in an intertwined process of birth and demise.

11 According to McHale, "a recursive structure results when you perform the same operation over and over again, each time operating on the product of the previous operation" (112). Narratively, recursive structures typical of postmodernist fiction involve strategies such as "the specter of infinite regress" (114) or *trompe-l'oeil* based on "deliberately misleading the reader into regarding an embedded, secondary world as the primary, diegetic world" (115).

12 Jeremy Gibson and Julian Wolfreys' *Peter Ackroyd. The Ludic and Labyrinthine Text* (2000) focuses on the notion of *game* in literature, which they see as the only plausible approach in their reading of the writer's poems, novels and biographies. Given

The following study is a semiotic investigation of the development of the urban spatiotemporal model in Ackroyd's fiction, aiming to answer one crucial question: what does the city actually *do* in the selected novels? The goal is first and foremost to map the narrative strategies of appropriating the city as the semiotic urban engine of the presented realities through the aforementioned metaphor of the Chemical Theatre. The place/space of the Chemical Theatre is a gateway into a different mode of reality that allows for the transformation of the attendants, a singular chronotope endowed with unique spatiotemporal qualities.[13] Established by Mikhail Bakhtin, the concept of the chronotope delineates "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" and constitutes one of the foundations of Bakhtin's approach to the novel as the ultimate expression of man's search for dialogue with the world ("Forms" 84).[14] The idea of the chronotope is based on a relationship between time and space, both concepts

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Ackroyd's attention to pastiche and parody," the argument goes, "the relationship to literary culture and tradition expressed through his writing is yet one more game, one more ruse in the labyrinthine play of his texts. If the heritage is there, it is exploited as being an improper and broken heritage" (3). Thus, if there is no possibility of ascertaining meaning in the texts, the city by default becomes an entity beyond fixed definitions. Gibson and Wolfreys explore the implicit indeterminacy of the urban landscape by examining the relationship between the author and his city as an endless game of searching for the ungraspable. For Gibson and Wolfreys the entire point of reading Ackroyd's urban texts lies in making one aware of the sheer futility of searching for fixed meaning(s), since one may try to assume certain relationships ("to trace the unreadable, in the effort to make connections" [172]) but never take them for granted. However, their study runs the risk of becoming ultimately a highly reductive approach to Ackroyd's fiction in which there is the game and nothing but the game, a whirlwind of meanings that does not provide a totalising image. Sebastian Groes makes a valid point by stating that such "foregrounding of Ackroyd's purported interest in purposelessness takes away the possibility of attributing any value or meaning to the works beyond the author's cleverly-clever free play. The texts, ultimately, mean nothing" (136).

13 Ackroyd's tripartite model of *place-space-time* bears a semblance to Gaston Bachelard's investigation of the relationship among the said components. In the case of both Ackroyd's Chemical Theatre and Bachelard's seminal metaphor of the house, linear temporality is replaced with the sacred time of personal experience and memory ("the theater of the past"), accessible only through the intimate *space* within the house (8).

14 For further information, see, for example, *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory* (eds. Ken Hirschkop and David Shepherd) or *Bakhtin in Contexts. Across the disciplines* (ed. Amy Mandelker).

connected with a specific literary genre where "spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole" (84). As the constitutive element of the narrative's reality, the chronotope denotes not only the entirety of spatiotemporal relations, but also, according to Carol Emerson and Gary Saul Morson, a particular event or a place within the presented world, "a condensed reminder of the kind of time and space" that is associated with the given genre (374). Thus, the model of the Chemical Theatre (and its various representations examined in the subsequent chapters of this book) exemplifies what Emerson and Morson call "a chronotopic place," reflecting the spatiotemporal mechanics of the novel in question (374).[15]

Equally useful is Paul Smethurst's concept of the postmodern chronotope, which is intensely spatialized in comparison to the original concept that assumed the balance of spatial and temporal elements. "In postmodern culture the emphasis is more on the spatial component of spatio-temporal relations," Smethurst argues, and consequently, "[i]n the postmodern novel, this change of emphasis entails a different organization of the novel's chronotope […]" (39). Smethurst also observes that "[p]ostmodern place suffers from (is enabled by) post-structuralist thinking" (54), permeated by "signs of nostalgia for the values or transcendent signifiers which would provide meaning in texts, and roots and belonging in places" (54-55). Simultaneously, the temporal dimension has undergone a significant vectorial change; in his analysis of Ackroyd's novel *Hawksmoor*, Smethurst postulates the importance of "non-directional forms of time" (19), indicating the rejection of linear temporality:

> The chronotope of such novels [i.e., postmodern (MK)] either reverses the arrow of time, or juxtaposes historically discontinuous time frames. The nature and direction of time is a major theme in these novels, and this is not only to look back to pre-modern concepts of cyclical time, whether

15 The close association between the given chronotope and the particular genre runs the risk of becoming narrowed down to what Michael Holquist considers "a formal feature," a fossilized element of genre analysis, resistant to any kind of generic diversification or heterogeneity (110). In our understanding, a chronotope does not thus denote a genre-restricted model of approaching time and space within a narrative, but rather an entirety of spatiotemporal relations present within an individual text, not necessarily connected with the genre as a whole. Such a stance seems of particular use in the following analyses as Ackroyd's novels constitute an amalgam of different genres and discourses, making the clear-cut division into separate sub-chronotopes difficult, if not entirely impossible.

> magical, mythological or 'natural,' but also to look to the present, especially to models of space-time developed in physics and cosmology. (Smethurst 179)

Smethurst's conclusions about the representations of timespace in contemporary postmodern fiction are linked to Ackroyd's aforementioned territorial imperative in which the city becomes the locus of his major novels and the dominant spatial presence endowed with the ability to manipulate and distort conventional temporality.[16] In contrast to Smethurst's diagnosis of a typically postmodernist malady of multisignificance, Ackroyd's novels postulate an image of the city in which the semiotic multiplicity of the urbanscape becomes paradoxically the only way to approach any kind of meaningful cultural totality *sensu* Lotman. The city, Yuri Lotman contends, is "a melting pot of texts and codes, belonging to all kinds of languages and levels"; it constitutes "the place of hybridization, recodings, semiotic translations, all of which makes it into a powerful generator of new information" (194). The quintessentially palimpsestic nature of the urbanscape is intertwined with the underlying process of constant renewal: the city is "forever recreating its past" (Lotman 195) as a self-begetting mechanism that defies any uniformity and invites creative self-reappropriation through the "semiotic encounters" of varying intensity which condition its cultural preservation (Lotman 194). Lotman's insistence on the heterogeneity of the city is therefore of particular importance to our approach to the urban representations in Ackroyd's novels where the chronotope of the city reveals the semiotically polymorphous urban space aligned with recursive temporality in the process of continuous rejuvenation.[17]

16 With the exception of *First Light, Milton in America* and *ż* that are set in Dorset, North America and Turkey respectively.

17 Conversely, in his comparative study, *Recalling London. Literature and History in the work of Peter Ackroyd and Iain Sinclair*, Alex Murray juxtaposes the two writers as instances of a conservative/passive (Ackroyd) and an anarchistic/active (Sinclair) understanding of the capital's cultural and historical potential. As for the former, Murray concludes, "the unwillingness to engage explicitly with contemporary cultural politics, his attempt to replace the hegemony of empirical history with conservative myth, resulted in a potentially reactionary and conservative form of cultural engagement" (172). Ackroyd's work produces what Murray calls a "blue-plaque London," a static rendition of the city based on "a potential fetishization of place" that leads to "the recollection of a potentially safe and secure version of the past" (5). For Murray, the writer's urban explorations are something of a guided tour in which "Ackroyd's fiction is responding to

We will also make extensive use of Lotman's concept of *semiosphere,* denoting "the whole semiotic space of the culture in question" (Lotman 125). The concept of semiotic space where the mechanism of producing meaning operates (semiosis) is essential in the analyses of the subsequent spatiotemporalities as meaning-generating systems in which spatial and temporal variations account for shifts in meaning. It should therefore be accentuated that we will be employing the concept of semiosphere as a symbolic space imposed upon the geographical map of the city. The notions of *centre*, *periphery* and *boundary* will be used, the terms designating the spatial and temporal practices that change depending on their position upon the semiotic map of a given text. For Lotman, the semiotic centre is "rigidly organized and self-regulating," denoting its inflexibility and authoritarian character (134); thus, places associated with officialdom and its discourse will belong to the centre. The periphery, on the other hand, represents an "area of semiotic dynamism" that challenges and subverts the central discourse (Lotman 134). This is what Lotman calls "a night-time world" (141), indicating "chaos, the anti-world, unstructured chthonic space, inhabited by monsters, infernal powers or people associated with them (140). The periphery is the fitting environment for the carnivalesque *sensu* Bakhtin, since the sites representing it stand out in the 'normalized' setting by displaying a transgressive disposition towards social regulations (taverns, brothels), by being populated by people cast aside by the rest of society (prisons, hospitals, shelters, mental asylums) or simply by being connected to the world of amusement, often of dubious quality (funfairs, circuses, music halls). The place/space of the carnivalesque is thus inextricably related to the presence of the Other, constituting a sanctuary for the repressed and rejected.[18]

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hegemonic historical discourses in contemporary Britain" (15). As a result, "the textual world retreats into sites and archetypes, into forms of traditional knowledge that, stripped of any certainty by the infinite ludic nature of textual practices, return to a traditional and potentially conservative representation of the past" (8).

18 The all-encompassing cosmic context of the carnival in which "the differences are temporarily obliterated and transgression becomes mainstream and all are involved" (Jenks 173) is simultaneously aligned, its inherently subversive nature grounded in the anti-establishment practices of uprooting social hierarchy as "[t]he laws, prohibitions and restrictions which determine the system and order of normal, i.e. non-carnival, life are for the period of carnival suspended; above all, the hierarchical system and all the connected forms of fear, awe, piety, etiquette, etc. are suspended" (Bakhtin, *Problems* 101). Semiotically, it could be argued, the core aspect of the carnivalesque is the ambivalence

Between the centre and periphery one will find the *boundary* that constitutes the most potent element of a given semiosphere as far as semiosis is concerned: "the place where what is 'external' is transformed into what is 'internal', […] a filtering membrane which so transforms foreign texts that they become part of the semiosphere's internal semiotics while still retaining their own characteristics" (Lotman 136-137). Since Ackroyd's characters are frequently situated at the boundary between the centre and the periphery, we will analyse how the urban chronotope reconstructs them in alignment with its current dominant. Eventually, by examining the relationship between the texts' constitutive spatiotemporalities and their semiotic load, we will investigate the given semiosis. The opposed chronotopes will therefore facilitate the establishment of meaning in the discussed narratives.

The goal is thus two-fold: we intend to delineate the development of the spatiotemporal design of the city from the postmodernist representation based on notions of textuality and performativity to the synthetic urban model that incorporates the metaphysical aspect; furthermore, it is our contention that the relationship between the city and its inhabitants is an example of semiotic dynamization of the protagonists whose individual chronotopes are correlated with the spatiotemporal evolution of the city. Thus, the structure of both components is interdependent: as seen by the narrator, the capital and the characters remain in a state of perpetual symbiosis in which the former reflects the structure of the latter, and vice versa.

All in all, the general aim of this study is to provide a dynamic perspective on Ackroyd's ever-fluctuant literary experience of the urbanscape from the postmodernist vision of an urban prisonhouse to the liberating vastness of the Eternal City.[19] The narratives discussed in this book foreground a full-fledged model of urban reality, a unique semiosphere endowed with specific spatiotemporal qualities constituting a meaning-producing chronotope. Starting with Ackroyd's 'most' (for lack of a better word) postmodernist narratives in the first chapter, we

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and plurality of meanings engendered by the juxtaposition of the semiotic binaries which ultimately leads to the upheaval and reversal of the dominant discourse.

19 In Ackroyd's urban novels, Onega contends, "the city is conceived in Blakean terms both as a physical and as a mythical space, a transhistorical palimpsest incessantly crisscrossed by generation after generation of Londoners and collectively thought into being by them as a character in her own right, a living body whose physical and spiritual health varies with and replicates that of her inhabitants" ("'Contrary'" 185).