

**LEARNING TO LIVE, LEARNING TO DIE:
WRITING AS MOURNING AND/OR FRAUD
IN PETER ACKROYD'S *THE LAMBS OF LONDON***

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Abstract: *In The School of the Dead (1994), Hélène Cixous investigates the kinship between writing and death by recalling Montaigne's famous perspective of philosophy, which identifies philosophizing with dying. This paper suggests a reading of Peter Ackroyd's Lambs of London in the light of Cixous's approach, juxtaposed with her "friend" (φίλος) Jacques Derrida's contributions on memory, mourning and ethics as "learning to live from the ghosts". Accordingly, the novel will be explored as a literary topos of Mnemosyne, through which the author revives the admiration and longing for Shakespeare, by resurrecting the ghosts of William Ireland, Mary and Charles Lamb.*

Keywords: *Derrida, hauntology, hermeneutic mourning, mimesis, Mnemosyne, Peter Ackroyd*

1. Introduction

“ ‘There is no secret,’ I replied, ‘ unless it is the secret of the whole world in which the elements are intermingled.’ ”
“The House of Doctor Dee”

Peter Ackroyd, one of the most prolific writers in contemporary English literature, has also acquired the reputation of a playful novelist. His playfulness as an author is not limited to his use of language, but defines a peculiar capacity to interweave genres. Jeremy Gibson and Julian Wolfreys' *Peter Ackroyd: The Ludic and Labyrinthine Text* constitutes a guide for critics and readers alike, meant to facilitate the deciphering of his authorial style:

Ackroyd plays constantly: within a given text, across his own texts, and between the texts which his name signs and those to which he alludes, from which he cites or otherwise borrows, often wittily, with knowing gestures of pastiche and parody, as much from a sense of fun or jest as out of a sense of respect and inheritance. He plays quite seriously between the conventional constraints of the novel and biography, so as to interanimate and contaminate the genres respectively. He plays too on expected values and meanings, toying with the commonsensical, with convention and received wisdom. (Gibson, Wolfreys 2000: 9)

Ackroyd's toying with genres, history, and fiction inevitably and/or intentionally construes a labyrinthine path connecting the past and the present. *The*

Lambs of London was published four years after the critical work mentioned above. The 2004 novel easily fits into the spectrum of texts discussed by the two critics, and thematically and stylistically fits the overall points of interest in Ackroyd's oeuvre.

Nevertheless, in light of the critical claims made by Gibson and Wolfreys (2000: 14), *The Lambs of London* is also open to new interpretations as "the singular example of 'a work of literature' which must be respected in all its singularity, and which cannot be controlled according to some thematic horizon of expectation."

For this reason, the present paper aims to argue that, within its singularity, *The Lambs of London* belongs to and embellishes the unconventional continuity of Ackroyd's remarkable ludic spirit: firstly, via his revisitations of the past and secondly, by obscuring the boundaries of authorship in the context of the notorious story of a literary fraud. The theoretical framework of the current reading will employ two well-known Derridean concepts. The first is hauntology, which I understand in the ethical context, as a specific way of being-with-others that entails past and future generations. In the introduction to *Specters of Marx*, Derrida (2006: xvii) defines ethics as a process of learning how to live from the ghosts of the past and of the future. In the following chapters, he introduces *hauntology* and elaborates on the necessity of speaking to and with the ghost, with several references to Shakespeare. The second concept that I will employ is *hermeneutic mourning* and its associations with memory, as offered by Derrida in *Memoires for Paul de Man* (Derrida 1989: 7). In order to illuminate the juncture between writing as hermeneutic mourning and hauntology, I will also draw on selected aspects of Hélène Cixous's work. As a philosopher friend of Derrida's, she also elaborated on the relationship between writing and death. In view of these combined perspectives, the present paper will offer a reading of *The Lambs of London* with a theoretical approach based upon the significant bond that connects writing, death, memory, and mourning.

2. Writing with ghosts

In *The School of the Dead*, which is the first part of *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, Cixous (1994: 7) notes: "To begin (writing, living) we must have death". Recalling Montaigne's words that philosophizing is learning to die, she (idem: 9-10) claims that "writing is learning to die". According to her (idem: 12-13), "in the inseparable relationship of the death of the I and the other, writing originates". Yet, writing is not merely about dying, but it is also an opportunity for being the guardian, the friend, and the regenerator of the dead (idem: 13). In an earlier text titled *Coming to Writing*, Cixous (1991: 3) describes writing as a "way of leaving no space for death, of pushing back forgetfulness, of never letting oneself be surprised by the abyss". The current reading claims that this is what Ackroyd mostly achieves in his novels, such as *Hawksmoor* (1985), *Chatterton* (1987), *Dan Leno and The Limehouse Golem* (1994), and *The Lambs of London* (2004). He creates a labyrinthic chronotope, where he is able to resurrect the dead poet, dead artist, dead novelist or the dead philosopher. He writes and rewrites the historico-literary events of London, he dialogizes his own narration by reviving great historical names, authors such as James Joyce, Thomas Chatterton, Dan Leno, Karl Marx, Thomas De Quincey, and, of course, William Shakespeare. Ackroyd, as a novelist with a confessed obsession with ghosts, pens his own

literature for the future as the literature of speaking to and with the ghosts. The author's playfulness and labyrinthine narration transcend the boundaries of a chronological past and present by an interplay of imagination, fiction, and history. As Ganteau (2021: 1065) formulates it, "Ackroyd's ethics and aesthetics of chronological resonance cannot be content with the constrained idiom of phenomenal realism."

Albeit concerned with and defined by the relationship with death as both conceptual and implacable reality, it is worth pointing out at this juncture that the conversational and non-fictional writings between Cixous and Derrida occurred while both philosophers were still alive. Neither philosopher had to wait for the other's death for the textual friendship to blossom, most probably because they had already invested a lot in attempting to tackle the various ways of commemorating the past and the entire literature of the dead. They both seemed to agree on the unavoidable bond between death/mourning/memory and writing. According to Cixous's *School of the Dead* (1994), the first moment of writing is that in which the writer learns not only to die but also to mourn, and this can also be understood as life itself. Ackroyd, as a novelist, also rediscovers his life in his mourning and re-membering the past, namely in the history of literature. From this perspective, it seems even more fitting to focus on *The Lambs of London*, since one of the protagonists of the novel, William Henry Ireland, is not only a real historical literary persona, but also a *quasi*-Shakespeare for a defined moment in history. William Ireland's multi-layered persona thus stands as the most representative character for exploring the possible associations of mourning, memory, and ghosts with writing.

3. The ghostly fraud

The Lambs of London, published in 2004, is a novel by Ackroyd within the literally literary chronotope of 19th century London; its plot draws its substance from William Ireland's meeting with two other historico-literary siblings, Mary and Charles Lamb. Their roads cross because of their shared-obsession, Shakespeare. When William Ireland discovers a book (Greene's *Pandosto*), which was claimed to be the one Shakespeare had read before writing *A Winter's Tale*, he wants to give it to Charles Lamb, who is an essayist, journalist and a poet of the time (Ackroyd 2005: 16-17). Mary and Charles Lamb are mostly famous for their retelling Shakespeare's plays for children, under the title *Tales from Shakespeare*, published in 1807. In Ackroyd's novel, they are both still living with their parents; Mary is the one who feels compelled to look after their father, who is suffering from a mental disorder very similar to dementia. For this reason, Mary's ambition for literature and reading must be spent indoors, while Charles is trying to forge his way in the intellectual circle of London. Despite sharing her enthusiasm and love for literature and Shakespeare with her brother and her continuous support of him, Mary seems to be resentful about her restrictions. That is why the encounter with William Ireland has such an impact on her: "She glanced up at him, astonished. 'Have you always loved Shakespeare?'" (Ackroyd 2005: 43). This is a momentous encounter between kindred spirits who share a similar obsession with Shakespeare; it becomes even more so in the context of Charles Lamb's numerous drinking escapades, which leave her sister devoid of brotherly and humanly affection. Hence, it is hardly surprising to find Mary investing deep confidence and trust in Ireland's discoveries, while the two are following in the Bard's footsteps through

London streets. Soon the mutual affection for Shakespeare develops into an intimate friendship, with William Ireland preferring Mary to his own father, when it comes to sharing the news of having located *Vortigern*, the allegedly lost Shakespearean play: “I would like you to see it first, Mary. Before anyone else. Even father does not know of it.” (Ackroyd 2005: 131)

However, the forgery is unveiled by William himself, after some investigations and accusations were already being uttered, when he confessed to his father:

‘All is true, Father.’

‘You cannot stand before me and tell me you alone – no more than a boy – you alone produced such voluminous papers? It is laughable. It is ridiculous.’

.....

‘I will do it now. This instant. I will show you, Father, how I am the forger...’

(idem: 202, 203)

Ironically, the idea of the will, the poems, even of the play itself being authored by Shakespeare, appeared more convincing to Samuel Ireland than his own son’s capacity to write like the Bard; what is even more incredible is that several reputed Shakespearean scholars would confirm the forgery as the genuine work. Mary, on the other hand, was devastated when she witnessed the conversation between the father and the son:

William had lied to her. He had betrayed her. She found herself thinking of other things – of the flight of sparrows from dark corner to dark corner, of some broken glass upon the cobbles, of a linen curtain billowing in the breeze, of the leaden sky threatening rain. And then just as suddenly she felt very cheerful. Nothing could touch her. Nothing could hurt her. ‘I am discharged from life,’ she said to herself, ‘after valiant service.’” (204)

The above quotation, apart from presenting Mary’s shifting moods ranging from bitter disappointment to unexpected elation, uncannily anticipates her committing matricide, followed by her imprisonment in a mad house. These chilling developments are explained in Charles Lambs’ letter to Thomas De Quincey, incidentally another famous writer, who is known for his interest in murders. William Ireland continues to write, publishes “more than sixty-seven books” and never again mentions his “Shakespearean adventure” (215, 216).

3.1. Mnemosyne as a poetic topos

Ireland’s story of literary forgery is notorious in literary history, similarly to the Lambs’ story:

William Henry Ireland (1775-1835) achieved fame - or, rather, in-famy - in 1795, when his father, Samuel, began displaying to the public a collection of William Shakespeare’s autograph manuscripts. William, not yet twenty years old, had discovered the first of them, a legal deed bearing Shakespeare’s signature, late in 1794; over the next year and a half there appeared a stream of legal documents, personal letters, poems, rough drafts of famous works, and even two previously unknown plays, all in the Bard’s hand. (Lynch 2011: 465)

Nevertheless, the encounter between Ireland and the Lambs, as depicted by Ackroyd, relocates the story of the famous literary fraud among the famous ghosts or ghost writers. In this part of the paper, I will attempt to briefly introduce Derrida's ideas about memory and mourning, accompanied by Cixous's thoughts, as parallel to Ireland's literary obsession with Shakespeare's ghost(s).

After the death of his friend Paul de Man in 1983, Derrida was asked to contribute to the commemoration; consequently, he dedicated a series of lectures to the memory of his deceased friend, which took place in the Wellek Library, at the University of California. The first of the four lectures was titled *Mnemosyne*, after the mother of all muses, who knows the past and the future and always remembers everything. The Greek word *μνήμη* refers to the capacity of remembering and has a very significant role as a human faculty in terms of knowledge. Aristotle, for instance, names *mimesis* and *μνήμη* among the primary conditions for human cognition (2002: 980b 25). Derrida dwells on the word *Mnemosyne* in association with Hölderlin's poem with the same title, and Paul de Man's readings of Hölderlin and Heidegger. Derrida (1989: 7) emphasizes that for Paul de Man, "the power of memory is not first of all, that of resuscitating, it remains enigmatic enough to be preoccupied, so to speak, by a thinking of 'the future'". According to Paul de Man, Heidegger's reading of Hölderlin is simply appropriation-by-identification, since Heidegger seems to reverse Hölderlin's writing in his own. Yet this, according to Derrida (*ibid.*), stands as Heidegger's "hermeneutic mourning". The hermeneutical capacity provides us with the possibility for a plurality of narration and rewriting. As Derrida suggests, "there is no singular memory" and therefore he chooses to name his lectures *Memoires* in the plural. "Plus d'une langue" he states, means more than a language, but, at the same time, no more a (single) language (*idem*: 15); since the plurality of *memoires* indicate plurality of languages and narrations.

Remembering takes place via writing and interpreting due to the plurality of *memoires* and it often follows a death or deaths. Each time a person is about to remember, there is a sort of appropriation-by-identification, since it is his or her *memoires* - plural, both masculine and feminine. Additionally, since mourning can also be life itself, as Cixous would say, memory is not solely about the past, but about the future, too. Therefore, suggests Derrida (1989: 22), "Funerary speech and writing do not follow upon death; they work upon life in what we call autobiography". Mourning and memory are utterly (auto)biographical and an (auto)biography takes place "between fiction and truth" (*ibid.*). The commonest phrase of funerary writings and discourses of mourning, "in memory of", refers to the other in us, who is no more outside us: "If death comes to the other, and comes to us through the other, then the friend no longer exists except in us, between us" and since the other lives in us, "we are no longer ourselves" (*idem*: 28). Cixous (1994: 13) also explains that the one who dies kills and the one who doesn't die, when the other dies, kills as well. Mourning in this sense involves a narcissistic fantasy of reciprocal killing, beyond any death and resurrection via re-membering. It is at the same time a hallucinatory prosopopoeia, a fiction of prosopopoeia, which dissolves the subjectivity of the *I* and *the other* who died:

The truth of the mourning of the other, but of the other who always speaks in before me, who signs in my place, the hypogram or epitaph being always of the other, and for the other. Which also means: in the place of the other." (Derrida 1989: 29)

In the process of mourning, when memories are considered, we are not only talking as ourselves, but also as the dead-others for the dead-others. Derrida

explains the “others living in us” with mimetic interiorization, recalling Freud’s analysis of mourning through memory and interiorization.

This mimetic interiorization is not fictive; it is the origin of fiction, of apocryphal figuration. It takes place in a body. Or rather, it makes a place for a body, a voice, and a soul which, although “ours”, did not exist and had no meaning before this possibility that one must always begin by remembering, and whose trace must be followed. (1989: 34- 35)

The soul – psyche also refers to “a revolving mirror”; for Derrida (1989: 39), Mnemosyne is now replacing psyche, thus creating a literary topos in which the other and the I become one, which is neither. Since mourning is also the future, it transforms the future, as well, through *memoires*. Mnemosyne, therefore, becomes “a poetic topos”, in which the dead speak to the future, with the future (idem: 38).

3.2. The ghost writers

In the previous sections, I have pointed out that Mnemosyne is not only about the past, but also pertains to the future, establishing a very specific chronotope for or within Ackroyd’s work.

Memory is the name of what is no longer only a mental “capacity” oriented toward one of the three modes of the present, the past present, which could be dissociated from the present present and the future present. Memory projects itself toward the future, and it constitutes the presence of the present. (Derrida 1989: 56-57)

The presence of Ackroyd’s characters, the selection and lineage of narrative incidents can be very well located within the chronotopicity that is bounded within memory. The poetic topos that is offered by Derrida, designating Mnemosyne and mourning as the locus *par excellence* for prosopopoeia and mimetic interiorization, can be explored in *The Lambs of London* as the chronotope of imposture, fraud, ambiguity of identity, and chronology. Ackroyd’s playing with time makes its presence very early in the novel, specifically when Charles Lamb and his obsession with the past are introduced:

Charles loved all the tokens of antiquity. He had stood on the site of the old Aldgate pump, imagined water being drawn from the wooden pipe five hundred years before; he had placed the line of the Roman wall, and noticed how the streets naturally conformed to it; he had lingered over the sundials in the Inner Temple, and traced their mottoes with his finger. ‘The future is as nothing, being everything,’ he had once told Tom Coates in a moment of drunken inspiration. ‘The past is everything, being nothing.’ (Ackroyd 2005: 15)

The novelist’s playful engagement with the motto on the antique wall is therefore an early signifier of a historical exploration. Ackroyd’s haunted narrative will tell a “moth-scented” account of the Ireland fraud, along with the story of the Lambs (2005: 15). Hauntology, too, relatable to multiple roots deriving from Freud (along with a whole tradition of philosophy), alludes to inheritance and the generational.

If Marx, like Freud, like Heidegger, like everybody, did not begin where he ought to have “been able to begin” (beginnen können), namely with haunting, before life as such, before death as such, it is doubtless not his fault. The fault, in any case, by definition, is repeated, we inherit it, we must watch over it. (Derrida 2006: 220)

Peter Ackroyd's literary works might also suggest a variety of psychoanalytic readings, "whereby the failing or absent fathers of Ackroyd's writings become versions of Ackroyd's own absentee parent" (Gibson, Wolfreys 2000: 13). Nevertheless, the scope of the present study remains ethical or more precisely hauntological. Therefore, the issue of the father will be touched upon in a restricted parenthesis. It is not mere coincidence that Ackroyd picks the character of William Ireland. William's story is the quest of a young man attempting to defeat his father, which is, in a way, a cliché. The fraud itself is part of these attempts that could be read as an extenuation for William in terms of the crime.

Initially, Ireland in-tended to hoax his father, but his successful forgery convinced him into producing an even more elaborate falsification, the *Vortigern*. Accordingly, Bagnani concludes by modifying the initial motto that headed his article, *Mundus vult decipi, ergo decipiatur*, turning it into *eruditi cupiunt decipi, ergo decipiuntur*. This explains to a great extent Bagnani's suspicious attitude to-wards erudites who encouraged or did not disclose the fraud, rather than fakers themselves. (Butoescu 2019: 173)

In Ackroyd's narration of William's intercourse with Beryl (the prostitute on the coach), the cynosure shifts to Ireland Senior, he becomes the pivot of the conversation with the occurrence of the kerchief. What about the kerchief? (Ackroyd 2005: 19) This interruption and interference of the father is considered; the scene is depicted in the way that the effort to become a man is alluded to by overreaching the father who does "all the talking ... on the merits of Shakespeare" (ibid.). Therefore, the perception of literary fraud is relevant to the father. Ackroyd successfully gives the impression that William hoped to be William Shakespeare, not only because of his inherited affection or admiration for the Poet, but also because of his resentment of being William Ireland. In a way, William does kill himself for the sake of becoming another in Ackroyd's strange mixture of personalities, impostures, masks, identity confusions among generations and chronologies.

4. Conclusion

Peter Ackroyd is the ghost writer in *genitivus obiectivus*, that is he writes the ghosts. His writing is haunted by the past and is haunted for a reason. He remembers, resurrects, internalizes, and learns to die together with the dead, for the literature of the future. In a very simple re-telling of an already renowned story of the Shakespearean fraud, he recreates this poetic topos of Mnemosyne. Therefore, Shakespeare is a ghost writer both in *genitivus obiectivus* and *genitivus subiectivus*, not only the one who wrote the "arch-ghost(s)", as Derrida (2006: 220) would put it, but who is also himself the ghost-writer. In Cixous's (2012: 17) pertinent formulation, Shakespeare "is the master, the king, the Lord of the Ghosts". William Ireland is also revived as an authentic ghost writer, despite his counterfeit Shakespearean texts, in *The Lambs of London*, which is yet another work of hermeneutic mourning. William Ireland, like Shakespeare, as the Quasi-Shakespeare, is a writer of ghosts and a ghost who writes. He is the exemplar of mimetic interiorization, killing himself in his admiration and longing for the Bard, trying to resurrect him and his writing through his own texts. In his struggle with his father, he initially kills himself, and then Shakespeare (as the other father), when he confesses that he wrote those works which were allegedly Shakespeare's.

The fraud becomes an opportunity to speak in place of the Ghost Shakespeare, in his memory in Ackroyd's retelling. Ireland tries to survive with Shakespeare in him, to bequeath *plus d'un* Shakespeare, to entrust more Shakespeare(s) who are no more Shakespeare. He stands almost as a transcendental figure of self-destruction in the work of mourning and at the highest possible level of mimetic interiorization.

The deaths of Shakespeare and Ireland are no more separable since writing originated in that relationship, to phrase it in Cixous's words. Ackroyd regenerates both writers for the future, again through writing which for a moment must attend the *School of the Dead*. Hence, he keeps looking for Shakespeare, Marx, Dryden, Chatterton, de Quincey and other Ghosts around London to collect more *memoires*: "He asked her how she found the house, but she misunderstood his question. 'I don't mind the rats,' she replied. 'But I mind the ghosts.'" (Ackroyd 2005: 145)

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