

«I THINK REAL WORLDS ESCAPE FROM BOOKS»

Interview with Peter Ackroyd



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VÉKONY: *Childhood is an ever recurring theme in your novels and the sentence And he was a child again seems to be one of your favourites. Can you remember any particular experience in your childhood that later set you off as a writer? If so, does it still influence your work?*

ACKROYD: I remember when I was a child being taken around London by my grandmother and [her] telling me about various sites and spots. That's the nearest to an actual experience. In terms of literature I remember the reading experience of Tennyson, which so inspired me at the age of 11 or 12 that I never forgot it and I used in the book about Oscar Wilde.

VÉKONY: *You were raised a Catholic. Would you define Catholicism as a strong influence?*

ACKROYD: I've always been interested in the idea of a Catholic England and, as you know, England was Catholic for a thousand years. My early experience of Catholicism as a child, namely, being an altar server and the fact that I learnt Latin, gave me a tremendous interest in ritual, ceremony, symbolism, drama and theatre. All these are, in fact, innate parts of the English native tradition. The spectacle, melodrama and theatricality are all very English characteristics and these represent our inheritance from the old Catholic England. In terms of my own writing, I suppose one can divide authors broadly into two areas, secular and spiritual. I put myself very much in the latter category. I presume this comes from the early immersion in this extraordinarily elaborate faith.

VÉKONY: *Are you still a practising Catholic?*

ACKROYD: No, I ceased practising when I was about eighteen, but that, what you might call religious awareness, never leaves you. So, you are always confronted with spiritual realities rather than material realities.

VÉKONY: *There is a very strong sense of the sacred in your works which curiously seems to be in opposition to the poststructuralist background that you were probably taught at Yale*

ACKROYD: No, I wasn't taught at Yale University, I was just a fellow. I was there just to be there actually, and poststructuralism, of course, was very fashionable at that period. I wasn't actually touched by it or educated in it at all. I only picked up what I heard around me.

VÉKONY: *Well, your first book entitled Notes for a New Culture reflects a general fascination with language and this is why I supposed that you were influenced by this stream of thought*

ACKROYD: No, not at all. What you call poststructuralism is part of the native English sensibility. It's not some new invention. Hawksmoor, for example, would devise a Gothic, Baroque or Romanesque faade and the employer would choose one to be built up. That sort of playing with styles and almost historical parodies is very much part of the English native genius. It's not something that emerged twenty or thirty years ago.

VÉKONY: *Many people define the mixing of styles and especially genres as some kind of postmodern invention*

ACKROYD: That's also not new. As you know, Voltaire accused Shakespeare of not being serious because he went from tragedy to farce in the same scene. Also in the case of Dickens there is a streaky bacon effect where you've got pathos and pantomime, satire and tragedy in the space of a page.

VÉKONY: *Does this mean then that you don't accept the term postmodernism?*

ACKROYD: It's a reassertion of *something* that has been very much part of the English tradition for a thousand years. Nikolaus Pevsner would call it the *Englishness of English Art*. In this book he described how particularly an English invention it was to put monkeys and apes into the mediaeval manuscripts as a way of putting various perspectives in the sacred texts. And that was the eleventh century.

VÉKONY: *Are you implying then that the domain of the sacred and the poststructuralist literary theory are not even different poles? Cabbala, for example, is just as fascinated with language as virtually any of the modern literary theories.*

ACKROYD: I think it's absurd to label or to create a whole new discipline called postmodernism or poststructuralism out of what is a very fundamental, intrinsic, permanent and continuous aspect of literature. In the sixteenth century people were taught to read the Bible as a way of prompting them into their own responses. This is quite a poststructuralist notion, that is, the Bible seen as a labyrinth in which you find your own way using words, symbols or phrases. They were investigating reality *through* this sacred text. That sounds to me pretty much the same as what modern academics have been saying about the processes of reading. Apparently, it's not a new thing.

VÉKONY: *Were your reading experiences as a child similar to Timothy Harcombes in English Music?*

ACKROYD: Not really, no. That was invention. I mean I had to read the books which the characters read in the novel, but as a child I didn't read those particular books.

VÉKONY: *In English Music the process of reading is closely related to dreams. Do you think of the reading process as something purely escapist?*

ACKROYD: No, not at all. I think real worlds escape from books. That way around makes more sense to me. What is true though is that the writing experiences are those that actually matter rather than the reading experiences. When I get up in the morning I go to the library and I sort of compose myself to sleep, but instead of sleeping or dreaming I write. It's the same sort of inattention to the external world.

VÉKONY: *Inattention to the external world? Isn't this some kind of escapism?*

ACKROYD: Well, yes, but escapism is a heavily loaded word. It is just a question of avoiding the displeasures of ordinary existence for the space of a couple of hours.

VÉKONY: *Do you think that reading books can actually change things?*

ACKROYD: Yes.

VÉKONY: *Even at a political level?*

ACKROYD: It has been done, yes. From a historical perspective there are certain books like Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man* which changed people's perceptions for a short time. They certainly can have their effect in that political sense, too. Darwin, Freud and Marx changed everything by their books.

VÉKONY: *In Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem Marx appears explicitly as the most important historical personage in the novel. Do you think that literature can affect things*

on a broader social level, too, just as Charles Babbage supposedly wanted to construct his Analytical Engine to the same end?

ACKROYD: Sure. Karl Marx certainly changed peoples perceptions and he was a poet rather than a historian.

VÉKONY: *Do you ever include autobiographical information in your novels?*

ACKROYD: No, Im not interested in my autobiography; thats why I write novels rather than autobiographies.

VÉKONY: *Do you think then that the author should be dead as Barthes suggests it?*

ACKROYD: Oh, thats the old question. No. not at all. I never know where these ideas come from. Paradoxically, this is always announced by startlingly good writers. Ive never understood this fashionable jargon.

VÉKONY: *Many of your fictional works have an open ending. Is this done on purpose to generate as many interpretations as possible?*

ACKROYD: No, it just happens, thats the way they work out. Thats the one thing Ive never properly understood, but it happens. I dont plan it or fashion it in advance. Thats the way the book ends. Its as much a mystery to me as anyone else. I think it has a lot to do with pantomime. Here we are *again* .

VÉKONY: *Dan Leno*

ACKROYD: Yes. The sense of bringing all the characters on the stage as it were and letting the audience clap. I dont know whats going to happen to the actors once they leave the stage.

VÉKONY: *All your work, however, boasts of constructedness. Take for example Hawksmoor. There is a very elaborate and playful scheme of odd and even chapters in that book. Do you really not plan?*

ACKROYD: No, I didnt say I didnt plan, I just said that my plans are irrelevant to the person who reads the book. You plan everything in intricate detail before you begin, like the characters, etc. But in the act of writing the plan is more of a safety net for me than for the reader. I have to know what *might* happen, but then once I know what might happen something else *might* happen instead. So for me this is some kind of a safeguard against a block. I know whatever happens I can get to the next stage because I planned it. It doesnt mean, however, that I will actually go to that stage. In *Hawksmoor* there was a rather transparent planning involved that I regret now.

VÉKONY: *In an interview John Fowles described his way of writing, which seems to be very similar to yours. He has an image at the beginning and then he lets this image grow and thrive organically*

ACKROYD: Thats what happens, yes.

VÉKONY: *Do you think that this is a natural process?*

ACKROYD: I imagine so. I cannot think of another way of doing it.

VÉKONY: *Can you give an example?*

ACKROYD: The best example would be *Hawksmoor*, I suppose, when I was watching television one night years ago. I had an idea for a book, though I hadnt thought it out properly, when suddenly the idea of two periods simultaneously came to me; it just came like that, and then I knew that I could begin. This is not necessarily a rational process.

VÉKONY: *Have you ever consulted emblem books which combine image and text into an organic whole?*

ACKROYD: I consulted emblem books when I was writing *The House of Doctor Dee*.

VÉKONY: *How much research do you do before writing a book?*

ACKROYD: A lot. I do the novels in the morning and in the afternoon I research for the next book or biography. The amount of research depends on the book. With *Milton in America*, *Hawksmoor* and *Chatterton* I did a lot of research, historical research. With *Dan Leno* practically none. With the novel I am working on now practically none.

VÉKONY: *A new novel?*

ACKROYD: It is a novel set four thousand years ahead. But I mean, I find it rather daunting to write a novel without the previous research.

VÉKONY: *What is the working title for your new novel?*

ACKROYD: Its called *The Popcorn Papers*.

VÉKONY: *Is it perhaps related to Dickens Pickwick Papers?*

ACKROYD: No. Its just a title which came to me while playing with the idea of the book. When you have a title like that, it gives you absolute free range to be as picaresque or as heterogeneous as you like.

VÉKONY: *Speaking of titles, I was quite surprised that Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem was entitled The Trial of Elizabeth Cree in America. Is there a particular reason for that?*

ACKROYD: Apparently so. Theyd never heard of Dan Leno, theyd never heard of Limehouse and apparently they have no idea what the Golem was, which is very weird since there is a large Jewish population there. So I had to change it. I didnt *mind* because once I finish a book I dont care any more.

VÉKONY: *But do they know anything about Elizabeth Cree?*

ACKROYD: She didnt exist.

VÉKONY: *Youve got me.*

ACKROYD: She was an invention. You thought she was real, eh? Lots of people did think that there was a real case. There was not. It was completely imagined.

VÉKONY: *Just like John Crees diary*

ACKROYD: Yes.

VÉKONY: *But when quoting from the proceedings of Elizabeth Crees trial and John Cree's diary you refer to exact manuscript codes according to which these texts can be found in the British Library.*

ACKROYD: Oh, yes, all made up.

VÉKONY: *Is there a particular reason for mixing fact and fiction?*

ACKROYD: Its more fun!

VÉKONY: *Just to create illusion as in a Baroque church?*

ACKROYD: Yes, its like being a conjurer. If I hadnt been a novelist Id love to be a magician, but I cant be because I lack the skills.

VÉKONY: *This brings us to another important thing Id like to talk about: magic and the occult. What is your personal stance on magic? I mean real magic.*

ACKROYD: It may exist, it may not and the occult was interesting as such.

VÉKONY: *But why is it that you keep referring to it so much?*

ACKROYD: I know, its this *thing*. But I definitely dont believe in it as such.

VÉKONY: *Is magic perhaps just a tool which allows you to operate more freely with the notions of space and time?*

ACKROYD: Exactly. Its like Gothic melodrama. You use all the stage effects in order to create a convincing plot. But my attitude towards all this is agnostic. I dont know whether all these people existed or not or whether there was magic at all or whether Paracelsus was a fraud or whether he was real I dont care, but they are very good to use as plot devices. There is a contemporary English writer called Iain Sinclair I know him slightly who writes marvellous novels such as *Lud Heat* about London and its mythology. He believes in magic, I dont. I just use it as a way of constructing a plot. Thats the difference between us.

VÉKONY: *Is there a particular way you select your subjects?*

ACKROYD: I dont select them, they select me. For example, when I was writing my life of William Blake, the idea came to me to write the book called *Milton in America*. Someone pointed out to me that Blake had written a poem called *Milton* and a poem called *America*. I think the idea must have sprung from my reading of Blake. So, in other words, one book creates another book. Essentially, when I was writing *Milton in America* I was also writing *Blake* and the idea came to me of writing a book on Thomas More, which I have just finished. Both Milton and Blake were religious visionaries as well as Londoners, that is, Cockney visionaries, and More is another one of that kind; therefore, More emerged. And when I was writing on More, of course I was very heavily involved in *Utopia*, so, I thought why not write a utopia four thousand years ahead. Thus, everything emerges from the previous book, which is not a necessarily rational process.

VÉKONY: *Speaking of rationality, would you attach any moral quality to rationality or irrationality?*

ACKROYD: No, none at all. The moral categories do not apply here. These are different sets of mental processes. Rationality emerges from peoples fear and guilt. The things Im talking about emerge from peoples happiness, joy in creation. Quite different things. I think being a Catholic also helps in that sense. Catholics have very little sense of guilt because they know that their sins will be expunged in the confessional, so its not a long lasting problem.

VÉKONY: *Is the process of selecting the subject also connected to your Catholic past?*

ACKROYD: I think it must be. The sense of the sacred can be easily coerced into a sense of the occult and if you cant use religion straight on as a plot, the occult is an excellent thing as it were because it has the same sense of sacredness, awe and worship which I carry from my childhood, but its transposed into a rather more fictional environment.

VÉKONY: *Have you been perhaps influenced by the works of Mircea Eliade and his theory of sacred church spaces versus the profane space of the ordinary world?*

ACKROYD: Ive heard of him, but neither have I read his works nor have I been really influenced by him.

VÉKONY: *Do you think the sacred has any moral qualities?*

ACKROYD: No, none all. The idea of the sacred just as the idea of worship and awe, power and terror, which is all the sacred implies, has nothing to do whatsoever with moral categories of good and bad. It faces them and transcends them. Thats the whole point of it, of course. Some people, however, strongly disagree with me on this point. The parish priests working in Hawksmoors churches, for example, sent me letters of protest in which they accused me of desecrating these churches in *Hawksmoor*, but I dont think this is the case.

VÉKONY: *But you seem to pass judgement quite easily on some of your female characters. I am thinking of characters like Harriet Scrope in Chatterton and Evangeline Tupper in First Light.*

ACKROYD: Yes, thats my favourite book, *First Light*. Its silly that no one else likes it but me. Returning to your question, my answer is yes. Its got to do with the fact that I am a homosexual and also with the fact that I dont create real characters. This latter is an old English thing going back to the morality plays. So, I dont take all the blame myself. Im expressing the native genius as it were, the native tradition. It just comes naturally to me. I shouldnt do it so much, I know I shouldnt, I regret it sometimes.

VÉKONY: *Does your homosexuality affect you in choosing subjects? For example, almost all of your main characters are male.*

ACKROYD: Thats a very interesting question. Ill tell you what it does to you, it stops you from writing about homosexuality, which I find very distasteful. Well, not distasteful, but very banal and deterministic, dont you think? I would never think of myself as gay. But I presume the interest in this sort of camp, sometimes an ironic thing, comes naturally to me and I suppose a certain kind of melodrama also comes naturally to homosexuality. I mean homosexuals would loathe the thought that this was sort of intrinsic, sort of melodramatic camp, but I think it is, and sometimes I express that, in *First Light* especially so. There is a gay character called something like

VÉKONY: *Fraicheur.*

ACKROYD: Yes, Augustine Fraicheur, the antiques dealer. I have a great deal of fun with that sort of character. I certainly enjoy making these characters. And also in *Chatterton* there is another campy character who lives in Bristol

VÉKONY: *Also an antiques dealer. Hm, is it a coincidence that both of these gay characters are antiquarians?*

ACKROYD: I think it is, I dont know any antiques dealers. I dont like antiques as such, I mean in shops.

VÉKONY: *Apropos homosexuality and subject selection, Im reminded of cross-dressing, which appears in Dan Leno. It seems to me an obvious choice.*

ACKROYD: I know, cross-dressing also appears in *The House of Doctor Dee*. I dont know why it comes out again and again. I dont really understand the processes involved. Earlier on, I wrote a book on it called *Dressing Up*, the history of transvestism. Im not a transvestite, I would be hopeless. But for some weird reason the change of gender identities is very appealing to me and I think that, from a certain perspective, the female characters are really *me*. So I wasnt passing judgement on the female characters, I was passing judgement on myself. This sort of excessively camp or pantomimic humour, which has been part of the English tradition for a thousand years anyway, has always appealed to me. Harriet Scrope is more like Noahs wife from the miracle plays in a different guise, but at the same time there are definite parts of me involved in creating those female characters.

VÉKONY: *Does it have anything to do with the realisation of the Anthropos, the cosmic man, who is without or rather beyond gender?*

ACKROYD: Well, people said that to me and there is a Spanish lady who is writing a book on me

VÉKONY: *Is it perhaps Susana Onega Jaén?*

ACKROYD: How the hell do you know that, too?! You are a mine of information! Well, I assume so, there is something like that. There are these great myths, Jungian or not Jun-

gian, but myths I dont think thats true at all, but it must be the case that at some level you are instinctively touching upon very basic ideas. Whether you rationalise it or not or whether you fashion an argument for it or not it doesnt matter. But you are actually touching upon these things in ways which I dont understand because it happens somehow instinctively. I dont think to myself Oh, God, Im going to have a cross-dresser and that he or she is going to be Adam Cadmon. It just happens.

VÉKONY: *When you say that something comes instinctively, do you mean the unconscious or generally the language into which we are all imprisoned?*

ACKROYD: It must be the language, because I dont believe in the unconscious. The unconscious is just an invention.

VÉKONY: *An invention to what end?*

ACKROYD: That is a late nineteenth-century myth by which people chose to live for a certain space of time. It has simply no more validity than the theory of humours. Its just another way of describing the world which suits that particular period. One of the great virtues of travelling in time as it were is that you learn to treat the contemporary mythology from the same distance you treat sixteenth-or seventeenth-century mythology. The unconscious is a very good example of that. It is a legendary thing of which there is no evidence whatsoever and of course which can never be properly investigated. Id rather believe in bile and spleen as the agents of human perception rather than in something called the unconscious.

VÉKONY: *Do you think that the people who dont read are equally affected by history?*

ACKROYD: I find that they actually *are*. When I give lectures in London, people come up to me and say well, the things youve described to us and youve discussed with us are precisely the things that we also understand and recognise. The point about London and the Londoners is that they, not all of them, but the real Londoners have an intrinsic sense of the past of their city which, apparently, is not shared by citizens of other cities in the same way. There is something peculiar about London, the power of London, its past, its history, its extraordinary presence as a city. Heine, for example, said that it broke his heart to come to London. Foreign observers have always commented in the past on its vastness, its poverty, and that sense of London still survives in the very stones of the streets. If I walk down a London street, Im also aware of all those people who lived and walked there before me. Every street in London is a rosary of sorrowful mysteries to me.

VÉKONY: *But why is London so special? Many cities have ancient pasts.*

ACKROYD: Yes, that is true, but they dont have the same resonance. If you go to Florence you can feel its huge historical depth, but still There are two ways of putting it. One would be that the English are a literary nation rather than an artistic or musical nation. I think thats partly to do with it and that the literature of England is also the literature of London. The second way of putting it would be that this particular city of two thousand years has created or is creating as we speak a permanent memorial of itself. Its presence is so strong that those who have a taste for such things cannot help being aware of it. I can walk down a street in the city and feel overjoyed because I know this was a world which the Romans created and I know exactly what happened in those streets for a thousand years. I could tell you the history of Cheapside from about 400 AD onwards and I walk down it today. That sense of the past is specifically a native thing because the English have always been known as antiquarians by the way. Goethe, for example, mocked them for being antiquarians and, indeed, they go to old battlefields and other ancient sites. I think its a combination of the English as a literary nation and a nation with a passion for anti-quarianism which may help to explain this fascination with London as a potent presence.

VÉKONY: *Is London the only city you could live in?*

ACKROYD: I never travel abroad. As I walk through Paris, for example, I'm bewildered because I don't know the history of that street or that tower. I find it very disconcerting and actually quite boring. Whereas when I'm in London I can't walk down a street without being aware of the mysteries involved. It's maybe portentous, but this is the landscape of my imagination. I'm a Londoner by birth, I've lived here all my life and for me it is the centre of my world. Blake called it Eternal London in his poem which displays his thorough visions of the eternity of the London streets as did other Cockney visionaries, too. T. S. Eliot of all people made a very significant remark when he said that the more local or provincial literature can be, the more it can aspire to universality. He's talking about American writers from the South, but the same thing holds true for people who live in London.

VÉKONY: *In Notes for a New Culture, however, you seem almost to flagellate the insularity of English culture.*

ACKROYD: That's true, but the book was written a long time ago when I was twenty-two. My passion for European culture and criticism has abated slightly the more I became acquainted with my own native tradition. The book is not bad in its own way, but I would not stand by any of its precepts, not now.

VÉKONY: *Do you think that the state of English culture headed by the London culture has changed significantly since the 70s?*

ACKROYD: Very much so. When I was a kid, twenty-two or twenty-three, the English culture and literature was going through one of its usual stalemates, a sort of death before rebirth. Now, however although I don't know what is going on exactly I sense that there has been a rebirth in English literature as such.

VÉKONY: *You talk about the rebirth of English literature, although you mentioned previously that you didn't read your contemporaries.*

ACKROYD: No, that is why I don't know exactly *what* is going on. But I have a feeling that there is a real revival of interest in English literature, even overseas. In my own case I believe it's to do with the fact that I'm investigating an area of consciousness which hasn't been completely available to many people, in other words, the permanence of the past within the present.

VÉKONY: *In First Light you write as follows I told you everything was related, didn't I? Well, even our bodies are built with the fossilised debris of dead stars. If everything can be connected with everything else, are there significant patterns, is there meaning or just the endless deferral of it?*

ACKROYD: It depends on what you mean by meaning.

VÉKONY: *By meaning I mean something that makes sense.*

ACKROYD: Nothing makes sense, meaning is a process. Understand the process and you will understand the meaning. There is no end result, there is no culmination, there's no beginning and there's no end. It's the process which is time, and once you understand *that* then you don't search for meaning in your sense at all.

VÉKONY: *When you say about time that it is a serpent that bites itself by the tale which, in turn, implies that history itself is circular, do you think that we can learn anything at all from history?*

ACKROYD: Well, it depends on what you mean by history. History is fiction. It is a form of words which we use. In terms of the existential sense of the past, it's always with us; it exists as we speak now.

VÉKONY: *Have you considered writing anything on Aleister Crowley, who was a pioneer in many occult practices?*

ACKROYD: No. I did some research on him because I thought that might be an interesting novel, but my interest waned when I read some of his works. He wasn't an interesting character at all, unlike Doctor Dee. I have always been fascinated by Dees magical gift, his knowledge and his significance. As opposed to him, Aleister Crowley was a minor figure. OK, he was interesting in a way, but he never had that direct significance that Doctor Dee had for me. He was not clever enough, he was not interesting enough, he was not significant in terms of general culture.

VÉKONY: *What about Newton who, apart from being one of the greatest scientists ever, was a closet alchemist himself?*

ACKROYD: I'd love to write about Newton. I've been thinking about that, but, as it often happens in the publishing world, there have been novels and biographies of Newton published quite recently and it is quite difficult to redirect the readers attention to something which has been thoroughly explored before. I might, however, do it in ten-fifteen years time.

VÉKONY: *Are you referring by any chance to John Banvilles The Newton Letter?*

ACKROYD: I thought it was called *Newtons Niece*. No, OK, that was one of the books which I heard about, that's true, but I haven't read it.

VÉKONY: *It is quite striking, however, that John Fowles, John Banville, Rose Tremain and you, Mr. Ackroyd, according to some critics all writers of historiographic metafiction, are all at the same literary agency. Is this a mere coincidence, or does this reflect only the taste of the literary agent?*

ACKROYD: Well, this is not exactly so. Rose Tremain is with a different agent within the same company, so, that is a slightly different case. But I mean, yes, this is a literary chance because there are ten agents in the country and something like a hundred authors. So, by chance you find that you are affiliated with writers who share certain things, same as the publishers. The trouble with the London publishing life is that it becomes essentialised and organised. You'll find that more and more writers write for the same persons or people.

VÉKONY: *Finally, what do you think the function of literature might be?*

ACKROYD: To entertain. And occasionally to instruct. But first of all to entertain, otherwise no one would read the stuff.

VÉKONY: *Thank you very much for your patience and time.*

London, June 5, 1997

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