

Hawksmoor's Churches: Myth and Architecture in the Works of Iain Sinclair and Peter Ackroyd

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ABSTRACT

The works of contemporary British writers Iain Sinclair and Peter Ackroyd demonstrate an intense preoccupation with the spatial symbols and ruins of London's East End, which to them stand not just for the broken pieces of a vanishing past but also as symptoms of an underlying force of mythological and cultural significance, a force that collapses contemporary ideology and resists consecutive attempts at control and order. Of these, the Hawksmoor churches built by the architect Nicholas Hawksmoor after the 1666 London fire, some already demolished and others standing dark and brooding with looming spires and shadowy recesses, take on a particular preeminence. Both writers view the churches as forming an invisible geometry of lines of power in the cartography of the city, calling forth occult energies that point to the deeper, though half-erased and repressed truth of London. Sinclair's early poetry collection *Lud Heat* first toys with this idea, and Ackroyd's bestselling novel *Hawksmoor* popularizes it and enables it to reach a wider public. This paper investigates the spatial and mythological symbolism of the Hawksmoor churches as reflected in the works of the two writers, arguing that this recurrent spatial motif holds the key to understanding an important strand of contemporary British literature where architecture, textuality and London's haunting past loom large.

KEY WORDS: Iain Sinclair, Peter Ackroyd, Nicholas Hawksmoor, *Lud Heat*, *Hawksmoor*

霍克斯莫教堂： 辛克萊和艾克若德作品中的 神話和建築

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摘 要

當代英國作家伊恩·辛克萊和彼得·艾克若德的作品中，呈現出某種對倫敦東區的空間象徵和廢墟的強烈執著，將其視為不光是一個即將逝去的過去的破碎片段，更是某種具有神秘和文化意義的內蘊力量的徵像，這種力量抗拒當今主流意識型態，也無懼於歷來不斷的整頓和秩序的企圖。其中，由十八世紀建築師尼克拉斯·霍克斯莫在1666年倫敦大火後開始建造、歷經多年方才完工的系列倫敦教堂，儘管有些已經破敗拆除、剩下的則是飽經蒼桑、以頹黑又低沈之姿構成倫敦天際線的另一特色，但在這兩位作家的作品中具有關鍵的重要性。兩位都認為此系列的十八世紀教堂構成倫敦空間某種隱形的代表黑暗能量的幾何圖形，召喚出被壓抑的神秘力量，也指向倫敦空間的真正意義。這種想法首先在辛克萊早期的詩作選集 *Lud Heat* 中提出，而五年後艾克若德的暢銷小說《霍克斯莫》則將此說法發揚光大、成為普羅大眾也日益熟悉的另一種倫敦傳說。本文試圖討論兩位作家作品中霍克斯莫教堂的空間和象徵意義，也指出唯有瞭解此重複出現的空間意象的意義，方能瞭解當代英國文學中這一以建築空間、文本和倫敦的過去為中心圖騰的流派。

關鍵詞：伊恩·辛克萊、彼得·艾克若德、尼克拉斯·霍克斯莫、*Lud Heat*、《霍克斯莫》

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Hawksmoor and His Churches

Nicholas Hawksmoor (probably 1661 - 1736) was first a student of and later collaborator with Christopher Wren. The two of them, together with another Baroque architect John Vanbrugh, were commissioned to build fifty new churches in London in accordance with a Parliamentary Act of 1711 providing tax money for the reconstruction of London after the 1666 Great Fire. In the end, only 12 churches were built. Hawksmoor designed six of them and co-designed another two, of which Christ Church Spitalfields, St. George's Bloomsbury, and St. Anne's Limehouse (gutted by fire in 1850) are the more famous. Yet unlike Wren's classical order and light, best exemplified in St. Paul's cathedral, Hawksmoor's churches, now dominating the London skyline as a counterpoint to St. Paul's, are noted for their abundant use of pagan architectural motifs like obelisks and pyramids, their low ceilings, massive scale and extraordinary Gothic steeples. These structures often evoke different feelings of gloom, awe and darkness, and have since given rise to speculations as to Hawksmoor's religious allegiance, and of his possible subscription to an occult cult of malevolence and darkness that is in stark contrast to the Christian mission of the churches.

It must be pointed out, though, that Hawksmoor and Wren often worked as a team, and that the interest in pre-Christian, monumental architecture of antiquity was widely shared among architects of his time. Even for the rational and intellectual Wren, biblical references often vied with classical, primitive motifs drawn from the Egyptian pyramids and ancient temples and mausoleums, when he and his fellow architects envisaged a new religious cartography for the city of London. Like his teacher Wren, Hawksmoor was also a professional architect trained in the principles of Newtonian mechanics and Hooke's law in physics. When entrusted with the task of rebuilding London's churches after an era of religious and political turmoil, great fires, devastating plagues and civil war¹, they combined their scientific scrutiny

¹ Plagues broke out in London regularly in the 17th century but the 1666 Great Plague killed more than 100,000 people, 20% of the population of London, which was at the time an unregulated urban sprawl of wooden houses crowded together. This was followed by the Great Fire of September 3-5, which destroyed the medieval City of London and more than 13,000 houses and 87 parish churches. On the political and religious front, despite the 1534 Act of Supremacy that marked Henry VIII's break from the Roman Catholic Pope, it was not until the 1550's under Edward VI that the English Church became Protestant in doctrine and ritual. The Church reverted back to Catholicism under Mary I, and with the

with a religious belief and turned for inspiration to what was often perceived to be a purer, primitive stage of Christianity. Just as the Temple of Jerusalem had powerful religious associations for the Jews, the London churches were to be transported with “joy and gladness” for the people of England (Du Prey 31), and are crucial sites of re-imposing order, knowledge and the religious values of Protestant Christianity upon a cityscape ravaged by disease, fire, chaos and filth. There is no doubt that the utmost purpose of Hawksmoor’s churches, as part of the restoration commission, dovetails with what is often seen as the enlightenment project for which Wren stands. This can be seen in Hawksmoor’s letter to Dr. George Clarke:

[w]e have no City, nor Streets, nor Houses, but a Chaos of Dirty Rotten Sheds, always tumbling or taking fire, with winding Crooked passages (scarse practicable) Lakes of Mud & Rills of Stinking Mire Running through them...They had so favourable an opportunity to Rebuild London ye most August Towne in ye world... (qtd. in Sinclair: 14)

The building of the churches is therefore not just to spread the religion of the gospels but also knowledge, control, health and a clearly demarcated urban order upon unplanned, filthy and disease-inducing chaos. Darkness is to be conquered with enlightenment, and chaos replaced by order, all conducted with the precision and vision of the scientist/architect.

Nevertheless, it must be conceded that Hawksmoor’s churches do seem to harbor more than their share of primitive architectural motifs, displaying a much darker, brooding presence than Wren’s classical elegance and harmony. The most striking is often the massive character of his churches, which despite their classical patterning gives a feeling of medievalism and antiquarianism and of lowering heaviness that points not to the heights above, or to the spiritually transcendental. Hawksmoor’s apparent obsession with monumentality is seen in the flattened arches of the churches’ interior and the massive, recessed walls, and, even more strikingly, in the exterior, in the massive towers and pyramid-like steeples of the exterior which one

succession of Elizabeth I in 1558 the Anglican faith was codified. Charles I leaned toward the “popish” High Church, and he was defeated by the frequently Puritan Cromwell in the Civil Wars of 1642-1651. Religious and political stability was only possible after the restoration of Charles II in 1660. See Porter 34-92.

commentator compares to “bleached bones” “reaching white into the sky” (Wright, par. 11). The tower of St. George’s Bloomsbury is unmistakably a pyramid, topped by a statue of George I in Roman attire, surrounded by lions and unicorns at his feet. Although the use of the pyramid, also seen in smaller scale in his other churches, along with other pagan details like obelisks, temple shapes and sacrificial altars, may be explained by a shared interest in his time in ancient architectural details for inspiration, its prominence in a Christian church does strike latter-day observers as distinctly odd and unnerving, and seems to offer prime proof for the depiction of Hawksmoor as the “devil’s architect.”

Architecture critics have always noticed the uneasy emotional appeal of Hawksmoor’s churches. Writing in 1924, H. S. Goodhart-Rendel suggested that Hawksmoor was superior to his contemporaries because of his “greater consciousness than theirs of the emotional values of architectural forms” (17). Kerry Downes in 1959 was more specific when he pointed out that Hawksmoor’s churches produced an “effect of emotional assault” and that the spectator’s “emotions are being directly attacked” in that the churches seem to exude irrational, unknowable forces (167, 46). But it is the poet/novelist Iain Sinclair who has been instrumental in expanding the impact of Hawksmoor’s architecture beyond architectural circles and in casting a veil of mystery, mythology and occultism over the architecture.

Sinclair and the Start of the Literary Myth

In his 1975 privately published poem collection *Lud Heat*, Sinclair makes the strongest, most explicit case for Hawksmoor’s secret occultism and his oblique antagonism to Christianity, by arguing that the location of the churches corresponds to an Egyptian hieroglyph and harbors a secret code that impacts powerfully on London’s cityscape and its dark hidden forces. Sinclair was working as a dealer in rare books at the time while also writing poetry and moving in the underground² art circles of London. He confesses to taking obsessive walks around London and is particularly attracted to the

² The word “underground” refers to Sinclair’s affiliation to poetic circles known for their uncompromising rejection of public attention and mainstream culture. “Underground” here denotes a defiant and subversive attitude to stay out of the literary canon, and this is reciprocated on the part of literary critics by a lack of critical attention. For more, see Robert Bond 4-15. *Lud Heat* received relatively little critical attention, except as part of Sinclair’s overall works in later book-length studies on Sinclair after he became famous. For some samplings, see Bond and Baker.

architectural and spatial remains of London's past, which led him to form a theory about the dark energy and occult meaning half-buried and dormant beneath the London cityscape.

The Hawksmoor churches were in a perilous condition at that time, with Christ Church close to demolition and the others in bad need of restoration. This combination of the churches' half-abandoned, half-ruined state, their unusual design and unnerving, emotional impact, together with a lack of biographical data about Hawksmoor, fueled Sinclair's imagination and shaped the theme of *Lud Heat*. This theme was then picked up a decade later by another London writer Peter Ackroyd in his bestselling novel *Hawksmoor* (1985). Together they have ignited a literary myth about Hawksmoor rich in dark forces, occult beliefs and evil deeds, a myth that has traversed into the popular domain and revived public interest in the churches and their restoration.³

In the first section of Book One in *Lud Heat*, entitled "Nicholas Hawksmoor, His Churches," Sinclair writes that Hawksmoor's churches are intentionally unnerving and unusual, because Hawksmoor deliberately works a secret code of pagan occultism into the design, "templates of meanings, bands of continuing ritual" (17). Sinclair argues that as Hawksmoor's obituary tells us he is a very skillful "Mathematician, Geographer and Geometrician," his churches were built with a distinct plan to "rewrite the city" (14), to form a neat and powerful system with the existing geography of eastern London. "[W]e can mark out the total plan of the churches on the map and sift the meanings" (16). Christ Church, St. George and St. Anne, for instance, form a triangle, while pentacle stars could be formed by linking the other churches, which altogether produces the symbol of Set, "the tool for castration & the instrument for impressing cuneiform script onto the clay table" (107).

These speculations reveal more about Sinclair's own occult belief in an alternative, underlying history of London that links it to ancient, irrational, sinister forces of power, forces that defy consecutive human efforts at control and order. In *Lud Heat*, he sees the 18th century rebuilding of fire-ravaged London by the Commission as one such human effort at control, and liberally speculates that Hawksmoor's unusual churches harbor a secret motive to

³ The restoration of Christ Church under the auspices of the Hawksmoor Committee was completed in 2004. St Luke's Old Street (by Hawksmoor and John James) was also restored in 2003 just before it was almost derelict, reopening as a rehearsal space for the London Symphony Orchestra. Another threatened Hawksmoor church, St George's Bloomsbury, was restored in 2005.

undermine that overt mission and worship instead forces of unruly darkness, because more than his contemporaries and like Sinclair himself, Hawksmoor intuitively understands London's deeper, buried truth.

The Hawksmoor churches, forming "an eastern arc" (13) over London's sinister, plague-ridden and low-lying eastern half, are "white stones laid upon the mud and dust," and erected over a "fen of undisclosed horrors" (13). Excavations of graves during the plagues prior to the 1666 Great Fire and thus prior to the construction of the churches themselves, had already uncovered parts of east London as pre-Roman mass burial sites, as well as sites where ancient, pagan rites of sacrifice had been performed. "The Romans regarded east London not as a place for the living but as a necropolis for the dead"(27). The brick fields at Spitalfields, where Hawksmoor's Christ Church was to be built later, were excavated in 1574 to reveal bone masses, "cartloads," "[a]shes," "[p]owder," "[s]kulls," and "[s]tone coffins" (27). Hawksmoor's churches are located on ancient burial sites, and the death, bloodshed, sacrifice and disease latent to the local geography form a centripetal force of dark energy that absorbs the churches, producing together a symphony of occult symbolism that runs counter to the Christian mission of the churches.

It is now clear that to Sinclair, the Commission's churches, intended originally to impose order, conquer chaos, and lead to spiritual and religious transcendence, turn out instead under Hawksmoor's orchestration to join forces with unruly chaos in a downward move toward darkness and occultism. Hawksmoor thus secretly changes the Christian churches into pagan temples dedicated to the worship of death and darkness. This darker code, printed like an oblique "web" over London and "disguised with multiple superimpositions" 16-17), is much approved by Sinclair, because to him it points to the deeper truth of London's spatiality, a truth that Hawksmoor recognizes and links, through his liberal use of pagan and Egyptian motifs, to the roots of antiquity common to all humankind. The churches boast an "extravagant design, massive, almost slave-built, strength – not democratic." They are "not easy on the eye," and the towers are particularly "shunned" because they suggest an "awkward" "hybrid" strength, "an admix of Egyptian and Greek source matter," "[n]ecropolis Culture," "[b]ehemoths from the Zoo of Abortions," "[b]otched Sphinx experiments;" the "great Mausoleum at Halicarnassus is re-enacted in Bloomsbury" (20). The statue of King George at the top of the pyramid-tower in St. George Bloomsbury is linked to Sphinx

itself—“George is Sphinx, a lion body sprawling along the Highway,” “terrible, living” (35).

Hawksmoor changes the meaning of his churches because he, to Sinclair, alone sees that death and violence and bloodshed, long plaguing east London, have always erupted at regular intervals to disrupt any semblance of human order. This is the ultimate truth of London, and the only way to approach that force is with awe, fear and appeasement. Thus Hawksmoor intended his churches to become temples of fear, “the enclosure, the shape of the fear” (13), fear over the ruthless power of gods and goddesses, fear that had to be appeased through ritual acts of sacrifice and death. The gloomy, looming Hawksmoor churches, which often seem to be more suitable for funerals, are thus linked by Sinclair to the Egyptian pyramids, to the King’s death chambers and mausoleums where “rites of autopsy on a more than local scale” (28) are performed, brains and bowels are removed and blood sacrifices offered to allay the beast, the animal power. The Christian emphasis on spiritual salvation has now given way to the pagan worship of the dark powers of death that claim everything and harbor no mercy.

By this time, an opposing dichotomy is established between the perceived irrationality, occultism and darkness that Hawksmoor stands for and the rationality, enlightenment and systematized Christianity for which Wren and the Commission stand. Religion and science are not normally bedfellows, but to Sinclair, the 18th century reconstruction seamlessly weaves Wren’s scientific enlightenment with the religious enlightenment that the organized Church of England stands for, as both seek to restore order, knowledge and systematized control to London after the London fire. Sinclair argues that only Hawksmoor senses that the unruly, dark forces, of which the devastating fire is but one manifestation, are the real lord of the place and would never really be erased or tamed. This is a dichotomy that would be later picked up and amplified by subsequent writers, particularly Peter Ackroyd, writers who form this particular strand of contemporary British literature, a strand that always makes London the central theme of its writing, and is always preoccupied with London’s spatial ruins, latent energy and its buried, half-forgotten mythology.

That this strand of London writing should appear in the 1980s is not an accident. A flurry of urban regeneration and rebuilding projects, mostly in London’s East End, took place under Thatcher’s Conservative government in

the 1980s, which tore down derelict parts of east London and sought to wipe off the remaining spatial symbols of dilapidation and poverty and erect instead a sleek, shining, free-for-all capitalist “enterprise zone” of corporate skyscrapers and multi-national office blocks and yuppie condos. Perceived as the latest example of a long history of human attempts at taming and controlling the unruly east London, powered this time not by systematized religion but by capitalist rationalization and profit-seeking efficiency, this triggered and exacerbated a new wave of literary response that seeks to restore, resurrect and recall London’s subterranean, half-erased and repressed spatial images and relics, in order to weave a cityscape often in implicit opposition from the official ideology of Thatcherite corporatism (Chen, “Stalking” 226).⁴

This new wave of London writing traces its heritage to earlier London writers like De Quincey, Blake and Dickens, not just because of these writers’ pioneering representations of a labyrinthine London spatiality, representations that have prescribed the basic mode of perception and techniques of articulation which inevitably impact on any subsequent writings on the city, but more importantly because these writers’ visionary response to the dark energies or evil of the place finds particular resonances in the works of these new London writers. De Quincey’s opiate-enhanced mythic visions, the Blakeian sense of evil as dynamically necessary and productive, and the Dickensian obsession with the grotesque and sinister all find echoes in Sinclair and his fellow writers and contribute importantly to the palimpsestic nature of his London writing.⁵

A related trait also shared by this strand of contemporary London writing is the intense juxtaposition of architecture and textuality. In Sinclair’s *Lud Heat*, for instance, by writing a secret code into his churches, Hawksmoor is seen to turn his architecture into a kind of spatial writing, a symbolic code that simultaneously encloses and discloses the underlying true meaning of London’s cityscape. It is also a counter-writing that opposes the dominant spatial writing of order and rationalism in Wren’s enlightenment discourse. In this way, Hawksmoor, to Sinclair, is able to get to the ultimate truth of London’s spatiality and turns his churches into a representation, worship as well as appeasement of its unruly power. Architecture is thereby textualized,

⁴ Among this contemporary group of London writers, Sinclair and Ackroyd are the more famous. Others include Neil Gaiman, Michael Moorcock and Marc Atkins. For more, see Roger Luckhurst.

⁵ For more on the influences on Sinclair, see Wolfreys 138-58.

as Hawksmoor writes a spatialized text exposing the meaning of London and attacking the fatuity of rationalized views and inscriptions. Sinclair's own writing, commenting on the writings of Hawksmoor and Wren, in its turn adds to and joins the countless layers of previous writings on London's spatiality, turning the London text into an inevitable palimpsest.

In this sense, Sinclair is not just preoccupied with the architectural landmarks of London's skyline but more fundamentally with the types of writing that strive to reveal the true meaning of London. This close link between architecture and textuality is also carried on in Ackroyd, a point we shall return to later. In *Lud Heat*, Sinclair sets up a dichotomy between two ways of writing on London's spatial truth, and there is no question over where Sinclair's own sympathy lies:

The secret routines are uncovered at risk
& the point is
That the *objective* is nonsense
& the scientific approach a bitter farce
Unless it is shot through with high occulting
Fear & need & awe of mysteries &
Does not demean or explain
In scholarly babytalk (113; emphasis original)

A lot of questioning may, however, arise over the veracity of this stand. Sinclair is obviously on the side of the irrational and the occult and advocates a position of awe, of empathic fear over and against rational explanation and control, but occultism and magic may themselves be early attempts to "explain" the world and to extend human power over the universe, at the same time that this power is acknowledged to be limited. Sinclair's own efforts at invoking the buried, occult power of east London, not through scientific, "scholarly babytalk" but through walking and poetic writing as a gesture of tactile and immersive empathy, are likewise motivated by an impulse to reveal, to order, to pattern, and to better "explain." More so is his "charting instinct" (13), his admittedly obsessive attempts to read the maps like an archeologist in order to find Hawksmoor's underlying code, and "to sift" the "templates of meaning" (17).

In this early work *Lud Heat*, Sinclair seems particularly preoccupied with a prioritization of the irrational and monstrous forces over enlightenment

attempts at order and control. In his later work like *White Chappell*, *Scarlet Tracings* and *Lights Out for the Territory*, a more fundamental concern can be seen with the radical other that exposes the lack and violence at the center of the very system of metaphysics, at the center of writing itself that necessarily controls, explains and represses, however “awed” and empathic it may be.⁶ But in this early work, a still very much dichotomous approach that does not fully realize its own complicity seems to prevail.

A further point of controversy is that to Sinclair, Hawksmoor’s churches not only reflect and worship the dark energy of the place, but, also, in time become themselves the centripetal center of evil, actively producing instead of just reflecting darkness and violence. This is seen in the passages recounting the subsequent escalation of violence in east London after the building of the churches. The Radcliffe Highway murders of 1811, which De Quincey wrote about in 1827, took place in east London, and Sinclair quotes a line from De Quincey right at the beginning of *Lud Heat*— “All perils, specially malignant, are recurrent” (13). The supposed murderer hanged himself in the prison, and his body was dragged through the streets and later pitched into a pit, stake through heart, where “four roads cross to the north of Hawksmoor’s St. George.” During the 1888 Ripper murders, which also took place in east London, the ritual slaying of the final and fifth victim Marie Kelly was carried out “in the ground floor room of Miller’s Court, Dorset Street, directly opposite Christ Church.” And in 1974, a Jewish man Abraham Cohen was battered to death on Cannon Street Road, with “three ritualistic coins laid at his feet, just as they were in 1888 at the feet of the first Ripper victim Mary Ann Nicholls” (21).

These incidents of violence are described not just to suggest that the churches, originally intended to bring order to the chaos of east London, fail ultimately to tame the innate dark power of the land, but further to imply that, as secret temples to paganism that thwart their manifest purpose of enlightenment, they actually create and fuel these evil deeds. A twist of meaning has occurred here. Instead of the churches being absorbed by and reflecting the general evil of the place where they are located, they become an axis of darkness producing more evil and leading and aggravating the sinister forces native to the land. Sinclair recounts all of these violent crimes to

⁶ For more on his approach to the radical other in his later works, see my 2011 paper, “Contemporary London Gothic” 321-26.

suggest that the churches produce “an unacknowledged influence over events created within the shadow-lines of their towers” (20). “The whole karmic program moves around the fixed point of Christ Church, that Tower of the Winds” until “[p]urgation/completion” is performed (21-22). The murder is a rite of purgation and blood sacrifice to appease the animal power, and the church is where such rites of autopsy are performed. Instead of bringing Christian elevation and curing evil, the churches seem to encourage, attract, and actively instigate further evil. “If Christ Church was magnet to the archetypal murder myth of the late 19th century, St George-in-the-East was host to the definitive fear-prose of the early century”(22)—the Radcliffe murders. The Hawksmoor churches thus prove to be evil centers of “unacknowledged magnetism and control-power” (21) for such violence and bloodshed.

Even at the time of his writing in the 1970s, Sinclair sees these churches as magnets drawing in all of the drug addicts, alcoholics and vagabonds of the land, “seducing” them in a “not altogether benevolent” fashion into “some tall parental grasp” (20). Admittedly the vagabonds and addicts are there for shelter and the occasional meals at the churches’ soup-kitchens, but Sinclair sees it differently. To him, this is just further proof that the Hawksmoor churches always have a way of attracting evil, harboring it and then releasing it greatly strengthened and in double force from “the incubation cubicles beneath the church,” the many graves and sarcophaguses inside and beneath.

But if the churches become centers of evil in the east London landscape and actively produce crimes and vampiric monsters, how does this bear upon Sinclair’s earlier statement on the futility of human efforts? Hawksmoor’s churches are after all products of human labor and design, however intuited they are to the latent magic forces of east London. To suggest, as Sinclair seems to do here, that these products of human efforts have now strengthened and accelerated the cosmic evil native to the land and thus inevitably changed the place, hints at a recognition of the greater power of such human efforts. If that is the case, how could it reconcile with Sinclair’s earlier claims as to the overwhelming power of “cosmic order” (37) and the futility and undesirability of any kinds of human efforts at control? Since the churches are also seen by Sinclair to have Hawksmoor’s occultist code worked into the design, turning architecture thus into textuality, they also suggest that writing, of which the Hawksmoor churches are now a powerful example, is elevated to a status that

seems to tower above the power of nature, not just representing the latter but also accelerating and intensifying and eventually producing natural happenings.

At the end of the first part of *Lud Heat*, Sinclair obliquely refers to a “Manhattan Project” that was to come about in east London in the coming years. What exactly is meant by this is not clear, as *Lud Heat* was written in 1975, and Thatcher’s Conservative government came to power in 1979. Yet somehow Sinclair seems to have uncannily anticipated the nightmarish reality several years later, when Thatcherite urban regeneration sought to erect an American-style corporate playground in east London, a virtual “Manhattan rising out of [east London’s] swamp land” (Wolfreys 157). This latest attempt to tame and order east London under the aegis of capitalist corporatism, in full swing by the time of Peter Ackroyd’s 1985 novel *Hawksmoor*, becomes the subject of its scathing criticism as the novel picks up and expands on Sinclair’s concern.

The Myth Goes Public

As his very first poetry collection, *Lud Heat* was published with Sinclair’s own funds at a time when he was virtually unknown. And it wasn’t until his breakthrough novel *White Chappells, Scarlet Tracings* (1987), which was the sole runner-up in the 1987 *Guardian* fiction prize, that he began to claim a big readership and mainstream accolades. Before that, however, other writers and poets had noticed *Lud Heat* and latched on to Sinclair’s ideas about a mythical London. In the preface to his 1985 novel *Hawksmoor*, Peter Ackroyd publicly acknowledged that his book was inspired by Sinclair by expressing his “obligations to Iain Sinclair’s poem, *Lud Heat*, which first directed my attention to the strange characteristics of the London churches.” Ackroyd’s *Hawksmoor* was the winner of the Whitbread Prize in 1985 and became subsequently a bestseller. This popular success was then instrumental in bringing Sinclair’s speculation to the wider public, and in reviving Hawksmoor’s reputation⁷ as well as popularizing the literary myth of the ancient, underlying symbolism of London’s spatiality.

Like Sinclair’s novel *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings*, published two

⁷ Hawksmoor and his churches now attract a steady following, as can be seen in a plethora of websites devoted to the topic. See, for instance, Rose and Wright.

years later in 1987, Ackroyd's 1985 *Hawksmoor* takes the form of a detective story. In it a 20th century London detective named Hawksmoor tries to solve a series of horrendous murders on the grounds of Christ Church, built by the real-life 18th century architect Hawksmoor. The pun on the names and the juxtaposition of fiction and history is intentional. A second competing story set in the 18th century also runs in parallel, in which a fictitious architect named Nicholas Dyer, uncannily evoking the historical architect Nicholas Hawksmoor, recounts his thoughts and feelings in the midst of designing and constructing the historical Hawksmoor churches after the London fire. The two plots start out as separate, appearing in odd-numbered and even-numbered chapters, respectively. But as the story moves toward the end the two plots become increasingly interwoven, with the detective Hawksmoor chasing after the ghost of the architect Dyer and eventually merging with him, the one dead and the other reborn through him. A number of boundaries are thus collapsed, those of time and space, of narrative diegetic levels, of fiction and history, of self and other and of life and death, as the novel presents a labyrinthine, multi-layered narrative structure with varying perspectives and clues.

Ackroyd picks up two main ideas from Sinclair. One is that Hawksmoor intends his churches to be temples to darkness so that they form a power matrix and emanate mystical energies that impact on sinister events taking place around them. The other is that the dark, irrational and violent forces underlying east London point to the true essence of London that will not be erased or repressed by human efforts at rational control. Where he expands on Sinclair or adds something new is when he much highlights, while Sinclair only hints at, the opposing dichotomy between Wren's rationalism and Hawksmoor's irrationalism. Ackroyd is also more politically current by criticizing explicitly the Thatcherite capitalist urban regeneration which Sinclair had not fully anticipated. Finally, while Sinclair entertains a more expansive idea of a generalized force of darkness that traverses time and space, Ackroyd focuses on the indigenous 18th century Catholic English tradition of the popular visionary as the true essence of Englishness, opposed to and long suppressed by official Protestantism and rationalism.

Ackroyd tells two stories simultaneously. The 18th century plot purports to challenge the traditional perception of the century as one of reason and empiricism, and to show that it is also shaped as much by strong

undercurrents of mystical, diabolical occultism, currents that denote the confused and contradictory atmosphere of the 18th century after the plagues and fires. The symbol of that occultism is the churches that Nicholas Dyer designed, six historical Hawksmoor churches and one fictional church called St. Hugh of Black Step Lane. In a first-person narration, Dyer describes his miserable childhood, the horrible deaths of his parents in the Black Death, the Great Fire, and the savagery of street life when he became a young tramp, which landed him in close range of the poverty, suffering and sordid crimes rampant in the sinister parts of east London. Rescued by an aunt, Dyer advances himself through self-reading and by apprenticeship to the famous architect Wren, with whom he eventually collaborates to build the churches. Dyer's childhood experience and his hodgepodge readings of the world's mythologies make him reject established religion and morality, and espouse instead one of the many strange religious cults flourishing in England at that time, a cult of Satanism that believes that violence, darkness and death rule the world, and that these can only be appeased by acts of evil, bloodshed and human sacrifice.

Dyer works this dark belief into the construction of his churches, and the choice of their sites, on top of ancient burial pits, the first one literally on the graves of Dyer's plague-stricken parents, reflects Dyer's intention to suck in all the sinister energies of the place. To consecrate these secret temples to death and evil, Dyer kills a virgin boy as blood sacrifice each time one of the churches is finished. The plague- and fire-devastated London is a "monstrous Pile" (13), a "Nest of Death and Contagion," "Capital City of the World of Affliction," and "Hive of Noise and Ignorance" (47-48), and only a temple of death, an "Architecture of the Devil" (60-61), a "Pyrammide rising above the stinking Streets of London" (61), will be able to channel this evil and sinister power.

Dyer wants his churches to be like Stonehenge, that pagan site of sacrifice and worship, and seeks not harmony but "Terror and Magnificence," "Strangeness and Awefulness" during the construction (5, 52). When designing one church, he sees a "huge dark Man with red Eyes holding a Sword and clad in a white Garment, a Man holding a golden Sphere and dressed in Red, a Man with a hood of dark Linen over his Head and with his Hands raysed" (105). The Satanic image calls for more bloodshed and violence, as "He who made the World is also author of Death, nor can we but

by doing Evil avoid the rage of evil Spirits” (105). In the end, Dyer sinks into madness and delirium, but warns that he will transcend time and be reincarnated in the future.

In the 20th century plot, the corpses that turn up mysteriously in the grounds of Dyer’s Christ Church seem to hail directly from the 18th century, suggesting that the human sacrifices Dyer used have now risen up from their church graves to haunt and to shock and to impress on the present a sense of the recurrence of past debt and violence. This sense of the continuity of time that sees no severance between the 18th and the 20th centuries is further strengthened by the novel’s structural arrangement, when the last sentences of the odd-numbered 18th century chapters are repeated as the starting sentences of the next, even-numbered 20th century chapters. While the first chapter on Dyer is narrated in the past tense, its last sentence ends in the present tense, suggesting a theme of reincarnation and that Dyer is still very much alive through his churches. “I cannot change that Thing call’d Time, but I can alter its Posture and, as Boys do turn a looking glass against the Sunne, so will I dazzle you all” (11). “Why do the living still haunt me when I am among the Dead?” (89). Time is not about progress or change, but is one long process of continuity, circularity and recurrence, with past and present fused into one. And the most powerful way to impress this knowledge is through Dyer’s churches. “My Churches will indure” (10). “My Churches will live on, darker and more solid than the approaching Night” (148). “All this shall pass, and these things shall fall and crumple into the Dust, but my Churches shall survive” (208). So the churches stand on dark and unchanging, at the center of a recurrent pattern of violence and evil.

This idea of the circularity of time and of the indelible recurrence of the past in the present is a common temporal perception shared by most writers in this strand of contemporary London writing. The truth to the present is in the past, as the two are in perennial continuity and the ruins and relics of the past harbor a latent truth that any rationalistic attempts at human control, powered by a belief in linear progress, change and betterment, can not completely repress.

In Ackroyd’s *Hawksmoor*, a polar opposition is highlighted between Dyer’s diabolical irrationalism, undercurrents that are still recalcitrant in London after the fires and plagues, and Wren’s scientific rationalism, a new official discourse of Enlightenment that is fast gaining ascendance during the

reconstruction project. Wren argues that empirical study could lead to human progress and help humankind to understand and control nature—“The Experimental Philosophy is an Instrument for Mankind’s domination of Darkness and Superstition... through the sciences of Mechanicks, Opticks, Hydrostaticks, Pneumaticks as well as Chymistry, Anatomy and the Mathematical Arts we have begun to understand the works of Nature”. Rationalism will help prove wrong “[t]ales at which [one’s] Ancestours trembled” (141) and wipe out “one of the greatest Curses visited upon Mankind...that they shall fear where no Fear is” (144). “There is no Truth so abstruse nor so far elevated that Man’s reason may not reach it: what you understand, you may control” (147). Dyer, however, secretly believes in such darkness and superstition—“Satan is the God of this World and fit to be worshipp’d” (21). Thus in his churches he forsakes light and even symmetry and seeks to create shadows and gloom.

In the 20th century plot, the Thatcherite official discourse of spatial and social regeneration through capitalist development is also presented as yet another attempt to celebrate human progress. The novel’s setting in the contemporary 1980s is significant, because the Thatcherite reinscription comes after decades of decay and neglect in east London, where a state of poverty and near ruin was exacerbated by staggering rates of unemployment after the government closed down London Docklands, hitherto the main employer in the East End. The flurry of furious entrepreneurial developments in east London awakens the place from decades of dormancy, and seems to promise a better future of prosperity and progress.

As Hawksmoor the detective walks through east London, the area is already being inundated by drills and bulldozers blasting down old houses, huge new road developments with lorries roaring past, and sleek, glass-fronted, multi-corporational skyscrapers towering over the boggy land. Yet Dyer’s 18th century churches, standing in half ruin and mossy decay, represent “all that was dark and immutably dirty about the area” (34), all that cannot be tamed by this rhetoric of progress. Thatcherite efforts to embrace global capitalism, to deregulate the domestic market and erase all planning and environmental restrictions so as to effect the maximum flow of capital, personnel and technology, and to then wipe out traces of east London’s dark, backward past and re-inject a new sense of British national pride, ultimately proves futile, for the past always lurks below and the dark, unruly forces

always reign supreme.

Hawksmoor the detective is at first also a believer in rationality. He walks by a statue of Wren and thinks of himself, a detective, as very much like an architect or scholar, for both use reason and science to solve problems. There is no mystery that cannot be solved with reason, Hawksmoor believes. “Murders aren’t unsolvable. Imagine the chaos if that happened. Who would feel the need to restrain himself then?” (126). Yet as the Christ Church murders prove ever more hard to solve, he finds himself chasing not after living murderers but what seems to be the ghost of the long dead Dyer. Increasingly, Hawksmoor takes on the deranged tendencies of Dyer and becomes sympathetic to Dyer’s dark mysticism. Finally, hopes of detection and rational reasoning are completely defeated, as Hawksmoor rushes to Little St. Hugh, seemingly to prevent the last murder but suspiciously ready to commit the act himself. As he merges with the spirit of Dyer, speaking both with “one voice,” detective and murderer, rationalist and mystic become one. A first person speaker takes over the end of the novel, finishing with the line “and I am a child again, begging on the threshold of eternity” (217). Has the 20th century Hawksmoor achieved death or eternity? Is the 18th century Dyer reborn through Hawksmoor? Reincarnation, and a simultaneity of past and present, life and death and self and other are thus achieved, all in the shadow of the Dyer church.

The final ending suggests that the rationalism of Hawksmoor the detective is increasingly giving way to and finally indistinguishable from Dyer’s mystical occultism. This same blurring can also be seen in the novel’s presentation of the seeming polarity between Wren and Dyer in the 18th century plot. Wren may stand for rationalism and enlightenment, but the novel portrays him as ultimately more cruel and diabolical than the devil-worshipping Dyer. Dyer is called away from his work to witness Wren performing an autopsy on the body of a murdered woman. “Hands steeped in Blood up the Wrist-bones” (95), Wren explores “the private Kingdom of Veins and Arteries” (95), obsessed with seeking knowledge whilst completely detached from and oblivious to the woman. It is Dyer, on the other hand, the supposed Satanist and murderer, who feels horror and empathy for the dead woman, imagining her agony and pain.

A number of critics have discussed this issue and come up with differing

interpretations.⁸ Alex Link, in particular, has argued that Wren and Dyer are mutually complicit and that Dyer's alternative occultism is no less totalizing than Wren's rationalism in trying to order and pattern London (521). But to this author, it seems that Ackroyd's presentation of the dichotomy is less even-handed. In the same way that the detective Hawksmoor is shown as giving way to Dyer's mysticism and finally abandoning his rationalism, Wren's rationalism is subject to far more criticism than Dyer's Satanism. Wren's scientific detachment is shown to be just as cruel if not more so than Dyer's mysticism, and ultimately violence and evil govern everywhere and everyone. In this sense, the dichotomy between rationalism and irrationalism is indeed compromised and blurred, only when it leads to the supremacy of one force, that of the irrational and the sinister.

To Ackroyd, this is the half-buried, unchanging and ancient truth about London and the ultimate true nature of the cityscape that defies temporality, progress or centuries of human attempts at control. Yet, as has been observed of Sinclair's earlier work⁹, this privileging of the sinister, the irrational and the devilish, this canonization of what is conventionally the uncanonical, is perhaps no less arbitrary and as much guilty of paradigm building, albeit an alternative paradigm, as the conventional privileging of the rational, the official discourse both of Wren and of Thatcher that is the target of Ackroyd's criticism. The debunking of the dichotomy is not ultimately successful, for Ackroyd's novel is still very much bound by it, even if he goes only for the reverse of the conventionally acceptable.

Sinclair's more complicated, multi-voiced novel *White Chappell*, *Scarlet Tracings* published two years later demonstrates a greater awareness of this problem, as the narrator self-consciously admits that there is "a sort of sucking in towards evil in the text" (149). To ward off possible criticism, the novel includes a letter, addressed to Sinclair himself by a real-life artist friend Doug, which attacks any criticism of Sinclair's "dabbling with demon" as a relegation of the "poetic process to a nothing" (145-149). In other words, Sinclair's treatment of evil is perceived to be essentially poetic and may be

⁸ Susan Onega sees this passage as evidence of Ackroyd's unmitigated rejection of Enlightenment reason in favor of Dyer's irrationalism (52). Alex Link argues that the antagonism between Dyer and Wren is actually complicit, as one needs the other; and as Dyer's irrational Satanism is as totalizing as Wren's rationalism in order to form a pattern and to order London, albeit in an alternative fashion (522).

⁹ See my 2006 paper "Stalking the East End" 244. Also Perril 309.

closer to what this paper earlier referred to as a more dynamic, metaphysical preoccupation with the radical other. Instead of evil in the conventionally moral sense, it is violence in the metaphysical sense that seems to interest Sinclair more. But with Ackroyd's novel, the pursuit of the alternative seems to be more single-minded and less ambivalent. Unlike the multi-genre *White Chappell*, *Scarlet Tracings*, which combines fiction, history, biography and literary criticism and features narrators from different diegetic levels that allows for more self-reflexivity and self-parody, Ackroyd's two-tier plot line makes his preference much more transparent and obtrusive.

In other works and in interviews, Ackroyd has further narrowed down what he perceives as the ultimate truth about London, and pinpointed a specifically 18th century tradition of the popular visionary, a folklore with roots in the supernatural, the gothic and the grotesque, "stained with the blood rites of the druids" (Link 530), as the true and forgotten inheritance of London. He calls this lost tradition Catholic, as opposed to the rationalism of Protestantism which came to increasing ascendance in England since the 18th century. It is an understanding of London that Dyer possesses and Wren lacks, an understanding that is also at risk of erasure by Thatcherite capitalist rationalization. Not only do Dyer's churches embody this gothic, supernatural tradition in their architectural motifs and designs, but Ackroyd envisages a parallel literary tradition, also flourishing in the 18th century, as the ultimately "English" inheritance of the London writer.

This juxtaposition of architecture and textuality is, as has been mentioned above, common to most writers in this strand of contemporary London writing. For Ackroyd, Hawksmoor's 18th century churches belong to a wider context of 18th century writing that is opposite from the mainstream Augustan tradition of balance, restraint and rationalism, an alternative folklore literary tradition that mixes comedy and seriousness and is characterized by irregularity, mixed modes, textual play and "heterogeneity" ("London Luminaries" 347). To Ackroyd, the 18th century literary gothic best represents this alternative tradition. It is the true English literary tradition, a half "forgotten inheritance" ("William Blake" 353), "buried but scarcely concealed" ("All the Time in the World" 366). It is a tradition that his own mixed mode, multiple-voiced novels try to emulate, and that is why he does not like the "postmodern" epithet many of his critics have ascribed to his

novels,¹⁰ arguing that it is instead an “ancient tradition” (“Englishness” 333) whose Englishness is evidenced in its open indebtedness to “a specifically English mythology or folklore” (Rev. of *Tales* 243).

Yet by pinning down this 18th century tradition, literary or architectural, as allowing for the ultimate true understanding of London and by extension of Englishness, Ackroyd risks giving a face to this ever elusive, ineffable spectrality that by its nature continually resists any efforts at systematization, order or control. By filling in the lack at the core of the structure of knowledge-making, he is dangerously close to the same totalizing tendencies he is attacking in the rationalist schemes of Wren and Thatcher. At the same time that he fails to see that the later centuries, including the present, may harbor a similar heterogeneity, Ackroyd also seems blind to the fact that the 18th century tradition, the alternative paradigm that he sets up, may contain elements of control and domination no less arbitrary.

Ackroyd’s interpretation of the gothic may also be problematic. The 18th century literary gothic is indeed characterized by a form of excessiveness, irrationality and heterogeneity, mixing and inheriting many of the elements of the feudal past which also often form its content. While indeed betraying a reaction against the restraint, control and order of the mainstream Protestant spirit, the literary gothic harbors a much more ambiguous attitude toward the Catholic past. It mimics and borrows the form of the feudal, aristocratic past, but the desire for the irrational is mostly displaced onto feudal lords or evil priests, who become safe, easy targets of ridicule while the virtues of the new rising Protestant middle class, by contrast, are still kept intact and lauded.¹¹ This may suggest a deliberate ploy by 18th century gothic literature to ward off possible attacks, but it does also suggest a richer, more complex approach than Ackroyd’s unambiguous endorsement of the Catholic. Ackroyd’s writing has done much to revive awareness of London’s rich literary heritage, but in the earnestness of his message he also seems to gloss over that heritage’s complexity and multi-layers, the very qualities he has set out to laud.

¹⁰ A representative critic taking this postmodern approach is Susana Omega. See also De Lange.

¹¹ For a recent study, see Spooner 23-85.

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