

Peter Ackroyd  
The Ludic and Labyrinthine Text

*Also by Julian Wolfreys*

- \* APPLYING: TO DERRIDA (*co-editor with John Brannigan and Ruth Robbins*)
  - BEING ENGLISH: Narratives, Idioms, and Performances of National Identity from Coleridge to Trollope
  - DECONSTRUCTION • DERRIDA
  - THE DERRIDA READER: Writing Performances (*editor*)
  - THE FRENCH CONNECTIONS OF JACQUES DERRIDA (*co-editor with John Brannigan and Ruth Robbins*)
  - LITERARY THEORIES: A Case Study in Critical Performance (*co-editor with William Baker*)
  - LITERARY THEORIES: A Reader and Guide (*editor*)
  - READINGS: Acts of Close Reading in Literary Theory
  - \* RE: JOYCE: Text–Culture–Politics (*co-editor with John Brannigan and Geoff Ward*)
  - \* THE RHETORIC OF AFFIRMATIVE RESISTANCES: Dissonant Identities from Carroll to Derrida
  - \* VICTORIAN IDENTITIES: Social and Cultural Formations in Nineteenth-Century Literature (*co-editor with Ruth Robbins*)
  - \* WRITING LONDON: The Trace of the Urban Text from Blake to Dickens
- \* *From the same publishers*

# Peter Ackroyd

## The Ludic and Labyrinthine Text

Jeremy Gibson

and

Julian Wolfreys

Foreword by Peter Nicholls





First published in Great Britain 2000 by  
**MACMILLAN PRESS LTD**  
 Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS and London  
 Companies and representatives throughout the world

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-349-39960-4      ISBN 978-0-230-28834-8 (eBook)  
 DOI 10.1057/9780230288348

---



First published in the United States of America 2000 by  
**ST. MARTIN'S PRESS, INC.,**

Scholarly and Reference Division,  
 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010

ISBN 978-0-312-22868-2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gibson, Jeremy Sumner Wycherley.

Peter Ackroyd : the ludic and labyrinthine text / Jeremy Gibson  
 and Julian Wolfreys ; foreword by Peter Nicholls.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-312-22868-2 (cloth)

1. Ackroyd, Peter, 1949- — Criticism and interpretation.

2. Experimental fiction, English—History and criticism.

I. Wolfreys, Julian, 1958- . II. Title.

PR6051.C64Z66 1999

828'.91409—dc21

99-43171

CIP

---

© Peter Gibson and Julian Wolfreys 2000

Foreword © Peter Nicholls 2000

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2000 978-0-333-67751-3

All rights reserved. No reproduction, copy or transmission of this publication may be made without written permission.

No paragraph of this publication may be reproduced, copied or transmitted save with written permission or in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, or under the terms of any licence permitting limited copying issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency, 90 Tottenham Court Road, London W1P 0LP.

Any person who does any unauthorised act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

The authors have asserted their rights to be identified as the authors of this work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1  
 09 08 07 06 05 04 03 02 01 00

*To friends at HEQC*

*This page intentionally left blank*

# Contents

<i>Abbreviations</i>	viii
<i>Foreword by Peter Nicholls</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
Introduction: the 'ludicrous' Text of Peter Ackroyd	1
1 'A tiny light /seen in the mind's eye as a phoneme': the Poetry of Peter Ackroyd	35
2 'A bit of a game': the Styles of Peter Ackroyd I: <i>The Great Fire of London, The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde, Hawksmoor</i>	67
3 'A bit of a game': the Styles of Peter Ackroyd II: <i>Chatterton, English Music, First Light, Milton in America</i>	123
4 'Endless Variety': Writing the City in the Biographies, <i>The House of Doctor Dee</i> , and <i>Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem</i>	172
5 Three Interviews with Peter Ackroyd	
• 26 August 1989	221
• 4 January 1995	236
• 21 December 1997	249
<i>Bibliography</i>	289
<i>Index</i>	304

# Abbreviations

The following abbreviations for the works of Peter Ackroyd are used throughout the text. Full bibliographical details are given in the Bibliography at the end of the book.

<i>B</i>	<i>Blake</i>
<i>C</i>	<i>Chatterton</i>
<i>CL</i>	<i>Country Life</i>
<i>D</i>	<i>Dickens</i>
<i>DLLG</i>	<i>Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem</i>
<i>DP</i>	<i>The Diversions of Purley</i>
<i>DU</i>	<i>Dressing Up</i>
<i>EPW</i>	<i>Ezra Pound and His World</i>
<i>FL</i>	<i>First Light</i>
<i>GFL</i>	<i>The Great Fire of London</i>
<i>H</i>	<i>Hawksmoor</i>
<i>HDD</i>	<i>The House of Doctor Dee</i>
<i>ID</i>	<i>Introduction to Dickens</i>
<i>LL</i>	<i>London Lickpenny</i>
<i>LTM</i>	<i>The Life of Thomas More</i>
<i>LTOW</i>	<i>The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde</i>
<i>MA</i>	<i>Milton in America</i>
<i>NNC</i>	<i>Notes for a New Culture</i>
<i>O</i>	<i>Ouch</i>
<i>PP</i>	<i>The Plato Papers</i>
<i>TSE</i>	<i>T. S. Eliot</i>

# Foreword

Forewords are openings; this one, sadly, also marks a close. Jeremy Gibson, instigator of this book on Peter Ackroyd, died after a cycling accident in 1996. He was 29 and had recently completed his DPhil at the University of Sussex. He was a man of multifarious talents, and while working on his doctoral thesis he continued to develop as a musician, composer and creative writer. The thesis itself explored what Jeremy called 'Problems of Value in Literary Study, Critical Theory and Educational Politics', and in its wide sweep of reference it laid the foundations for his later work on Ackroyd's fiction. The enthusiasm for Ackroyd's novels was, however, an early one, and, as Jeremy's DPhil supervisor, I was aware that from the outset his interest in critical theory was motivated by a fascination with aspects of language and fictionality which his reading of Ackroyd had already provoked. With the thesis behind him, Jeremy promptly returned to Ackroyd's work and was generously granted several interviews, two of which are published here. At the time of his death, a manuscript had been submitted for preliminary assessment to Macmillan. Several chapters existed in draft form, along with a mass of speculative comments and extended citations from Ackroyd's writings. A book was clearly there in germ, though a daunting amount of work remained to be done. As reader for the publisher, Julian Wolfreys was enthusiastic about the project and accepted editor Charmian Hearne's invitation to bring it to completion.

Such is the history of the present volume, though as Ackroyd himself would be quick to remind us, mere facts are never adequate to events. 'The past can only really exist in the present,' he observes in one of the interviews included here, and this comment, so pertinent to his own fictional practice, provides, for me, one way of reading the words of someone whose lively and combative conversation I shall not be able to enjoy again. For this study – on the face of it just another work of literary criticism – is motivated by a critical imagination which – quite remarkably – is shared and developed by a co-author who never met his fellow writer. Somewhere in all this is something which our authors call 'the ludic and labyrinthine' – a shared sense of serious playfulness and an attentiveness to traces and memories which at once marks all of Ackroyd's fiction and establishes a textual network in which both absent and present voices speak. This responsiveness to what is past and shared – to a tradition which is active, pantomimic and not oppressive – is something which, the authors argue, characterizes much of Ackroyd's work and defines its sense of possible community. I will leave it to them to make that point in detail, noting here only that playfulness bespeaks a certain generosity, a lack of dogmatism,

an openness of view, which both authors have admired in Ackroyd's fiction. Such intellectual generosity is certainly a quality for which I shall remember Jeremy, and it is something richly celebrated here, in Julian Wolfreys's own dedication to this project. In all of this, Peter Ackroyd's exploration of those complex and moving passages between past and present seems relevant indeed.

PETER NICHOLLS

# Acknowledgements

I never 'knew' Jeremy Gibson. I put the verb in quotation marks to signal the fact that, while I never met Jeremy, I feel, having worked with his material for the past year, having spoken about him and his work with his parents, Charmian Hearne of Macmillan, and Peter Ackroyd, I know something of Jeremy Gibson, I know him, I know a particular Jeremy Gibson in a certain way, which this is neither the place nor the time to put into words.

This book is, inevitably, different in a number of ways from the book Jeremy might have written. Working with his material, in all its various forms, in varying stages of completion or incompleteness, I have had to revise, rewrite or otherwise make editorial decisions. On occasions, I have felt, correctly or otherwise, that it was more important to go with the spirit of Jeremy's work, rather than the letter. This was particularly the case where all that was left to me were pages of citations from Ackroyd's texts, seeming to indicate some skeletal configuration of an anticipated chapter. Despite this, I hope this very different book might be neither unfamiliar nor unwelcome to Jeremy Gibson, and that it has become, if not the book he was going to write, at least one possible book he may have written, had he lived. Jeremy's work most immediately informs the opening pages of the introduction, Chapter 2 and the material on *Chatterton* from Chapter 3, along with the first two interviews.

My first acknowledgement and debt of gratitude is therefore to Jeremy himself. I would also like to thank Charmian Hearne for asking me to complete this book. I would like to thank everyone who read portions, drafts or complete chapters, those who criticized and commented, those who made remarks in passing about Peter Ackroyd's work, and those who gave me information and assistance over the nature and mythology of the golem, and other matters.

Finally, the greatest debt of gratitude, acknowledged as freely as possible beyond the bounds of conventional politeness, is to Peter Ackroyd. His receptiveness and generosity, his unstinting willingness to help in whatever manner, and his openness to questioning and discussion are, without question, the principal reason for the completion of this project. I would also like to thank Peter Ackroyd for granting permission to reproduce material from both his novels and his poetry.

JULIAN WOLFREYS