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MAPPING LONDON IN PETER ACKROYD'S PROSE

Abstract

There are many ways of mapping spaces. Mapmaking can be informed by various realms of knowledge – from history and culture to the sciences. Taking geography as a starting point, maps unite physical and fictional spaces as they focus on the interaction between geography and society, that is, location and culture. Disciplines like cultural geography and geocriticism explore how narratives relate to landscapes. Viewing writers as cartographers, the American writer and scholar Peter Turchi describes how stories about places map those places according to their authors' visions. The stories about spaces provide the indispensable link between mind and space, making navigation possible. On the other hand, spatial stories make the imagined spaces "real" to readers bringing them close to their own worlds.

In his fictional world, the British writer Peter Ackroyd imagines London by building an intricate network of relationships between the location and the stories that were lived and told by the people who populated it over time. In Ackroyd's imagination, the portrait of London is produced by the histories, memories, experiences, and daily routines of its real and fictional dwellers.

In this paper, I propose to analyze how London is fantasized and mapped in Ackroyd's fiction. Drawing on Robert Tally's studies in literary cartography and Bertrand Westphal's book on real and fictional spaces, this paper aims to show how fiction contributes to mapping spaces and creating portraits of places.

Key words: London, Peter Ackroyd, deep maps, inscriptions, traces, space, place, dwelling

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"To ask for a map is to say, 'Tell me a story'", claims Peter Turchi, highlighting the importance of storytelling in the navigation of space (2004: 11). Stories map spaces and expose the intimate connection between literature and cartography. In a book called *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces* (2007), the pioneers of geocriticism Bertrand Westphal and Robert Tally, Jr. imply that "we understand 'real' places by understanding their fundamental fictionality" (Tally, Jr. 2007/2011: x). The opposite is also true, "we understand 'fictional' spaces by grasping their own levels of reality as they become part of our world" (ibid.). Fiction often traces the invisible signs, symbols, and inscriptions in real locations by revealing their various meanings and interpretations. Our maps, or "fictions" about places enclose our understanding of reality, while narratives give form to our imagination. In literature, fiction weaves together with reality to encode locations with meanings and "make a place a *place*" (Yi-Fu Taun, quoted in Tally, Jr. 2014: 3). Through literature, stories about places become part of their uniqueness and reality.

In his fiction, Peter Ackroyd maps London with stories in which he blends history with fantasy. He traces mental maps of the imagined minds of various authors, travelers, vagrants, tramps, and dwellers of London. Their stories reveal visions, thrills, sufferings, dreams, and fantasies about London over centuries, reminding the reader that, through fiction, "cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears" (Calvino 1974: 44).

London is Peter Ackroyd's hero, and a protagonist in almost all his books. In his first novel, *The Great Fire of London,* Ackroyd sets out to map London as a city of mysteries and destruction. He starts developing his method of "digging" into London's secretive realities. He revives the world of London's celebrities – "great Londoners," referring to their fantasies and fictions exposed in their works. On the other hand, he addresses anonymous Londoners, low lifers and fictional characters making them all traverse the city space. In *The Great Fire of London,* he refers to Charles Dickens's world created in his novel *Little Dorrit.* The plot is set in the location and space of the Marshalsea prison in Southwark, on the south bank of the Thames. It is interesting to note that the Marshalsea prison was one of the oldest prisons in London, established in the 14th century. Although originally used for seamen's violations, the Marshalsea Prison became known as a debtor's prison in the 16th century. At the beginning of the 19th century, Dickens's father was imprisoned in the Marshalsea Prison for his debts when Dickens was only 12. This trauma is known to have had a tremendous impact on

the young Dickens and his vision of society, which became his major theme and most directly inspired *Little Dorrit*. Dickens's own biography is thus inscribed in the history and "stones" of the Marshalsea Prison.

As Dickens is one of Ackroyd's "great Londoners," the intertext of the Marshalsea Prison imports Dickens's own vision of London – its injustices, brutality, and crimes – into the novel's world. This description agrees with Ackroyd's own grim vision of the city, as reflected in the frequent references to prisons and catastrophes throughout his works. Even the novel's title, "The Great Fire of London," foresees a tragedy involving many fires and destruction throughout London's history. As he points out, "it has always been rebuilt, and demolished, and vandalized. That, too, is part of its history" (Ackroyd 2012a: 614). The plot moves back and forth in time and covers two centuries – the Victorian and the modern age. *The Great Fire of London* is written from the perspective of two imaginations: the imagined world of Charles Dickens and the "real" world of an eccentric director named Spenser Spender, who sets out to recreate the world of Dickens's *Little Dorrit* on screen. In early Victorian London, as Dickens saw it through the lens of poverty and squalor, the low life of marginal and marginalized social groups overlaps with the images of contemporary life in contemporary London, with similar Victorian markers of crime, madness, and poverty. The city is pictured at the intersection of two time panels as a unique mental map drawn to connect the imaginary points of timeless moments—pain, misery, and awkwardness. The artistic imaginations of Charles Dickens and the director Spender are united in the story of "Little Dorrit." Dickens's story is about a girl named Dorrit who was born in the Marshalsea Prison, while Spenders's story seeks to revive Dickens's world in the 20th-century location of the Marshalsea Prison. The two ages are spiritually linked by Audrie – a deranged 20th-century woman who thinks that she is "Little Dorrit," "the child of the Marshalsea" (Ackroyd 1982: 40). She frequents the film set and harasses the crew, insisting that she is the only "legitimate" "Little Dorrit." As is common in Ackroyd's novels, the two ages are connected by numerous ties and spirits that haunt London locations. The general cruelty of life in Dickens's world emanates a spirit that persists in the modern age of similar hopelessness and depression. Their miseries culminate in the great fire that devours all. The "artist" Spender alone destroys his work. Like many of Ackroyd's other characters, Spender is obsessed with the past, destruction, fire, and macabre deals. In shaping Spender's personality, Ackroyd foregrounds his own interest in

deranged, obsessive minds, criminals, and killers who, curiously, reflect the city's propensity to crime. His first novel also envisioned the mental maps that Ackroyd would trace through London spaces – stories that uncover the hidden histories of London landmarks, linking the present with the past.

In *London Under* Ackroyd announces that in the city space "good and evil can be found side by side; enchantment and terror mingle" (Ackroyd 2012b: 3). Ackroyd's cartographic fiction based on a particular vision of the city is most striking in his novel *Hawksmoor*. The balance of good and evil is what has and should govern the thoughts of the architects of London space.

> … for there is no Light without Darknesse and no Substance without Shaddowe (and I turn this Thought over in my Mind: what Life is there which is not a Portmanteau of Shaddowes and Chimeras?). I build in the Day to bring News of the Night and of Sorrowe. (Ackroyd 1985: 5–6)

In the novel *Hawksmoor*, which is set simultaneously in two different "presents," London landmarks link London's present with the past. Ignoring chronology, *Hawksmoor* maps London as a mental map of several real/ imagined characters who travel through the space of London, spanning centuries. The novel unravels the mystery of their ties with London landmarks, mapping the city's space as an imaginary journey or quest for some privileged knowledge. Occultism, secretive knowledge, obsession, and reason are the keywords that lead the imagination of the protagonists towards their goals. The protagonists are coupled into two camps in their quest for existential wisdom: those who search the area of light and those who search through the realm of darkness. London is mapped as a double-surfaced mirror in which light is dangerously but inevitably close to darkness.

The story is based on the historical saga of rebuilding London after the Great Fire. Many protagonists are named after historical figures. One of them is Sir Christopher Wren, who was the key figure in London's reconstruction. He was appointed to reconstruct many buildings and several churches. Wren's work gave a completely new look to the city. Alongside Wren worked his apprentice, Nicholas Hawksmoor. Although Wren was the main architect, Hawksmoor's work was considered important, and his legacy of six churches significantly shaped the city's landscape as well. While Wren's style was monumental and elegant, Hawksmoor's was intricate and enigmatic. In 1711, Hawksmoor was one of the leading

architects appointed to the commission during the reign of Queen Anne to build 50 new churches. Sir Christopher Wren, whose work and ideas are grounded in the philosophy of Enlightenment, stands, needless to say, for the light, while his apprentice, whose name in the book is Nicholas Dyer, is shaped as an occultist and a dark genius. The name Nicholas Hawksmoor is given to a fictional character – a contemporary detective, unable to solve the mysteries inscribed in the city stones. Ackroyd blurs their names as an indication of their blurred destinies on the axes of time.

In the novel *Hawksmoor,* Ackroyd maps London as a city of the eternal struggle between light and darkness, where the concepts of art, artifice, and architecture reflect mind structures and visions of the city as a struggle between Christopher Wren, with his enlightened vision, and Nicholas Dyer (historically Hawksmoor) with his obsessive mind. Their respective imaginations are intermingled to make one comprehensive map of London as a combination of the self and the shadow. One imagination belongs to the macabre fictional Dyer, based on the real and acclaimed architect Hawksmoor; the other belongs to the fictional, 20th-century detective Nicholas Hawksmoor. The imaginary Dyer and the real/imaginary Hawksmoor represent contrasting powers of darkness and light. In the persons of the two architects – one historical, one fictional – two images of reality merge, exposing Ackroyd's concepts of London as both a dark and a white city. Each architect is an artist; only the historical one, Hawksmoor, built churches and created the visible cityscape, while the other killed his fellow citizens to bury them and build them in the structure of the churches. The plot thus features the mystery of several murders that are performed in the name of art and architecture. The churches are historical, the murders are imaginary, and they retell the historical saga of rebuilding London after the Great Fire (1666). The architects, Dyer and Hawksmoor, reflect London's destiny, as Ackroyd imagines it as a city of contrasts, beauty, and crime: "Architecture aims at Eternity and must contain the Eternal Powers: not only our Altars and Sacrifices, but the Forms of our Temples, must be mystical" (Ackroyd 1985: 4).

Although the plan was to build seven churches, in actuality six churches were rebuilt to the designs of Nicholas Hawksmoor at the beginning of the 18th century: St Anne's in Limehouse, probably named after Queen Anne; Christ Church, Spitalfields, in central London; St George's in Bloomsbury, central London; St Mary Woolnoth in Central London; St George in the East, in the East End of London; St Alfege Church, in Greenwich, to the

southeast of the City of London. All of them are referred to in the novel as serving as both sanctuaries and murder sites. This view of London inspires the London map as a diagram drawn between seven churches that are metaphors of light as they are houses of God, while these very locations are also murder sites. The struggle between light and darkness reflects the mental structure and vision of all humanity.

> That the miseries of the present Life, arid the Barbarities of Mankind, the fatall disadvantages we are all under and the Hazard we run of being eternally Undone, lead the True Architect not to Harmony or to Rationall Beauty but to quite another Game. (Ackroyd 1985: 9)

London is mapped as a diagram drawn between seven churches. Churches are metaphors of light – loci of light as the temples of God, but Dyer's churches are also murder sites. The murders, or rather the moments of killing, are a focal point of the plot, depicted as an eternal present and the unity of two imaginations – Dyer's and Hawksmoor's. Ackroyd's fictional 20th-century detective Hawksmoor, is, in the fictional world, trying to solve the murders of six victims who were murdered at the very same locations occupied by the very same churches and, in a strange play of coincidence, are called by similar names as the respective victims of the 18th-century crimes. The locations combine the two principles of the London spirit – darkness and light – rationality and irrationality, detective and magical ways of thinking.

The last church addressed in the novel, Little St Hugh, is purely fictional, though its location is inscribed in the city space.

> He descended at Fenchurch Street, expecting to glimpse the spire of the church somewhere above him, but here were only the burnished towers of office-blocks which gleamed in the winter light. A seller of hot chestnuts stood on the corner of Gracechurch Street, and for a moment Hawksmoor watched the coals of his brazier as they brightened and then dimmed with the passage of the wind down the crowded thoroughfares; he went up to him saying, 'Little St Hugh?' and the man, not pausing in his cries, pointed up Lime Street. And his refrain of Hot chestnuts! Hot chestnuts! was taken up by another calling Woe! Woe! and then by a third who cried out Paper! Paper! These were the calls he had known all his life and Hawksmoor grew melancholy as he walked up Lime Street into St Mary Axe. (Ackroyd 1985: 215)

In the location of the only fictional church in the novel, the two protagonists meet and become one – an eternal architect, a builder, and a murderer. The "murder" of the Other's double unites death, rebirth, mystery, and reason as the Light (of the Enlightenment) and the Darkness of Occultism blend at the fictional spot – the unison of murder, martyrdom, and rebirth.

> They were face to face, and yet they looked past one another at the pattern which they cast upon the stone; for when there was a shape there was a reflection, and when there was a light there was a shadow, and when there was a sound there was an echo, and who could say where one had ended and the other had begun? And when they spoke they spoke with one voice: … And when I went among them, they touched fingers and formed a circle around me; and, as we came closer, all the while we moved further apart. Their words were my own but not my own, and I found myself on a winding path of smooth stones. And when I looked back, they were watching one another silently.

> And then in my dream I looked down at myself and saw in what rags I stood; and I am a child again, begging on the threshold of eternity. (Ackroyd 1985: 217)

Beggars and vagrants – all of whom are begging "on the threshold of eternity" – are constant characters in Ackroyd's prose. They underline the space inhabited by a timeless, invisible crowd of anonymous figures with unchanging outlooks and philosophy. They are perpetual dwellers of London, the endless row of eyewitnesses to London history. In his book *London Under* Ackroyd reflects, "The vagrants of London often lived under bridges and under arches…" (Ackroyd 2012b: 7). The stories collected in *London Under* map London as a shadowy presence of the visible city space – an inseparable part of its "body and being."

> Like the nerves within the human body, the underworld controls the life of the surface. Our activities are governed and sustained by materials and signals that emanate from beneath the ground; a pulse, an ebb, a flow, a signal, a light, or a run of water, will affect us. It is a shadow or replica of the city; like London itself it has developed organically with its own laws of growth and change. (Ackroyd 2012b: 1–2)

However, the outlook of London is at its most intricate in Ackroyd's biography of London. In Ackroyd's reading, "biography" is "history dispersed in geography" (Said 1993: 279). The historical timeline is intersected with numerous digressions. In this book, Ackroyd has collected as many facts and fantasies about London as he possibly could. In them, London is seen through the eyes of its dwellers – some of them authors themselves – imagining it through the devices of genre, style, and culture of specific periods. Ackroyd maps London as a millennial body, a person tracing its physical and spiritual features, and creating it as a place. As in his other books, stories expose London as a place of contrasts – ugly and enchanting at the same time: "London has always been an ugly city. It is part of its identity. It has always been rebuilt, and demolished, and vandalised. That, too, is part of its history" (Ackroyd 2012a: 614).

Abstract concepts connect the flow of experiences of life in London and group them into narratives in which London is pictured as dangerous, sentimental, boisterous, loud, violent, magical, criminal, bloodthirsty, active, and colorful. Curiously, all these traits are most often present simultaneously. One of the greatest concepts that links abstractions is the color red.

> Red is London's colour. The cabs of the early nineteenth century were red. The pillar boxes are red. The telephone boxes were, until recently, red. The buses are characteristically still red. The Underground trains were once generally of that colour. The tiles of Roman London were red. The original wall of London was built from red sandstone. London Bridge itself was reputed to be imbued with red, "bespattered with the blood of little children" as part of the ancient rituals of building. Red is also the colour of violence. (Ackroyd 2012a: 188)

"Red" stresses London's doubleness. It evokes objects, events and locations where glee and sorrow rub shoulders, while at the same time, many of them are linked to the locations of London prisons and execution sites. Ackroyd thus exposes the terror and exaltation linked to London prison life.

Newgate Prison is one of the most notorious prisons in London. It originated in the 12th century and was a gatehouse on the western side of the Roman London Wall, the wall around the City of London. It was notorious for its cruelty and harsh conditions, and later for grim spectacles – public executions. Newgate Prison was seriously damaged in the Great

Fire of London in 1666. However, it continued to be the site of public executions conducted well into the late 19th century. Newgate Prison was finally demolished at the beginning of the 20th century.

The location of Newgate Prison stresses London's long history, traditions that connect centuries, and its violent nature, wrapped in stories about prison life, its violence, and its infamy. The famous prisoner John "Jack" Sheppard (1702–1724) was one of the most prominent prisoners of London crime life. His "life and times" inspired literary works, theater performances, and even operas. A pantomime by *Harlequin Sheppard* was put on stage only two weeks after his execution. Daniel Defoe allegedly wrote a pamphlet, Sheppard's autobiography, which circulated on the day of his execution. Sheppard's dark glory serves in Ackroyd's work as an illustration of London's affection for the eerie. Popular songs were performed in his "honour." He was known for his four escapes from notorious London prisons until he finally took "the fatal route taken by the condemned from Newgate to Tyburn" (Ackroyd 2012a: 756). The life of Jack Sheppard, his moves from one infamous London prison to another, as well as his final itinerary to death, were once again followed by the joyful, crowded map of the city space as a horrific spectacle.

It is interesting to note how Ackroyd creates "great Londoners." In "his" London, historical and fictional characters live side by side. Thus, the legendary detective Sherlock Holmes, although an entirely fictional character, is one of Ackroyd's "great Londoners." The personality of Sherlock Holmes personifies the urban spirit of London. Holmes is a striking figure whose skill in solving mysteries is linked to his deep knowledge of London life and thoroughfares– the vast boulevards of central London and its narrow alleys where crimes usually happen.

> Sherlock Holmes, a character who could have existed only in the heart of London. According to his amanuensis, Holmes "had at least five small refuges in different parts of London, in which he was able to change his personality." The mysteries of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, too, could be conducted only through "the swirling wreaths" of London fog where character and identity may suddenly and dramatically be obscured. (Ackroyd 2012a: 126).

The fact that Sherlock Holmes inhabits the real spaces of London with his fictional persona reinforces the ultimate fictionality of real spaces. Holmes's fictional lodgings in Baker Street have ever since become one

of the "real" treasures of London life. His fictional itineraries as he traced criminals through labyrinthine alleys and corners contributed to London maps and its history as the imaginations and stories of many of its famous and anonymous inhabitants over time. Holmes's case supports Tally, Jr.'s claim that "the referentiality of fiction … allows it to point to a recognizable place, real or imaginary, or a bit of both at once, while also transforming that place, making it part of a fictional world (Tally, Jr. 2007/2011: x).

A writer is a dreamer, a traveller, and a cartographer as mapmaking involves the creation of stories. Through an imaginary dialogue between Kublai Khan and Marco Polo in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, the "ingenious foreigner" tells the Emperor stories about the cities he visited (Calvino 1974: 21). Khan "interprets" the stories by examining their emblems that Polo provides, mixing mixes mental images, memories, and fantasies within them. The stories make the cities "real" to the emperor, although he cannot tell the truth from falsehood. However, he believes that the "cities … are the work of the mind" (Calvino 1974: 44). The imaginary dialogue between a dreamer and a traveller highlights the essence of all cartographic fiction – the role of imagination in mapping the world. Ackroyd keeps that ongoing dialogue between imagination and interpretation in his mapping of London, tracing the emblems of London stories through its history and geography. Thus, the map of the city in Ackroyd's fiction constantly emerges and reemerges from the liminal space between the official story and the interpretation of its various anonymous cartographers and storytellers.

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