Transcendental Disposition of Time in Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor* (1985)

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"Time present and time past
Are all in time future perhaps present
And time future contained in time past.
If time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable, [...]
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present."
T.S. Eliot[1]

Peter Ackroyd's London novels display a various and intriguing range of temporal alterations and alternations. Ackroyd is a skilful writer of historiographic metafictional novels within the premises of which traditional peculiarities of time are being distorted in multifaceted ways. While in *The House of Doctor Dee* (1993), time periods replace each other in an orderly way, in *Dan Leno and The Limehouse Golem* (1994), different times flow simultaneously or in *Chatterton* (1987), visions and dreams embody the temporal continuum. His London is a perpetual minatory city that refashions time's value, movement, and conceptualisation. Since addressing all these instances exceeds the purposes of this paper, I will focus only on his *Hawksmoor* published in 1985 to articulate the rational and irrational temporal parallelisms that refute orthodox theories. Although *Hawksmoor* is a historiographic metafiction that approaches the historical concept given in the book as an artificial construct of the human mind, this paper focuses on the occurrences deliberately distorting time's conventional nature. While the first part will address the postulations of linear time's order, the second part will explore the circular time's events resulting in the altered perception of the actual or objective time of the novel. In the final part, I will reveal that there is also an intersection of quixotically flowing time initiating the penultimate union or transcendental exposition of different times.

As Ackroyd's other historiographic metafictions, *Hawksmoor* is a novel dealing with two stories lived in the same place two centuries apart. These two plotlines whirl around

[1] T. S. Eliot, *The Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936), accessed 1 May, 2022, http://www.davidgorman.com/4quartets/1-norton.htm.

the churches in two time periods. Whether these plots are alternating or parallel is a quest for a reader to find since the first line deals with the life and activity of Christopher Wren's brilliant student Nicholas Dyer in the 18th century (the years 1711–1715) and is told in the 18th-century English language. The second line tells the story of a police detective called Nicholas Hawksmoor in the 20th century and is written in modern English.

THE ORDER OF LINEAR TIME

Nicholas Dyer's life story is illuminated in the first five consecutive chapters constituting the book's first part. Though being rich with flashbacks to his childhood, Dyer retells them retrospectively in the style of confessions. As a child, Dyer loses his parents to the Black Plague in 1665 and is adopted by a magus called Mirabilis, who also schools him in his creed, which promotes "that Sathan is the God of this World and fit to be worshipp'd."[2] Unable to endure all the spiritual tension of Mirabilis's occultic science called *Scientia Umbrarum,* Nick escapes and joins the vagabonds, most of whom are orphans from the Plague like himself. Turning fourteen, Nick is given the apprenticeship to a mason. Then famous Christopher Wren hires him due to his sensational knowledge of the peculiarities of construction materials like stone, timber, wood, etc.

Time passes, Nick starts to contradict Christopher Wren's empirical worldview of New Science and his plans regarding the churches and initiates disguising his own ideas in their construction. Busy with his other duties, Wren sets Dyer to work independently, unaware of his true intentions. In this way, Dyer begins to lay the foundations for seven churches in the most macabre parts of London to fulfil his satanic duty. He builds his seven churches in Spitalfields, Limehouse (St Anne's), Wapping (St George-in-the-East), Lombard Street (St Mary Woolnoth's), Bloomsbury (St George's), Greenwich (St Alfege's), and Moorfields (St Hugh's), each of which is a landscape with subterranean passages extending into graveyards, cemeteries, sepulchres, settlements of beggars, historical chambers of sacrifices "consecrated to evil spirits by a human sacrifice made in its foundations."[3] His main purpose in constructing these seven churches is to help his soul cross "the seven planetary orbs that separate the material from the spiritual world" and become "*Anthropos,* the cosmic man."[4] Dyer gets mental disorders during this whole

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[2] Peter Ackroyd, *Hawksmoor* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 21.

[3] Alan Hollinghurst, "In Hieroglyph and Shadow," *The Times Literary Supplement,* September 27, 1985, 1049.

[4] Susana Onega Jaén, *Metafiction and Myth in the Novels of Peter Ackroyd* (Columbia: Camden House, 1999), 50.

process, making his "mildew'd Fancies and confus'd Rules"[5] obvious to the rest of Wren's construction office.

A heterodiegetic narrator tells the second part of the book. It starts with Ackroyd's eponymous Nicholas Hawksmoor's investigation of the third homicide in Wapping following Spitalfields and Limehouse in the 20th century. Detective Chief Superintendent Hawksmoor is a competent detective and easily recognises how crimes have been conducted by examining the signs on the corpses. From the manners of killings, he allocates them to the 18th century because he is reading Thomas de Quincey's writings on the murder cases and draws some resemblances between them. Eventually, Hawksmoor realises that the mystery lies within the churches and the architect is the crossing point. Afterwards, Hawksmoor receives a letter from a person calling himself "The Universal Architect"[6] and starts to trace him. While haunting an unknown murderer, Hawksmoor's mentality gets altered, and he becomes like a tramp himself, consequently being estranged from his duties by his Senior. Despite this decision, Nicholas continues his pursuit and finds the tramp in a matte black coat in the church of Little St Hugh. The person turns out to be his own reflection, and the novel finishes with the mystical reunion of the two characters.

On the surface of both Dyer's and Hawksmoor's stories, the conception of time appears as "a linear, uniform, and continually progressing process", each event has an irreversibly transitory point on the "homogeneous, steadily quantifiable arrow of time."[7] Deducted from all metaphysical, mystical, and mythical conventions, this homogeneous time is in an unfluctuating line with the natural world around Dyer. The "chronology as a model of time" is predominant in Nicholas's 18th century.[8] At first sight, Hawksmoor's time also resembles one-directional linearity in coherence with a clock time with "an unimpeded sequence of raw empirical realities."[9] The forward time perception of these storylines and the progressive nature of the empirical events also demonstrate that "the

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5 Ackroyd, *Hawksmoor,* 87.

6 Ibid., 166.

7 Thomas Fuchs, "The Cyclical Time of the Body and Its Relation to Linear Time," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 25, no. 7–8 (2018): 47–48.

8 Mark Currie, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 93.

9 Dana Shiller, "The Redemptive Past in the Neo-Victorian Novel," *Studies in the Novel* 29, no. 4 (1997): 540.

only time conceivable is precisely chronological time."[10] Not surprisingly, the perception of time alters at that moment when recurring events resonating circularity of the time violate the ordinary conception of it as "time is the most fundamental structure of consciousness" or rather "temporalising is what consciousness *does*."[11] A breach of this pattern leads "to physical or psychological as well as to social disorders" as seen from Dyer's and Hawksmoor's altered mentalities with the growth of circling instances revolving around them in London – Ackroyd's "psycho-spatial-temporal-fictional construct."[12]

CIRCULAR TIME'S EVENTS

The second part of the novel is significantly important in studying the disruption of the progressive flow of time. These distortions are present in stylistics and structural layers of the text and the linguistic and symbolic strata. Initially, the transtemporal nature of the time is posited by the dualities existing in both centuries. The main of them is the churches that Nicholas Dyer erected throughout London. These buildings are perfectly preserved till the 20th century and carry the same power of the *genius loci* that resonate with the gothic mystical and labyrinthine aura of the grandiloquent London.[13] Since Dyer's *modus operandi* necessitates virgin boys' sacrifices for the foundations of his churches, he supervises the "accidents" or suicides of tramps, beggars, vagabonds, or small boys. These people have either identical or slightly different names like the first three murdered boys in both centuries, are respectively named Thomas Hill, Ned, Matthew Hayes,[14] and all die in the same areas. Therefore, these locations submerge in "an evil that transcendent the limitations of space and time but which manifest itself recurrently in a local habitation [...]"[15] in the same grotesque style.

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[10] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative,* trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, Vol. 2 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), 25.

[11] Original emphasis, Lanei M. Rodemeyer, "The Body in Time/Time in the Body," in Stuart Grant, Jodie McNeilly, and Maeva Veerapen, eds., *Performance and Temporalisation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015): 129–38.

[12] Petr Chalupský, *A Horror and a Beauty: The World of Peter Ackroyd's London Novels* (Prague: Karolinum Press, 2016), 155.

[13] Petr Chalupský, "Where Everything Is Connected to Everything Else and Anything Is Possible: London in Peter Ackroyd's Three Brothers," *The Literary London Journal* 11, no. 2 (2014): 36.

[14] Ackroyd, *Hawksmoor,* 64, 78, 162.

[15] Barry Lewis, *My Words Echo Thus: Possessing the Past in Peter Ackroyd* (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2007), 44.

Hawksmoor resists chronology in the profiles of its characters' dualities. Dyer and Hawksmoor are two distinct individuals until Hawksmoor aligns committed murders with Dyer. The novel advances a wide variety of biformity in their personalities from this moment. Both are alone, live a celibate life, wear a long matte black coat, are tall with dark hair, wear glasses, have nightmares, love puzzles, and hate sex. Both have assistants called Walter Pyne and Walter Payne, and they betray both. Both live in a house with single landladies called Mrs Best[16] and Mrs West.[17] When identifying their aims clearly, both start their psychogeographical strolls in the same outskirts of felonious London. Whilst these walks bring them closer, they walk-off from their connections to the material world and its conventional time order. Both wander among the buildings that "disturbingly combine the barbaric grandeur of the antique with a kind of atavistic feeling for Gothic forms."[18] They mystically reflect Dyer's innermost self and infect Hawksmoor's psyche. As a result, the pattern circulates to Hawksmoor's identifying himself with tramps and beggars, just like Dyer did two centuries ago. In this sense, vagabonds can also be assessed "as a personification of continuum"[19] since they keep on reappearing.

Additionally, some peculiarities of Dyer's individuality intrinsically descend to the victims estranged from him by centuries. In his childhood, the place where Dyer was spending much of his time was the yard of the church at Spitalfields. In the 20th century, the victim called Thomas also liked to play at the same place regardless of his mother's objections. Dyer liked to read *Dr Faustus,*[20] and in the 20th century, the victim Thomas Hills' bedside book is *Dr Faustus and Queen Elizabeth.*[21] In Dana Shiller's terms, these dualities strip away the political content of the time "to focus on its aesthetics."[22]

Along with people, two worldviews constitute a part of this mythical circularity: occultist *Scientia Umbrarum* and empiricist New Science embodied respectively in Mirabilis and Christopher Wren in the 18th century, then in Dyer and Hawksmoor in the 20th century. *Scientia Umbrarum* is an occult philosophy "developed out of neolithic,

16 Ackroyd, *Hawksmoor,* 46.

17 Ibid., 119.

18 Hollinghurst, "In Hieroglyph and Shadow."

19 David Charnick, "The Trope of the Tramp: Ackroyd's Vagrants at the Heart of the City," *The Literary London Journal* 9, no. 2 (2011).

20 Ackroyd, *Hawksmoor,* 18.

21 Ibid., 33.

22 Dana Shiller, "The Redemptive Past in the Neo-Victorian Novel," *Studies in the Novel* 29, no. 4 (1997): 534.

hermetic, cabbalistic, and gnostic elements"[23] that acknowledges Satan's authority over the world. Mirabilis preaches this faith in the occult society called "Enthusiasticks" and spreads that to flee the miseries of the mortal world, one should follow certain rituals and ascend the cosmic spheres to become the *Anthropos*. Dyer, brainwashed with and subservient to these proclaims, starts his pursuit of "*exaltatio,* that's the deification of man."[24] Therefore, he tries founding seven churches corresponding to the seven spheres of the seven planets to consent his soul to seven demons governing these planetary realms, a *sine qua non* of the *Scientia Umbrarum.* Wren's counterfeiting empiricism, however, pioneers averse notions. Wren advocates rationality over irrationality, logic over intuition, science over magic in his lecture on "Rational Experiment and the Observation of Cause and Effect."[25] In parallel, just like Wren, Hawksmoor never displays any sign of intuition in his investigations, always relying on the autopsy carried out by medical specialists or on prior studies regarding the behavioural patterns of the murderers.[26]

These metaphysical circularities are further enhanced by the structure and stylistics of the novel itself. The book consists of twelve chapters which can be attributed to the cycles of cosmogony, such as twelve days of Epiphany or twelve months of the year endlessly circulating and replacing each other.[27] Chapters are also connected with each other to amplify uncanny textuality. Apart from semantic bridges, chapters posit a continuation by the repetitions of certain words. The first chapter ends with the words "I can see the brightness of the Starres at Noon",[28] and the second chapter starts with "AT NOON they were approaching the church in Spitalfields."[29] The second chapter ends with "And when he looked up he saw the face above him",[30] the third chapter starts with "THE FACE above me then became a Voice: It is a dark morning, Master, and after a fine moonshiny night it is terrible rainy."[31] This tradition continues in these chapters conjoining Dyer's and

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[23] Onega, *Metafiction and Myth,* 48.

[24] György E. Szőnyi, "John Dee and Early Modern Occult Philosophy," *Literature Compass* 1, no. 1 (2004): 10.

[25] Ackroyd, *Hawksmoor,* 140.

[26] Ibid., 159.

[27] Onega, *Metafiction and Myth,* 57.

[28] Ackroyd, *Hawksmoor,* 25.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid., 42.

[31] Ibid., 43.

Hawksmoor's universes until the very last page, regardless of spatial and temporal differences "to generate mystery through portentous vagueness."[32]

Symbolically the recurrent conception of time is reinforced by repeating certain words within the text in the continuous yet crisscrossing fashion. Notions like "dust", "pain", "child", "pattern", "shadow", "tramp", and "time" are endlessly rotating throughout the novel. On the background of the spiritual and miraculous London, these incessant textual patterns expose complex metaphysical depth to the book as they cohere "forward and backward at the same time, disrupting traditional notions of chronological linearity in favour of a circular, or mythical conception of time."[33]

TRANSTEMPORAL MANIFESTATIONS

Several moments in the novel defy both the linearly progressive and cyclically recurring concepts of time. The crisscrossing, as mentioned earlier, is present in the events that add an intersectional dimension to the experience of time overall. First and foremost of these occasions happens when Christopher Wren and Dyer travel to Stonehenge since Wren wants to use the same kind of stones to construct the St Paul's Cathedral. However, according to Dyer, the circle inside Stonehenge was once a place of sacrifices and now resonates with a strong power of dark deities inside this "Architecture of the Devil.[34] For Wren, "Geometry is the Key to this Majesty."[35] When they start having a dispute over the shadows on the stones that show the position of daytime hours, it starts raining. They seek shelter and lean to a sarsen, one of the biggest stones of Stonehenge. While Dyer feels the "Fabrick the Labour and Agonie of those who erected it... the marks of Eternity which had been placed there,[36] Wren confusingly confesses that he puts "no Stress upon the Thing called a Dream [...] but [he] just now had a Vision of [his] Son dead."[37] Wren is being informed about the death of his son several months later this event. The following chapter tells the simultaneous 20th-century story of a man called Ned who abandons his normal life and starts wandering as a tramp from Bristol to Stonehenge. He encounters two cars parked and hears voices, uncannily belonging to Wren, but does not see any-

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32 Hollinghurst, "In Hieroglyph and Shadow."

33 Onega, *Metafiction and Myth,* 47.

34 Silvia Mergenthal, "'The Architecture of the Devil': Stonehenge, Englishness, English Fiction," in Robert Burden and Stephan Kohl, eds., *Landscape and Englishness* (Amsterdam / New York: Brill, 2006), 126.

35 Ackroyd, *Hawksmoor,* 61.

36 Ibid., 60.

37 Ibid., 61.

one. When Ned bends over one stone, he hears "voices swirling around him – among them his own father saying, 'I had a vision of my son dead.'"[38] The other instances are the songs and ballads sung in the 18th century and heard in the 20th century. As seen, these temporal layovers are intriguingly diverse displays of time that have been explored. In his lecture "London Luminaries and Cockney Visionaries" (1993), Ackroyd challenged the traditional understanding of time postulated by social, cultural, and historical norms by using the metaphor of "a lava flow" rather than an established "river flow" streaming unidirectionally.[39] Taking its spring from fire, lava and its streams move in a different celerity and route, not in one course as conventionally accepted. Similarly, this version of time that we are dealing with in *Hawksmoor* should not be evaluated as linear or, circular but as a "disordered intersecting of time sequences"[40] that imbues the present and the past.

Such concurrent possibility of overlapping times also worlds constitute the novel's very end. The convergence at the end of the novel enfolds Dyer and Hawksmoor – merging "enigmatically with [one] another [into a] mysterious being."[41] The book ends when a tramp called The Architect, also Dyer's reincarnation and Hawksmoor's mythical image, and Hawksmoor face each other inside the darkness of the seventh church – Little St Hugh's:

> They were face to face, and yet they looked past one another... where one had ended and the other had begun? And when they spoke they spoke with one voice.[42]

When an impingement of the superstitious into the logical occurs, as, in this scene, a transcendental architecture exposes an atemporal spatial indefinity, which can be assessed as the levels of "transcendental ladder to higher spheres of transtemporal existence."[43] Here Hawksmoor sees many figures looking like him and sounding like him. After this mythical union, Hawksmoor becomes one of these figures whose souls have been sacrificed to serve Dyer's *magnum opus.* Since he has not been murdered like other souls, Morton P. Levitt suggests that Dyer is Hawksmoor's alter ego, "each needing the

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38 Ibid., 76.

39 Currie, *About Time,* 89.

40 Chalupský, *A Horror and a Beauty,* 74.

41 Alex Link, "'The Capitol of Darknesse': Gothic Spatialities in the London of Peter Ackroyd's 'Hawksmoor,'" *Contemporary Literature* 45, no. 3 (2004): 517.

42 Ackroyd, *Hawksmoor,* 217.

43 Chalupský, *A Horror and a Beauty,* 39.

other to fulfill his nature."[44] To follow this idea, Hawksmoor's survival would have ended in the incompleteness of Dyer's pursuit and breach the temporal circularity as when Hawksmoor turns back to check on himself. He sees that

> [...] 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.[45]

Not only does Hawksmoor talk about his body in the third person, but he also sees his other self as a child. The temporal layering of this type shows the restless oscillation of the "wheel of life and death";[46] Hawksmoor disappears to be a child again and experience the repetitions of life continuously. Circularity is an indicator of the character's personalities, time's orders, and events throughout the novel, only for this moment to posit heterogeneity within oneself. The mythical unity between Dyer's reincarnated soul and Hawksmoor can be interpreted as the embodiment of the cosmic man that Dyer was striving for. The temporal aspect of this omnipresence can be related to Mircea Eliade's "solution of continuity",[47] which exists between the ordinary, profane, and sacred, mythical kinds of time. Unlike mythical time, which is "an ontological, Parmenidean time" and neither passes nor reverses[48] the transmigration that Hawksmoor experiences bear the peculiarities of the liminal time. This marginal reality is the category "where rules of status and boundary do not apply."[49] Hawksmoor is also in a limitless atmosphere where all confines are blurred and merged, and everything constitutes the particles of a whole. The haziness within such temporal multilayering leaves the novel's denouement ambiguously vague.

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44 Morton P. Levitt, "James Joyce in London: Peter Ackroyd's 'Hawksmoor,'" *James Joyce Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (2002): 843.

45 Ackroyd, *Hawksmoor,* 217.

46 Onega, *Metafiction and Myth,* 47.

47 Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion,* trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, 1987), 68.

48 Ibid., 69.

49 Kathleen A. Nuzum, "The Monster's Sacrifice—Historic Time: The Uses of Mythic and Liminal Time in Monster Literature," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (2004): 210.

CONCLUSION

In his lecture on *Hawksmoor,* Ackroyd accepts that "'time' is perhaps an ambiguous and uncertain dimension."[50] To convey his philosophy, he designs time that defies all evidence of empiricism. *Hawksmoor* is a novel about the multiple distortions of the traditionally perceived temporal consciousness of a 20th-century man who evolved with the idea of time as "a linear, unidirectional and irreversible process."[51]

Despite being seen in orderly sequences, the equivalence of Hawksmoor's physical appearance, lifestyle, character, and disturbed mentality to Dyer's, the dualities of the victims, the exactness of the crime locations and transtemporal apparitions are all ephemeral to serve the preordained cyclical pattern of time. Indefinite and inevitable reincarnations of Dyer's soul refracting into certain bodies throughout the book reshape the novel into an endlessly whirling *achronotope.*[52] Multiple transmigrations from the body to body and the final grand union in one mythical self and liminal time reinforce the distortion of the conventional dimensions of time not by satanic powers but "a network of textual traces which disorder graphically both narrative and time."[53] Simultaneous cyclicality and convergence of two spatially separate worlds in an ontological way guarantee the novel's uninterrupted narrative, which brings forth further studies of the subject.

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[50] Peter Ackroyd, "'On Hawksmoor,'" in *The Collection* (London: Random House Uk Limited, 2001), 379.

[51] Vaira Vīkis-Freibergs, "Linear and Cyclic Time in Traditional and Modern Latvian Poetry," *World Literature Today* 51, no. 4 (1977): 538.

[52] Spatial constructs outside the perceivable flow of time, in Chalupský, *A Horror and a Beauty,* 57.

[53] Jeremy Gibson and Julian Wolfreys, *Peter Ackroyd: The Ludic and Labyrinthine Text* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 93.