

PETER ACKROYD'S *FIRST LIGHT*:
NOT ALTOGETHER BARREN ANCESTRY

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with Peter Ackroyd's idea of national history as it is conveyed in his novel *First Light*. Ackroyd creates a hypertextual novel with one hypotext, Thomas Hardy's *Two on a Tower*, and several grafted texts, J. G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, Rudyard Kipling's short story "The Finest Story in the World," William Blake's *Europe*, and one of Oscar Wilde's aphorisms. The hypotext and the grafted texts are transformed by Ackroyd's hypertext so that they emphasize his theory of history as a unity of time and place. Ackroyd's history is a combination of genealogical continuity and the spirit of the territory which assumes the image of a spiral—it is repetitive yet progressive.

KEYWORDS

Peter Ackroyd; *First Light*; Thomas Hardy; hypertextuality; national history; twentieth-century English literature

In his essay "No End of History," Del Ivan Janik claims that both Ackroyd's *English Music* and *First Light*, and also other contemporary English novels, "are characterized by a foregrounding of the historical consciousness, most often through a dual or even multiple focus on the fictional present and one or more crucial 'pasts'. Their narrators or protagonists are for the most part explorers of history (in the broadest sense) by profession or avocation."¹ The exploration of history, not only of the national type but, primarily, the principles by which it operates and influences human lives, is the theme of *First Light*. In order to portray his view of history Ackroyd creates a novel primarily constructed with the help of intertextuality and orchestrating a large number of assorted sources. Ackroyd carefully handles all these pretexts so that they are finally arranged into an examination of history—history in the sense of a theory of time and place constructed by human beings in order to give identity and meaning to their individual lives. As such, Ackroyd's examination of history is preoccupied with the exploration of one's ancestry, by which each human being is identified and by which people of a certain ancestry form smaller or larger coherent groups—from a family to a nation.

Ackroyd's use of intertextual references encourages the rethinking of intertextuality and, particularly, hypertextuality theory. Ackroyd's novel

1. Del Ivan Janik, "No End of History: Evidence from the Contemporary English Novel," *Twentieth-Century Literature* 41, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 161.

refers to many different kinds of pre-texts. I understand a pre-text, in contrast to the poststructuralist theories, as a materially existent work, or source, to which the text of the novel refers and which is constitutive of the novel's meaning. The authors use their pre-texts self-consciously. They carefully select and acknowledge them and thus construct the meanings of their texts with a rhetorical goal in their minds. In *First Light* Ackroyd creates a hypertextual novel in Gérard Genette's sense. He conducts a hypertextual dialogue between the text of his novel, which works as the hypertext, and Thomas Hardy's *Two on a Tower*, as the hypotext.

In his *Palimpsests* Genette defines hypertextuality as "any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the *hypertext*) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the *hypotext*), upon which it is grafted."² The hypertext is a text in the second degree, i.e., a non-original rewriting of a text that already exists. The hypotext is definitely the most important pre-text constitutive of the hypertext's meaning as these two texts engage in a continuous dialogue. They are parallel to each other as they run side by side throughout the whole length of the novel and thus create the image of the palimpsest: "on the same parchment, one text can become superimposed upon another, which it does not quite conceal but allows to show through."³ However, *Two on a Tower* is not the only pre-text that Ackroyd uses in his novel. There are other pre-texts that are not parallel to the novel but only intersect with its text at various points. In the epigraphs of the novel's individual parts, Ackroyd acknowledges not only Hardy's novel but also J. G. Frazer's anthropological study *The Golden Bough*, one of Oscar Wilde's aphorisms, Rudyard Kipling's short story "The Finest Story in the World," and one of William Blake's prophetic works, *Europe*.⁴ I call these pre-texts grafted texts. The grafted text is not rewritten and recreated by the hypertext in its entirety like the hypotext is. The hypertext does not transform or imitate the grafted text, in Genette's sense, like the hypotext and this is the reason why the grafted text is not continuously present in the reader's mind and throughout the whole process of reading. The hypertext only draws on the grafted text by *selectively* choosing and picking particular elements or premises from it which the hypertext appropriates into its overall meaning. The grafted text has a function that is supplementary to the main role of the hypotext. All the texts discussed here—hypertext, hypotext, and grafted text—are constitutive of the notion of literary hypertextuality.

I will thus conduct a literary analysis in which I will compare Ackroyd's hypertext with its hypotext and each of its grafted texts. All the above defined texts are used by Peter Ackroyd in his *First Light* in order to argue for his

2. Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 5.

3. Genette, *Palimpsests*, 398–99.

4. Peter Ackroyd's *First Light* also refers to other pre-texts. However, for the sake of clarity and the transparency of my argument, I will pay attention only to the most important of them, from which the epigraphs of the novel's individual parts are taken.

view of English history. Ackroyd's history is a unity of time and place—a sequence of generations tied to their native land. Later, in *Albion*, Ackroyd stresses the primary role of the spirit of the land as opposed to genealogy. The English land emanates a “territorial imperative by means of which a local area can influence or guide all those who inhabit it.”⁵ However, in *First Light* the genealogical part of the history of the nation plays at least as important a part as the territory. Ackroyd's notion of history is the continuity of the generations living in England. It assumes an image of a spiral. Each new generation progresses but at a certain point it comes back to rediscover its roots and find a connection to its ancestors, only to brush against the past and start progressing again.

Peter Ackroyd's *First Light* takes place in the Pilgrim Valley, with the village of Colcorum, which is situated in Hardy's country, on the border of Dorset and Devon, near Lyme Regis. Mark Clare is the leader of a group of anthropologists who, during the excavation of a Neolithic tumulus, discover the casket of, supposedly, an ancient astronomer with the words “Old Barren One” inscribed on it. “Old Barren One” is Ackroyd's word play on the name of the star Aldebaran, with which the ancient burial site is aligned, and which is, incidentally, being studied by Damian Fall, an astronomer in a nearby observatory. The village of Colcorum is the seat of the Mint and Trout family tribe. It is not surprising that the Mints, the father and son who are also local farmers, turn out to have known about the tumulus and the buried Neolithic man all this time and actually to be his guardians, as Old Barren One is their first and most ancient ancestor. In an attempt to save their ancestor from the nosy scientists, the Mints steal the casket from the tumulus and hide it with a newcomer into the family, Joey Hanover, a retired cabaret comedian who had set out for this part of the country to discover his parents' identity and found out that Father Mint is actually his cousin. The story also includes two personal tragedies—Damian Fall and Mark's wife Kathleen commit suicide.

I argue that Ackroyd rewrites Hardy's *Two on a Tower* so that he completely inverts Hardy's message. Both novels work with the dyad of the smallness and concreteness of individual human lives in everyday reality and the removed abstract theories of science, particularly astronomy. Whereas Hardy puts these two elements in utter contrast, in which the pursuit of science may seem mere theorizing, not only unimportant but also alien to the down-to-earth reality, Ackroyd approves of the pursuit of science and constructing grand theories, no matter whether scientific or lay, because only these theories give meaning to human lives—individuals have a meaning only as part of a larger picture, while alone they are doomed to annihilation. Most of *First Light's* characters are concerned with constructing theories, or we can even say “grand narratives,” in the frame of which their lives are meant to be parts of a larger pattern. The grand theories, no matter whether based

5. Peter Ackroyd, *Albion: The Origins of the English Imagination* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2002), 448.

on science, common sense, or even superstition, are important as they are points of reference towards which individuals are oriented. For Ackroyd, it is of hardly any importance whether a theory is grounded in truthful facts or only illusions of facts; a much more significant feature is that it assigns meaning to its individual components (people), who, by relating to it, are able to discover their own meaning. For Ackroyd, as well as for his characters, the “grand theory” is always a theory of history. In *First Light* history is identified as Hardy’s universe and the unity of time and place. Unlike *Albion*, Ackroyd’s *First Light* primarily investigates the temporal axis of his notion of history. Place, Hardy’s country, also plays a significant role but this novel is unique as far as the theme of ancestry, and, thus, the temporal element of Ackroyd’s national history is concerned. Since Ackroyd does not pay as much attention to the ancestral part of national history in his later writings, I find *First Light* rather illuminative. Ackroyd’s view of history assumes the image of a spiral. Individuals cannot exist outside their relationships to both the previous and forthcoming generations. Moreover, in each new generation some features of older generations are present. In such a way the extremities of the past and the present become united. History is not, however, a circular motion of fruitless repetition or stagnation. It also includes change. Each new generation necessarily advances.

In *First Light* Ackroyd inverts the message of his hypotext—Thomas Hardy’s *Two on a Tower*. Whereas Hardy emphasizes the importance of the relatively small lives of his two heroes, whose fates matter more than the abstract constructions of astronomy and the crushing vastness of the universe, Ackroyd makes the abstract theoretical constructions of the spatial and temporal continuity of the universe the more important element in the dyad. Individual lives are meaningful only under the condition that they are parts of the much larger process of history, only if they are part of communities and only if they have historical continuity in the sense of traceable ancestry. In the preface to the 1895 edition Thomas Hardy defends his novel against accusations of immorality and of satirizing the Church of England. However, at the beginning of his short defence he introduces his novel in this way: “This slightly-built romance was the outcome of a wish to set the emotional history of two infinitesimal lives against the stupendous background of the stellar universe, and to impart to readers the sentiment that of these contrasting magnitudes the smaller might be the greater to them as men.”⁶ Ackroyd, on the other hand, bends the thematic concerns of Hardy’s novel in his own direction. As Bruce Bawer confirms in his review of *First Light*, “while Hardy, with relative constraint, chose in his 1882 novel to focus upon the ‘infinitesimal lives’ of his hero and heroine, Mr. Ackroyd . . . devotes at least as much attention to ‘the stellar universe’ as to any given character.”⁷

6. Thomas Hardy, *Two on a Tower* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1905), v.

7. Bruce Bawer, “Stars Flicker Weakly Over Dorset Dig,” review of *First Light*, by Peter Ackroyd, *Wall Street Journal*, September 18, 1989, Eastern edition, Leisure & Arts 1.

The universe, the history, the grand theories of time, place, and the meaning of human lives seem to be of more importance to Ackroyd than the petty twists and turns of individual fates.

The most prominent points of connection between *Two on a Tower* and *First Light* are the setting of the novels and their major characters. The setting and characters in both novels express a sense of isolation that sets the small lives of the novels' heroes against the vastness of the universe. In both novels we find the tower from the title of Hardy's novel, or rather a column, as both novels call it. It is from the top of this column that Swithin St. Clare, a youth of about 20 years of age and an astronomer, and Viviette, the wife of a local aristocrat, Sir Blount Constantine, make their astronomical observations, and it is also this column from which Kathleen Clare flings herself down in her final despair. In both novels the column is an abandoned site on top of a hill in the middle of fields and forests, set apart from human settlement, visited by hardly anybody except for the novels' heroes. Both settings convey the same sense of loneliness, waste, and disintegration over time. In order to emphasize the continuation and importance of Hardy's novel in *First Light* even further, Ackroyd makes Kathleen and Mark find a page torn from *Two on a Tower* on the steps of the column. The only readable line on the page is ". . . has beyond it ghastliness," which is actually taken from Hardy's novel and is also a part of one of the epigraphs that Ackroyd places at the beginnings of the parts of his book.⁸

Hardy's lovers, Swithin and Viviette, who vainly struggle to make their love legitimate and to overcome the increasing distance that Swithin's pursuit of science makes between them, are paralleled in Ackroyd's Mark and Kathleen Clare. Although Ackroyd reverses the age difference between the lovers—whereas Viviette is older by some eight or nine years than Swithin, Mark is Kathleen's much older husband—it is the men in both the couples who pursue their careers in science and leave their women in despair as far as their relationship is concerned and thus cause their deaths. Viviette's isolation is both internal and external. While her husband pursues adventures in Africa, she lives alone in Welland House, hardly encountering anybody from the nearby village except for her servants and thus "the void in her outer life continued, and with it the void in her life within."⁹ Her isolation, both social and emotional, is interrupted by meeting the young astronomer on the top of the column. The prospect of studying astronomy with Swithin, spending time in the company of somebody who she fancies, arouses "an attractive little intervention between herself and despair."¹⁰ This happy intervention is not, however, supposed to last long. Even though Viviette and Swithin fall in love and legitimize their relationship in a secret wedding, she always seems the second among Swithin's interests after his astronomy. After it is revealed that

8. Peter Ackroyd, *First Light* (London: Hamilton, 1989), 207.

9. Hardy, *Two on a Tower*, 52.

10. Hardy, *Two on a Tower*, 55.

Sir Blount actually died only about six weeks after Swithin and Viviette's wedding, thus making their marriage invalid, Swithin takes up his great uncle's inheritance money and leaves for several years to study the Transit of Venus all over the world. As Swithin's great uncle's condition is that Swithin only gets an annuity if he stays single until the age of 25, it is actually Viviette who lets him go and who feels the inevitability of her sacrifice. The reason for her sacrifice is an utterly unselfish one—it is her love for Swithin:

Ought a possibly large number, Swithin included, to remain unbenefited because the one individual to whom his release would be an injury chanced to be herself? Love between man and woman, which in Homer, Moses, and other early exhibitors of life, is mere desire, had for centuries past so far broadened as to include sympathy and friendship; surely it should in this advanced stage of the world include benevolence also. If so, it was her duty to set her young man free.¹¹

By setting Swithin free, Viviette also seals her unfortunate destiny. She makes her fatal decision before realizing that she is pregnant with his child. Under such circumstances she is forced to marry one of her suitors, old Bishop Helmsdale. During their next, and last, encounter on the column several years later, Viviette's heavily tried heart does not endure the shock of Swithin's resolution, even though it is only formal and not emotional, to marry her again and to take care of their son, and dies of a heart attack right there in Swithin's arms on the top of the fatal column.

Kathleen Clare is Viviette's fitting unfortunate and desperate counterpart. Her isolation is, first of all, caused by her disability. Her crippled leg made her a lonely child always "left behind on the shore" while other children played with a ball on the beach.¹² Isolation has marked her whole life. Her marriage to Mark consists of long days spent in the confinement of their flat, her only company being their dog Jude. Her longing to put an end to her isolation is expressed by her wish to adopt a child, as she cannot have one of her own because of her disability, and which she is denied by the authorities exactly because of her impairment. Like Viviette, Kathleen "had always felt destined to suffer."¹³ Unlike Viviette, she voluntarily puts an end to her life. She cannot bear her own crippled existence, so much so that she thinks that after her death "in the passage of time she could be blotted out, utterly forgotten."¹⁴ On the other hand, both women suppress their own presence in order to make way for their partners' career growth; they both set them free. When Mark contemplated Kathleen's death "he realised how, in that instant, he had felt free. This was the choice which Kathleen had exercised, and he felt a certain exhilaration. If she had made her own choice, then there was no need to pity or to mourn her."¹⁵ Kathleen, like Viviette, feels she is a hindrance to Mark's

11. Hardy, *Two on a Tower*, 270.

12. Ackroyd, *First Light*, 29.

13. Ackroyd, *First Light*, 30.

14. Ackroyd, *First Light*, 242.

15. Ackroyd, *First Light*, 258.

scientific pursuits. One sleepless night she sends Mark to the excavation site, where he finally advances in his research and discovers the tumulus of Old Barren One. This is also the night when Kathleen takes her life by jumping from Swithin's column.

The isolation and subsequent deaths of these two women are in large measure caused by their partners' scientific pursuits, which result in their neglect of their partners. As compared to the grand pursuit of science, two small female lives mean nothing. Swithin St. Cleeve is a prototypical scientist of nineteenth century literature. In his article on the representation of scientists in nineteenth century English fiction Milton Millhauser emphasizes the disparity between fact and fiction. Even though Britain had many prominent scientists in the nineteenth century, the characters of scientists in the fiction of the period are presented with contempt as "faintly comic, often alien, often somehow 'unsound,' and frequently positively evil."¹⁶ Swithin is indeed perceived by the local people, who live by physical labour, as detached and not practical: "[H]e's good for nothing He mopes about—sometimes here, and sometimes there."¹⁷ Millhauser examines the character of Swithin and comes to the conclusion that Hardy presents him as a scientist only to make him alien to the local community, that he does not treat Swithin as a serious scientist but "downgrades" his role to a lover.¹⁸ It is true that readers do not get to know many details of Swithin's astronomical theories, but still, Swithin is not only a lover. His pursuit of astronomy and study of abstract theories is contrasted with his and Viviette's everyday struggle. From the point of view of down-to-earth reality, especially if it is as dramatic as Viviette's, what happens in the sky is so unimportant. Swithin, on the other hand, even in Viviette's company, is mentally inaccessible and barely notices his beautiful companion:

There lay, in the shape of an Antinous, no *amoroso*, no gallant, but a guileless philosopher. His parted lips were lips which spoke, not of love, but of millions of miles; those were eyes which habitually gazed, not into the depths of other eyes, but into other worlds. Within his temples dwelt thoughts, not of woman's looks, but of stellar aspects and the configuration of constellations. . . . His heaven at present was truly in the skies, and not in that only other place where they say it can be found, in the eyes of some daughter of Eve.¹⁹

This "guileless philosopher" can never understand that his astronomical theories are of no concern when it comes to human misfortune on earth. It is this guilelessness, due to which Swithin rather chooses to live in the skies than to have his feet set firmly on the ground, that brings about Viviette's bleak future.

16. Milton Millhauser, "Dr. Newton and Mr. Hyde: Scientists in Fiction from Swift to Stevenson," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 28, no. 3 (1973): 288.

17. Hardy, *Two on a Tower*, 12.

18. Millhauser, "Dr. Newton and Mr. Hyde," 295–96.

19. Hardy, *Two on a Tower*, 47.

The character of Swithin is the point where Ackroyd starts diverging from Hardy's novel. It is true that Swithin finds his counterpart in Mark Clare, who fails as a partner to Kathleen in the same way as Swithin fails Viviette. Mark, too, pursues his scientific career and leaves his wife to struggle with her own despair, which results in her suicide. However, I argue that Hardy's Swithin is split into two characters—that of a failed partner but successful scientist, which Ackroyd transforms into the character of Mark Clare, and that of a detached astronomer who lives in his vain theorizing, which Ackroyd transforms into Damian Fall. There is also another point where Ackroyd diverges from Hardy. Whereas Hardy emphasizes the pointlessness of abstract theories as compared to small individual lives, Ackroyd emphasizes the importance of theory which gives individual human lives meaning. Whereas Mark, as a scientist, constructs his theories about the tumulus and its importance, Damian is at the point of distrusting theories and particularly their constructedness, which is one of the reasons why he commits suicide. Damian is very much the alienated scientist in the tradition of the nineteenth century that Millhouser discusses. All his life he has pursued astronomy and its abstract theories but now his career is going downhill as he is ceasing to believe in scientific constructs. He realizes that all his theories are constructions which may not be grounded in the facts of life, the world, or the universe. While studying Aldebaran, he is becoming convinced that its representations in engravings, astronomical maps, and telescopes may only be human constructions, and thus mere illusions that could hardly matter for people on earth as they may not deal with objects that actually exist: "[W]hat if the pictures of Aldebaran were simply constructions with no reality beyond this particular time and place, this particular observer who now looked up at the sky from the dark observatory, looked up at the vast emptiness?"²⁰ Further on, Damian elaborates on his theoretical pessimism, arguing that the objects these theories deal with come into existence only in the form of human wishes. The objects are created by people only because people need to construct their theories with them. As a proof of his persuasion Damian contemplates the engravings of Ptolemy, Copernicus, Kepler, and Newton:

Their own theories and inventions had lasted only for the briefest of periods but, if all knowledge was a story, what did it really signify? Perhaps there were no stars and no planets, no nebulae and no constellations; perhaps they merely came into existence in recognition of our wishes and demands. And if there came a moment when no one on earth was studying the heavens . . . what then? Was it possible that the heavens would then disappear? What if there is a void above us, like the void within me now?²¹

Damian's nihilism finally drives him to suicide. Mark, on the other hand, is a scientist faithful to his theorizing. Although he shares with Damian, and all other scientists for that matter, the fear of constructing a theory and only

20. Ackroyd, *First Light*, 134.

21. Ackroyd, *First Light*, 102.

then realizing that the objects studied do not confirm it, that they do not follow the exact pattern aligned in his theory, he, nevertheless, does not lose faith in scientific pursuit, theory making, and the intellectual constructions interpreting the discovery of the skeleton in the tumulus:

And so he dreaded that inevitable moment when an unexpected discovery was made, a discovery which undermined the construction placed upon previous finds. For, when the theory fell apart, the evidence went with it. All the objects were still there, but as soon as they lost their coherence they lost their identity; they returned at once to that disassembled and dishevelled state in which they had first been found.²²

Mark is well aware of the artificial constructedness of his theories. He, however, never doubts the existence of evidence like Damian does. Moreover, he feels the necessity to arrange objects in meaningful patterns, i.e., theories. Without such patterns things are in a state of chaos and disintegration. In Ackroyd's novel constructing theories out of chaotic objects is a primary human activity by which people ascribe meaning not only to their surroundings but also to themselves. This is the point of difference between Hardy and Ackroyd. Whereas Swithin brings on Viviette's misfortune by his pursuit of science and his neglect of earthly affairs, Mark as a scientist survives and prospers because he finds meaning in theory but Damian loses because his faith in constructing abstract intellectual patterns is gone.

It is systems theory, in the sense of establishing relationships between objects, that is particularly important for the reading of *First Light*. Although both for Ackroyd and for Hardy the isolation of their characters is caused by their inability to form relationships, Ackroyd assigns a much more important role to human relationships. Without forming relationships, especially within the family, an individual is an isolated object who does not fit into any pattern, who cannot trace their continuity through time. Even though Hardy's heroes fail to connect at the beginning of the novel and to reconnect at its end after their separation, it is only because of Swithin's preoccupation with astronomy. He, at first, does not notice the beauty and love of his female companion; he is "quite unconscious of his terrestrial neighbourings, and of herself [Viviette] as one of them."²³ At the end of the novel, because of his lightness of heart when traveling abroad and studying both the southern and northern skies, Swithin seems to forget completely that, just like he has, Viviette has aged. Moreover, being older than him, she looks quite unlike when he left her. His surprise is an unpleasant one but, only to keep his word as a gentleman, he is still ready to marry her. Hardy's concern is thus purely with the alienation of science from everyday reality. Swithin, carried away by abstract science, disregards such ordinary facts of life as aging. Ackroyd, on the other hand, ascribes much more meaning to scientific theory and patterns. Even though they are ordinary patterns of human family relationships, they still form systems that give meaning to individuals and without which individuals are

22. Ackroyd, *First Light*, 240.

23. Hardy, *Two on a Tower*, 70.

bound to perish, just like Kathleen and Damian. Mark does not understand systems theory as an exact, objective, and precise science but as a set of relationships.²⁴ In his professional life he arranges archeological finds in a certain fashion so that they form connections and relationships with one another and yield a pattern, a theory of what ancient people's activities were. In his family life, however, he fails to connect with Kathleen and form a functioning family, which is also a system, with her. When contemplating the possibility of adopting a child with Kathleen, he is well aware of the fact that this means creating relationships which endure and which will assure his and Kathleen's continuity: "It all begins now. From this time a set of relationships will be established which may endure for ever, passing down echoes of Kathleen and myself from generation to generation."²⁵ Through their child they would pass on to the future and form a tentative relationship with future generations; they would make their family system grow and expand. This never happens, not only because the authorities will not allow Kathleen to adopt a child, but also because of Mark's inability to connect with his wife. Both Mark and Kathleen remember one moment in their lives when they met before they got to know each other. Kathleen was at the beach with her parents—a lonely child left out of the game other children were playing. Kathleen remembers a man and a woman walking by and noticing her. She never gets to know who the man was. It was, of course, Mark, but he never revealed his identity to Kathleen. This example of miscommunication is the doom of their marriage. Whereas Mark still has his science, where he can create systems and patterns, and, finally, at the end of the book, understand the interrelatedness of all things and his position in such a system, Kathleen has no such goal to pursue. She is aware of the fact that, not being able to relate, she does not fit into any pattern, she is the odd one out.

The main characters' isolation and their inability to relate and to form meaningful family units are balanced by the local farmers—Father and Boy Mint. The Mints have a display of family photos on the wall of their cottage: "In fact these pictures and photographs, which seemed to mark a continuous line of at least three centuries, displayed a succession of faces which bore a striking resemblance to those of the present Mints."²⁶ Their family is a set of relationships that have run unbroken for centuries and in which both Father and Boy Mint have their place. Even Joey's elderly life, after the discovery of his parents' identity, ceases to be contained in itself and is now related to the Mints. He has found other elements he can relate to or against and thus finalize his identity.

For Hardy and his heroes ancestry hardly matters in any other way than that it defines their social position. The most important setting of the novel, the column, is of hardly any concern to the people of the community. There

24. See Ackroyd, *First Light*, 37.

25. Ackroyd, *First Light*, 34.

26. Ackroyd, *First Light*, 58.

are only a few who still remember that it was built in commemoration of Sir Blount's great grandfather who died in the American War of Independence. There are still fewer who know that the column was built on a hill which is said to hide the remains of a Roman camp, an old British castle, or a Saxon field.²⁷ The Romans, Britons, or Saxons, in history far more distant ancestors than Sir Blount's great grandfather, matter even less. They are totally removed from the lives of the nineteenth century heroes, which is demonstrated on an early October morning when Swithin is in his column getting ready to depart to get secretly married to Viviette:

It was a strange place for a bridegroom to perform his toilet in, but, considering the unconventional nature of the marriage, a not inappropriate one. What events had been enacted in that earthen camp since it was first thrown up, nobody could say; but the primitive simplicity of the young man's preparations accorded well with the prehistoric spot on which they were made. Embedded under his feet were possibly even now rude trinkets that had been worn at bridal ceremonies of the early inhabitants. Little signified those ceremonies to-day, or the happiness or otherwise of the contracting parties.²⁸

Even though the primitiveness of the place is appropriate for Swithin's simple toilet, no more significance may be read into this passage. The dead do not care for the living and the living are hardly of any concern to the dead. Hardy is concerned with the lives of individuals and does not care to find any ancestry or historical continuity to give his heroes identity or meaning. Ackroyd's heroes, on the contrary, gain their identity exactly by finding their place in a family unit that extends to long-dead ancestors on the one hand and the prospect of new upcoming generations on the other hand. Colcorum turns out to be the seat of a family tribe—it is the Mints and the Trouts who make up the major part of the village's population. On welcoming Joey into the family, there is a festive dinner during which a ritual is performed. Joey has to wear antlers on his head. In ancient cultures, the Celtic one included, antlers were considered a sign of virility and fertility.²⁹ Considering Joey's much-advanced age, the antlers are not meant to signify his virility or fertility but to identify him as a newcomer into the family by whose arrival the family clan expands. To emphasize the tribe's connectedness with its most ancient ancestor, Ackroyd makes Old Barren One's burial site, which Mark studies in aerial photographs, so large as to include the whole of the community of Pilgrim Valley: "[I]t [the tumulus] resembled a single eye staring up at the heavens. . . . With his finger he traced a line of darker soil which extended around the mound; it took not the form of a circle but that of an ellipse, and it extended into the field beyond Pilgrim Valley itself."³⁰ Not only does Old Barren One encircle the whole community of his descendants but his casket is in the middle of the mound in a stone circle that looks like an eye.

27. See Hardy, *Two on a Tower*, 3.

28. Hardy, *Two on a Tower*, 137.

29. See Sabine Heinz, "Deer," in *Symbols of the Celts* (New York: Sterling, 1999), 47–51.

30. Ackroyd, *First Light*, 13.

Underground passages run out from the centre of the mound, just as Old Barren One's descendants spring out away from him.

In Hardy's *Two on a Tower* the universe is a source of annihilation; it is not friendly to poor human lives: "[W]hatever the stars were made for, they were not made to please our eyes. It is just the same in everything; nothing is made for man."³¹ The universe exists independently of the people on the earth and constructing theories about the course of the stars is of little concern to everyday peripeties. Ackroyd's Old Barren One, the ancient astronomer, on the other hand, is directly represented and identified as the burning star of Aldebaran that has watched over his earthly descendents throughout the centuries. By being everlastingly represented in the sky, the ancient ancestor gets reunited with his descendants to form an unbroken continuity of generations. For Hardy the sky is a sight of horror filled with impersonal monsters, immensities, and voids in which something as small as a human life can get lost with no consequence to the course of the universe. Even Swithin is well aware of the terrifying immensities of the skies:

'I often experience a kind of fear of the sky after sitting in the observing-chair a long time,' he answered. 'And when I walk home afterwards I also fear it, for what I know is there, but cannot see, as one naturally fears the presence of a vast formless something that only reveals a very little of itself. That's partly what I meant by saying that magnitude, which up to a certain point has grandeur, has beyond it ghastliness.'³²

Swithin, however, pursues the horror of the skies with fascination and naivety, totally unaware of how the universe is building up a wall between him and Viviette. Compared to the vastness of the universe, a human life is of as much importance as is a grain of sand at the bottom of the ocean:

They more and more felt the contrast between their own tiny magnitudes and those among which they had recklessly plunged, till they were oppressed with the presence of a vastness they could not cope with even as an idea, and which hung about them like a nightmare.³³

The two quotations above are used by Ackroyd as the epigraphs of two of the parts of his book. Ackroyd, however, does not use these quotations to emphasize the terrifying vastness of the universe in which a person gets totally lost. Quite the contrary. Ackroyd's sky, no matter how immense or horrific, gives people meaning as it has existed at least as long as the earth has and thus has been a witness to the history of the earth, of which humanity is an essential part. Each human being forms relationships with other human beings and also with the things that surround him/her. These relationships, when infinitely extended, form a vast system that makes up the whole universe.

This is the message that the readers get at the end of *First Light*, when the Trouts and Mints steal Old Barren One from the tumulus to save him

31. Hardy, *Two on a Tower*, 33.

32. Hardy, *Two on a Tower*, 69.

33. Hardy, *Two on a Tower*, 70.

from the interfering scientists and hide him in the house of the youngest member of the tribe—Joey Hanover. When the archeologists invade Joey’s house, instead of giving Old Barren One up, he rather burns him in his garden shed. Not only do the present and past get united in such an act, the oldest side by side with the youngest, but in the act of setting fire to the casket Joey’s consciousness gets fused with all his ancestors that are contained in the body of the oldest of them. Joey travels through time in his mind and hears the voices of his ancestors who form one unbroken line and who get united in Joey’s mind. Mark, even though not of the local family clan, finally understands this interconnectedness too. “Everything is part of the pattern,” as he says.³⁴ It is not *a* pattern but *the* pattern. As Alec explains to Mark, “even our bodies are built with the fossilised debris of dead stars. . . . All the materials of life come from the cosmic trace elements. . . . You have a universe inside you, my friend.”³⁵ One can fully understand this pattern of interconnectedness only if one is outside of it, but then one is an outsider with no basis for existence and thus ceases to exist, like Kathleen and Damian. The pattern is a spiral; “nothing is destroyed. Things just change their form, and take up another place in the pattern. No one really dies.”³⁶ But it is not only Joey’s consciousness that is united with Old Barren One. Damian experiences several of these occasions. He is not, however, part of the pattern as he refuses to believe in it. His refusal to cope with the constructedness of science and the facts behind it results in his inability to believe in his own existence as a basic element in the pattern of the universe. This mental annihilation and fusion of consciousness with the ancient corpse finally persuades Damian that he is insane and drives him to suicide, disregarding the fact that Old Barren One tries to reveal the functioning of the historical and universal pattern to him:

Everything is touching everything else, expanding outwards but still mingled together. If a leaf were miraculously to disappear from a single tree the whole universe would be destroyed, because at that instant the balance of forces would be disturbed. . . . And I, too, am an aspect of that order, a relic of earliest creation which space and time have now woven together: nothing can happen to me without subtly altering the shape of the visible universe.³⁷

For Ackroyd the whole universe is a set of relationships in which each element, no matter how seemingly unimportant, is connected to every other element. It is these relationships that define a human being as a brick in the vast construction of the universe, of time and place and of history. The universe is an efficient system that forms an image of a spiral—nothing gets lost, everything is “recycled.” Hardy would hardly understand this view of the world. For him the universe is an independent entity. It is strange, alien, or even unfriendly, and its pursuit is at best a fruitless hobby and at worst a destructive activity.

34. Ackroyd, *First Light*, 264.

35. Ackroyd, *First Light*, 263.

36. Ackroyd, *First Light*, 264.

37. Ackroyd, *First Light*, 156.

People have always constructed their views of the universe and of the time and place in which they live. Even though these theories may change, for very often they do, and none of them may be described as *the one* that survives the centuries, they are still meaningful to the people of a particular period and a particular place. For this reason, by using the four grafted texts in the epigraphs of the parts of the book, even Peter Ackroyd in *First Light* presents his readers with his theory of time and place, i.e., of the progress of history in England. Ackroyd first uses Frazer's *The Golden Bough* as support for his own theory. In Ackroyd's novel scientific theory and the worldview of ordinary people untrained in exact research, such as the Mints, and probably himself too, are equal. They are only two alternative ways of interpreting history, and the only criterion of their usefulness and validity is the man who chooses which alternative to follow. Ackroyd's view of history starts with the individual human being, whose life, however, does not exist in isolation; nor is it a self-contained entity, as Oscar Wilde's aphorism seems to proclaim. An individual human life exists in relation to, and thus is also defined by, that human's ancestors and descendants, by the preceding and forthcoming generations. One's position in the flow of generations assigns the person identity. Each new generation carries in itself, quite unconsciously, traces of the preceding generations. By using Kipling's short story "The Finest Story in the World," Ackroyd stresses the idea that certain qualities of the past remain permanent and are passed on and get accumulated in every new generation. This connection of the past and the present makes it possible for Ackroyd to present his spiral view of history. Ackroyd quotes from William Blake's *Europe* to stress the cyclical movement of history, which, however, also makes place for progress and change. Ackroyd's history forms a spiral in which each new generation progresses but, at the same time, continually explores its roots.

Scientific theories in *First Light* are tainted with a stigma of not being as exact as science is usually thought to be, of not being based on unshakeable facts. They have a stigma of being constructed by the human mind and thus necessarily subjective. As John Crowley admits, *First Light* explores the dilemma of "the hubris of modern science when faced with the dark and backward" such as Old Barren One, which means that the attainability of objective interpretation and comprehensive explanation, "goals that few real archeologists can have ever held . . . are to be baffled."³⁸ First, Ackroyd portrays scientific theory as necessarily subjective and thus not much different from superstition and ritual, i.e., the forms of magic performed by the inhabitants of Colcorum, the Mints in particular, who retain their trust in their oldest ancestor. Subsequently, science and magic are only two alternatives in interpreting history—they are both equal and valid. The criterion of the validity of each of them is man—scientists follow science and

38. John Crowley, "Something Vengeful and Ancient," review of *First Light*, by Peter Ackroyd, *New York Times*, September 17, 1989, late edition, East Coast, A15.

ordinary people follow their lay ideas, which may not be dissimilar to magic. For the purpose of illustrating the difference between, and, particularly, the similarity of scientific and superstitious interpretations of history, Ackroyd uses as an epigraph a quotation from Frazer's *The Golden Bough*: "It is therefore a truism, almost a tautology, to say that magic is necessarily false or barren; for were it ever to become true and fruitful, it would no longer be magic but science."³⁹ According to Frazer the conception of science and magic is identical—they are both grounded in a firm belief in the uniformity and order of nature, in a belief that the laws of nature, as conceived by the scientist or the magician, are immutable, that the same cause will always have the same effect and each operation may be foreseen and calculated.⁴⁰ The differences between science and magic, according to Frazer, are only two. First, and quite apparently, magic relies on a misconception of nature and its laws. Magic consists of mistaken applications of the laws of association by similarity and contiguity. If these two laws are applied legitimately, they yield science. The second difference is that whereas in magic the belief in these laws of association, by which the course of nature runs, is implicit, in science it is explicitly spelt out. What unites science and magic, however, is that both are constructions of the human mind by which people create order in the otherwise chaotic natural world. They construct laws and patterns that yield a certain meaning and allow them to predict the future and thus adjust their behaviour.⁴¹

In *First Light* it is the character of Damian, the doubting scientist, who spells out the assumption that science may not be exact as it is constructed by human beings and, as such, it is at least partially subjective. Damian doubts the usefulness of various astronomical theories because they change throughout history. He even doubts the reality behind astronomical theories exactly because of their subjectivity caused by the human mind. He compares the constructedness of science to fiction, whose features are totally contrary to it—a lack of exact data and an abundance of subjective perception:

Science is like fiction, you see. We make up stories, we sketch out narratives, we try to find some pattern beneath events. We are interested observers. . . . We know now that the scientist is actually controlling the reality while he observes it. The spin of a sub-atomic particle, for example, always does what the physicist expects. It always follows his random choice.⁴²

Ackroyd does not seem to ascribe much value to the exactness of science; to him it does not matter whether a particular theory is precise or not. His only criterion is the theory's applicability—if a theory presents a meaningful pattern that gives its builders a place in this world and an identity, it is

39. James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, abr. ed. (London: Macmillan, 1960), 64–65.

40. See Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 64.

41. See Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 67.

42. Ackroyd, *First Light*, 159–60.

useful. This criterion is, however, also met by magic. Father and Boy Mint are the very opposite of Damian or Mark. They resemble magicians or pagan priests that guard an ancient temple. Their view of the world has nothing to do with precise explanation or comprehensive interpretation of facts or evidence found in nature. The Mints “perpetuate a pattern of mystery and ritual that stretches back to the paleolithic era. Their veneration of the body of an ancient ancestor . . . forms the centerpiece of a survival of belief, superstition, and ritual that presents another alternative history of the Pilgrim Valley.”⁴³ The Mints’ alternative history revolves around Old Barren One, who acts as a totem and a protector of their identity. Long before Mark, the Mints formed their own theory about the skeleton in the tumulus; they formed a pattern in which they have their own place and which is meaningful to them and only them. It does not matter whether other people or scientists agree with the Mints on the function of Old Barren One or not, since their theory is utterly subjective, constructed by them and also useful to them only. For Ackroyd both scientific explanations and local superstitions and rituals may be considered valid explanations as they both create alternative theories; they are two different interpretations of history.

History, defined as a human construction and very close to fiction in its nature, is Ackroyd’s excuse for presenting his readers with his own view of history, the world, and, by extension, the universe, which may not be particularly scientific but it has been tested by generations before him and relies on others of his kind, i.e., authors of fiction. Ackroyd’s view of history, which is primarily based on relationships, starts with its smallest element—a human being. One of *First Light*’s chapters is introduced by Oscar Wilde’s aphorism: “*Creation began when you were born. It will end on the day you die.*”⁴⁴ As irony is characteristic of Wilde’s work in general and his witty remarks in particular, we can conclude that the above quotation is supposed to mean exactly the opposite of what it says. A human being is not a self contained element unrelated to anything else. Quite the contrary, a human life finds its “extensions” in the generations before and after it. Joey Hanover, the newcomer into the Mint family, realizes that his own small life has been extended into the past as well as into the future:

[T]he discovery of his family had allowed him to see his life as part of some larger continuity and, just as he could now look backward with more confidence, so also could he look forward. The world, before, had been merely an index of his own ageing; but now it seemed to him to contain the possibility of change, to be always capable of renewal.⁴⁵

His life, advanced in years, has ceased to be contained in itself. It is the act of positioning oneself in between one’s relatives that gives one identity and meaning. Without such positioning, one’s isolation is also one’s doom. Without

43. Janik, “No End of History,” 175.

44. Ackroyd, *First Light*, 61. Ackroyd’s italics.

45. Ackroyd, *First Light*, 222–23.

relationships to the past and to the future, one is erased from the earth's surface.

The continuity of generations or of time and place is not linear. The line which starts with family and ancestry and extends to a nation or even possibly humanity forms a spiral in which the present, although different from the past, is inspired by the past, imitates it, and thus gets reunited with it. The present is never totally new or disconnected from the past; it incorporates certain traits of the past. Certain qualities do not vanish with the age they primarily belong to but they stay for good and get accumulated in new generations. To illustrate his point, Ackroyd uses as a grafted text Rudyard Kipling's short story "The Finest Story in the World."

The narrator of Kipling's story is a writer with writer's block who meets a bank clerk, Charlie Mears, who is, although ignorant of literary history, able to tell the most exciting stories, which he dreams about. With the prospect of writing a story that has never been written before, the writer buys Charlie's tales and writes them up. With this money Charlie buys books of fiction and poetry and, incidentally, the more books he reads, the less his dreams seem original and the more they resemble stories written long before. The narrator's explanation of Charlie's ability is metempsychosis⁴⁶—reincarnation of the soul and remembering one's past lives. Charlie's vivid imagination, and any writer's for that matter, is only a half remembrance of what had happened to him in his previous lives. However, the narrator is unable to explain Charlie's inability to "dream up" interesting stories after he has begun reading literature. If writers' imagination is only the remembrance of their past lives, what had happened to a person centuries ago was not very probably extraordinary in that given time period but, carried in the memory through the centuries all the way to the nineteenth century, is most exciting, such as the tale of a Greek slave galley in Kipling's story. Thus, when Charlie reads other writers' books he is reminded, if only unconsciously, of what happened to him long ago. The act of being reminded of the past shuts Charlie's door to it. Charlie cannot be made to speak again because his vision of the present and of his own life would then crumble into pieces: "But *if* he spoke it would mean that it would end now—*instanto*—fall down on your head. These things are not allowed, you know. As I said, the door is shut."⁴⁷ The door of memory that shuts after each of a person's lives is a safety mechanism. People cannot explicitly remember

46. Metempsychosis is defined as the "passing of soul, spirit, or personality upon death into another body, whether of the same or of a different species. A cardinal feature of many forms of Indian philosophy; . . . Hinduism, Jainism, Mahayana Buddhism. Also a part of the Pythagorean . . . philosophy, and present in the writings of Plato . . . Finally, the doctrine is to be found in the Jewish Cabala." William L. Reese, *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion: Eastern and Western Thought* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1980), s.v. "Metempsychosis."

47. Rudyard Kipling, "The Finest Story in the World," in *Many Inventions* (London: Macmillan, 1920), 122.

what happened centuries ago even though those memories are contained in them because they are “repressed.” Sometimes the door opens a crack and then our imagination comes to life and starts rambling through the long-gone ages.

Ackroyd uses the above quotation from Kipling’s story to illustrate that the past still exists and survives in the present. To elaborate on this idea he uses, very much in the fashion of his previous novel *Hawksmoor*, a fusion of consciousness. Damian’s sensitive consciousness, which has always been affected and determined by the essence of his surroundings, is invaded by Old Barren One. His receptiveness and instinctive detection of the traits of the past is immense, just like Charlie’s. However, unlike Charlie, Damian is aware of his ability, which is not completely ordinary, and which finally makes him think he is insane. He is not capable of admitting that the past may still live and that the dead may not be completely dead. However, in his madness he puts his finger on one important thing—that his consciousness includes pictures of the past, or, as he says, “primeval images”:

And even as I suffered these things it occurred to me that insanity was simply the re-emergence of primeval images. . . . I had become a primitive again. One of my own ancestors. This was madness. And I realised how easy it is to slip into it, how close it always is. It was as if the oldest fantasies of fear and dissolution lay just beneath the surface, waiting to be brought forth. Waiting to be excavated.⁴⁸

Just as Damian refuses to believe in a theory based on the relationships between finds, he does not have any relations either. For him the voice of Old Barren One is a sign of madness; he cannot even think of the idea that he might be one of those who instinctively detect the past and for whom “the door is not shut.” Another person whose consciousness gets fused with that of Old Barren One is Joey. He is receptive to whatever elements of his past he can find in. Without knowing who his parents were he had no past, or it was very limited. When he comes down to Colcorum to look for his parents, he somehow knows that he belongs there. When his suspicion is confirmed, he realizes why, even without knowing who his parents were, he instinctively felt he belonged to Colcorum. He realizes that he remembers his parents’ house from when he was a baby, that he feels the presence of the past in it. Now that he has found his family, he understands that in all human beings some traits of the past are reborn, even though they may not be aware of it.

The fusion of present and past consciousnesses and the connection of the oldest and the youngest members are near-circular movements, or rather spiral movements, as stagnation is undesirable, and such is also Ackroyd’s view of history, which he shares with William Blake. Ackroyd uses two lines from Blake’s *Europe* to illustrate the revolving motion of the generations and of history: “Then was the Serpent temple form’d, image of Infinite / Shut

48. Ackroyd, *First Light*, 177–78.

up in finite revolutions, . . .”⁴⁹ The serpent temple in the quotation is very probably the one in Avebury in North Wiltshire,⁵⁰ the description of which resembles the circular shape of Old Barren One’s tumulus. Moreover, Blake’s engraving of the title page of *Europe* presents “the Serpent of Materialism, whose circular folds suggest the Everlasting of Nature.”⁵¹ The symbol of the snake swallowing its tail representing history with its extremities united is an old one, but it was not sufficient for Blake. For him only a circle and nothing else was the dullness of repetition and contradictory to progress. This is also why in *Europe* the serpent temple is a seat of Urizen, a negative character and an embodiment of conventional reason and law, who rises to assume his power over the earth. Urizen first establishes the ancient system of the Druid religion, according to Blake a materialistic religion of unredeemed people, in the serpent temple. Blake perceives a snake or a circle as an old and false idea of eternity which he adjusts to include the progress of humanity. In his 257th illustration to Edward Young’s *Night Thoughts* “he carefully distinguishes his conception from the early one: above the everlasting circle of Nature stands Man, a straight line pointing upward.”⁵² Blake considers both directions, the enclosed circular and progressing linear, important as they make up the course of history. His interest in the past and primarily in gothic art represents his return to past generations, the reunification of the past and the present. The circular motion of history, however, has to make room for change. This is exactly how Ackroyd understands Blake’s view of history:

[Blake] experienced an intense collaboration with mortality, and with the remnants of the past, because in the chapels and cloisters of the Abbey he saw the legendary history of Britain revealed. For him it was as much a spiritual as a national or antiquarian revelation; he entered a communion with the dead, with the passage of the generations, and thereby was granted a vision of the world that never left him. It was a vision, in his own words, of ‘the characters which compose all ages and nations: as one age falls, another rises, different to mortal sight, but to immortals only the same; for we see the same characters repeated again and again, in animals, vegetables, minerals, and in men; nothing new appears in identical existence; Accident ever varies, Substance can never suffer change or decay’.⁵³

This is not only Ackroyd’s interpretation of Blake’s view of history but also his own. People tend to behave in the same way; they carry in them, very probably unconsciously, some traits that are permanently present in a relatively fixed

49. William Blake, *Europe: A Prophecy*, in *The Poetical Works of William Blake*, ed. John Sampson (London: Oxford University Press, 1908), 308.

50. In his commentary to Blake’s *Europe* Damon identifies the serpent temple as Avebury in North Wiltshire. S. Foster Damon, “Commentary to *Europe: A Prophecy*,” in *William Blake: His Philosophy and Symbols* (London: Constable, 1924), 344. Avebury is a stone monument erected in about 2,000 BC. A pathway in the shape of a serpent cuts across a large circular temple of the sun. For more information see Gardiner and Osborn’s description at the *New Age Travel* website.

51. Damon, “Commentary,” 348.

52. Damon, “Commentary,” 345.

53. Peter Ackroyd, *Blake* (London: Minerva, 1996), 46–47.

community of people like a family or a nation. However, as time advances, people do not stay the same. They differ, grow older, die and are replaced by other human beings and this is the potential for change. Ackroyd's description of archeologists searching the site in *First Light* includes both:

They are searching for traces of their ancestors, who had once walked with the same posture. Heads bowed. Looking for seeds and roots. And, if it was the same posture, was it not also with the same sense of the world and of the sky above it? . . . Others had walked this way before them, and now they too are changing the surface, eroding it, leaving their own traces which in turn will be found. And this was why the walkers resembled dancers, when the dance is always the same while the dancers change and change about.⁵⁴

Ackroyd's metaphor of a dance is precise—its movements and steps are always the same and are recognizable to everyone, but individual dancers bring some improvisation to it, they dance in their own style. For Ackroyd national history appropriates its past. The present keeps returning to the past but the circle is not completed as history must also progress, not stagnate.

In *First Light* Peter Ackroyd forms a hypertextual relationship with the hypotext of Thomas Hardy's novel *Two on a Tower* in order to draw a contrast between his and Hardy's conception of the dyad of an individual human life versus the vastness of the universe. Whereas for Hardy these two are contradictory to each other, the universe is an independent force that has hardly any dealings with the everyday reality of human existence and whose scientific pursuit is at least of no consequence to that existence, if not actually harmful to it, for Ackroyd the universe is an all embracing entity which incorporates in itself all existence, including human existence. We can say that Hardy is primarily concerned with "connectedness" or rather the failure of it. His two lovers fail to form a lasting and firm emotional relationship, mainly due to Swithin's fruitless pursuit of astronomy and his abandonment of Viviette. Ackroyd, on the other hand, is concerned with "interconnectedness," which is the point where he significantly departs from Hardy's novel. Ackroyd's characters, like Damian or Kathleen, are not only isolated because they are unable to form relationships with their significant others; they are isolated, and thus doomed to annihilation, because they do not seem to have any relationships that tie them to the course of history, they do not seem to have any ancestors or descendants, and Damian does not even understand the significance of these relationships. They are isolated items that do not fit into the set of relationships that make up the whole system of the universe. In order to elaborate on his system of time and place, Ackroyd uses four grafted texts in *First Light*. Ackroyd deals with Frazer's *The Golden Bough* to emphasize the constructedness of various theories of history that give meaning to human existence. The fact that theories of the course of human history, no matter whether scientific or other, are constructed by human beings and thus necessarily subjective does not prevent them from being functional. Different theories describe different alternative ways of

54. Ackroyd, *First Light*, 41.

looking at history. Ackroyd thus presents his readers with his own theory of history, which is grounded in the relationships of all individuals and their previous and subsequent generations. Following the irony of Oscar Wilde's aphorism, a human life is not a self-contained entity. It is positioned in a flow of generations that give the people their identities. Each new generation carries in itself traces of previous generations and even though people may not be aware of them, like Kipling's Charlie Mears, those traces affect their behaviour. In his study of the English imagination, *Albion*, Ackroyd stresses that the "power of the past lies beneath consciousness itself, and is so strong that the most invasive forces of destruction cannot necessarily efface it."⁵⁵ The system of relationships is not, however, limited to one's own family. Ackroyd is primarily concerned with larger units, varying from local communities to the nation. The unconscious traces of the past are identified by Ackroyd as "communal memory."⁵⁶ In the communal memory the past and the present of a particular community are united. History is thus a circular movement which, however, allows for change, just like in William Blake's view. History, as described by Ackroyd himself in his *Albion*, "takes the form of an endless enchanted circle, or shining ring, moving backwards as well as forwards."⁵⁷ I personally think that the image of a spiral is more explanatory, as the circle as described above may be mistaken for fruitless repetition. Each new generation progresses and thus moves away from its ancestors. However, there comes a moment when the development of each new generation reaches its summit and starts coming back to rediscover its roots and to become aware of those qualities that they share with others before them, now long gone and dead. Nevertheless, the circle is not fully completed but at its other extreme starts progressing again. The history of the nation thus forms a "spring" in which, when compressed like in Ackroyd's *Albion*, each revolution, standing for each generation, touches the one before and the one after it, and yet no full circles are made.

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55. Ackroyd, *Albion*, 246.

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