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REMAPPING ENGLISHNESS IN PETER ACKROYD'S *MILTON IN AMERICA*

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Abstract: *Peter Ackroyd's historiographic metafictional novel* Milton in America *(2006) entails a critical return to history – critical in the sense that it questions the essence of historical knowledge and revisits the past in order to comment on the politics of national identity. Beneath a façade of historicity, the novel explores the continuity of English cultural identity and narrates a fictional story that centres on the conflict of Catholicism and Protestantism in the context of post-Restoration emigration of Puritans from England to New England. The "old faith", although marginalized, continued to exist in post-Reformation England. The novel ties the significance of Catholicism to a thorough sense of Englishness. Catholic faith is shown as an ancient anchor of English identity. Peter Ackroyd delves into the collective memory of his race in search of a sense of commonality, believing in the continuity of English national identity. Challenging humanist assumptions about historical authenticity, the novel calls into question the idea of religious homogeneity, offering a different narrative as equally valuable.*
Keywords*: Englishness, historiographic metafiction, Peter Ackroyd, nationhood*

> England was Catholic for nine hundred years, then Protestant for three hundred, then agnostic for a century. The Catholic structure still lies lightly buried beneath every phase of English life.
> – Evelyn Waugh, *The Essays, Articles and Reviews* (1984:212)

1. Introduction

The period of mid-century (the 1950s) saw the "exhaustion" of the modernist novel. The former literary forms, some critics believed, fell short of capturing and expressing the spirit of the postwar world. Some even hastened to toll the death knells for the novel. In 1967 John Barth writes his now-classic article "The Literature of Exhaustion," and explains that by "the literature of exhausted possibility" he means "only the used-upness of certain forms or exhaustion of certain possibilities" (Barth 1967:64). Barth, however, was not the only one to voice his concern about the future of the novel; the decline in the importance of the novel as a genre was addressed earlier by many writers and theorists as diverse as Jose Ortega y Gasset, Walter Benjamin, and Ronald Sukenick. According to Jesse Matz in *The Modern Novel*,

> World War II put an end to the modern novel. … Did it not prove that the relative detachment of the modern novel – its movement 'inward' – entailed a dangerous retreat from reality? These were the questions the war raised, and they did indeed pose a nearly insuperable challenge to fiction's modern impulse. (Matz 2004:98)

The shock of the Second World War – the most devastating war in recorded history – and the horror of a cold war (with the spectre of a third, nuclear war looming) were enough to affect the literature of the mid-century and produce Angry Young Men, "kitchen sink" social realism, Beat Generation, and the like. 1950s novels are characterized by a conscious retreat from the "stylistic and formal artifice" of the modernist novel and by a "cautious return" to the "condition of England" novels:

> In a rough and ready sense, it can be acknowledged that there was indeed a widespread dissatisfaction among novel writers with what was regarded as the asocial experimentation of modernist fiction of the years before the war, and that there was a willing return to a certain perhaps distinctively 'English' rendering" of subjects. (Connor 1996:45)

However, mid-century was in actual fact an age of revisions, a time of questioning the modern. In a rather belated follow-up article, "The Literature of Replenishment" (1980), Barth explains:

> What my essay "The Literature of Exhaustion" was really about, so it seems to me now, was the effective 'exhaustion' not of language or of literature, but of the aesthetic of high modernism: that admirable, not-to-be-repudiated, but essentially completed 'program' of what Hugh Kenner has dubbed 'the Pound era.' In 1966-67 we scarcely had the term *postmodernism* in its current literary-critical usage – at least I hadn't heard it yet – but a number of us, in quite different ways and with varying combinations of intuitive response and conscious deliberation, were already well into the working out, not of the next best thing after modernism, but of the *best next* thing: what is gropingly now called postmodernist fiction; what I hope might also be thought of one day as a literature of replenishment. (Barth 1980:176, original emphasis)

The postmodern novel revitalized the genre and gave it new bearings. For instance, Modernist writers tended to write for a high audience and therefore "to suffer from what Orwell called a 'severance from the common culture of the country' [England]" (Matz 2004:102). Postmodernism however tries to remove the distinction between high culture and low culture. According to Leslie A. Fiedler (1980:149), "the makers of the Cultural Revolution of the late sixties seem to have decided that what they needed was a form of Pop fiction … different from the kind of books which the Book Clubs were still bringing their bourgeois mothers". While the "modern novel seemed to threaten fiction's powers of social engagement [… and thereby] excessively detached the novel from the real world" in its attempt to remain utterly subjective (Matz 2004:100), postmodern literature engages with social themes and cultural (or even counter-cultural) subjects – an aspect which stands in sheer opposition to modernism's elitist (high-culture) agenda. In "The Ideology of Modernism" Georg Lukács (1962:21-25) attacks modernist fiction for evading social/political/cultural responsibility and, more importantly, for its "negation of history". Here Lukács argues that literary modernism has detached literature from history. Although his critique might be deemed rather categorical, his general idea (concerning history) is helpful for our discussion because a new trend in post-modernist English fiction was the revival of interest in history.

The rise in popularity of the historical novel on the English literary scene – started by the late 1960s and flourished afterwards – matched, in the words of Raymond Williams, the "new structure of feeling" (1977:132) that emerged in the post-war years. In his now classic article "Cross the Border – Close that Gap: Post-Modernism" Leslie A. Fiedler hails this "new structure of feeling" and says:

> Almost all living readers and writers are aware of a fact which they have no adequate words to express, not in English certainly, nor even in American. We are living, have been living for two decades – and have become acutely conscious of the fact that since 1955 – through the death throes of Modernism and the birth pangs of Post-Modernism. The kind of literature which had arrogated to itself the name Modern (with the presumption that it represented the ultimate advance in sensibility and form, that beyond it newness was not possible), and whose moment of triumph lasted from a point just before the First World War until one just after the Second World War, is *dead*, i.e., belongs to history not actuality. In the field of the novel, this means that the age of Proust, Mann, and Joyce is over. (Fiedler 2002:162)

The socio-cultural turn Fiedler describes, this paradigm shift which laid the foundations for the rebirth of English historical novel, demonstrates the influence of postmodernism on literary writing.

Postmodernism is one of those terms whose definition is notoriously difficult to pin down; therefore, many definitions are offered: incredulity towards legitimating meta-narratives (Jean-François Lyotard), the age of paranoia (Teresa Brennan), a change of the dominant (Brian McHale), the precession of simulacra (Jean Baudrillard), the cultural logic of late capitalism (Fredric Jameson), a time of cyborgs and socialist feminism (Donna Haraway), philosophical cynicism (Peter Sloterdijk), and so forth. Generally, postmodernism is taken to be the offspring of *endist* thinking: the end of (linear, teleological) history, the end of grand narratives, the end of ideology, the end of progress, and so on; however, it would be more true and fair if we regarded it not as an apocalyptic end of everything but as a fresh paradigm which has offered many a liberating tool of thinking and particularly a new understanding of history.

For postmodernists, history is not a way of imposing continuity and order on life; they do not seek for *a* meaning within history. In "History, the Referent, and Narrative: Reflections on Postmodernism Now" Perez Zagorin argues:

> [the] epochal shift from the modern to a postmodern era [… is] characterized by the final repudiation of the Enlightenment's legacy of belief in reason and progress and by a pervasive incredulity toward all metanarratives imputing a direction and meaning to history, in particular the notion that human history is a process of universal emancipation. In place of grand narratives of this kind, so it is held, have come a multiplicity of discourses and language games, a questioning of the nature of knowledge together with a dissolution of the idea of truth, and problems of legitimacy in many fields. (Zagorin 1999:5)

The best literary example of such an approach to history is the historiographic metafictional novel. Metafiction as a general term refers to any fictional narrative that self-consciously draws attention to itself as an imaginative work of art; hence, blurring the borderline between reality and fiction, between history and literature. Postmodernist historiographic novels use metafiction as a double-coded frame. Firstly, they situate the present in the context of the past and then work, through the use of parody and irony, to contest the authority of that account. In other words, they first contextualize and then deconstruct: "They [historiographic metafictional novels] juxtapose what we think we know of the past (from official archival sources and personal memory) with an alternate representation that foregrounds the postmodern epistemological questioning of the nature of historical knowledge" (Hutcheon 1989:68). These novels, therefore, challenge the nature of historical knowledge: How do we know (make sense of) the past? Does the past have a solid existence outside language?

Postmodernist writers, firstly, distinguish between history and the past; history is an interpretation of the past, a subjective account of the past, or in Jenkins' (2003:7) words, "[history is] a discourse about, but categorically different from, the past." Secondly, historical thinking and historiography generally uses the principle of selection; therefore, the choice of what (historical) data/information to narrate and what not to remains subjective. Or as Barthes says in "The Discourse of History", "the historian is not so much a collector of facts as a collector and relater of signifiers; that is to say, he organizes them with the purpose of establishing positive meaning and filling the vacuum of pure, meaningful series" (Barthes 2006:121). Thirdly, since we know the past through the medium of language (sign system), it is hardly possible to present an absolutely true account of the past as it actually happened: "Our only door to experience (past, present or future) is through the primary medium of language as a signifying process normally constituted within a framework for the exercise of power, legitimacy and illegitimacy" (Munslow 2006:129).

According to Hayden White in *Metahistory*, both literature and history employ "verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse" (1975:ix). He believes that language and the literary shape historical understanding, that both fiction and historiography draw on the same representational strategies, that both use narrative:

> the historian confronts a chaos of events … out of which he must choose the elements of the story he would tell. He makes his story by including some events and excluding others, by stressing some and subordinating others. This process of exclusion, stress, and subordination is carried out in the interest of constituting *a story of a particular kind*. That is to say, he 'emplots' his story. (White 1975:6)

Emplotment is a term coined by Hayden White, referring to the way in which historiographers form their "source material", their data, into narrative. White's aim is to reveal the "literary" elements in historiography. This "literariness of history", de Groot avers, "has led to a resurgence of interest in fictional forms" (2010:112). Since the past could be (imagined and) rewritten *ad infinitum*, authors of historiographic metafictional novels were able to deploy and examine a variety of forms and subjects, from Neo-Victorian detective stories (e.g. Byatt's *Possession*) to novels with postcolonial themes (e.g. Smith's *White Teeth*) – where the challenge is posed by immigrants to a shaken sense of Englishness. All these novels reveal multiple forms of belonging, and they are, in many ways, influential in the process(es) of social/cultural self-formation.

Moreover, since historiographic metafiction "points most self-consciously to its status as a system of effects", it could be considered the "least deceptive form of representation" (Kellner 1989:105). In fact, historiographic metafiction advertises the end of representation as mimesis; there is, instead, representation as construction. Hutcheon believes that "[w]ith problematizing and 'de-doxifying' of both realist reference and modernist autonomy, postmodern representation opens up other possible relations between art and the world" (1989:32-33). Historiographic metafictional novels, according to Patricia Waugh, reject *mimesis* in favour of *diegesis*; they draw attention to "the fact that imitation in the novel is not the imitation of existing objects but the fabrication of fictional objects which could exist, but do not" (1984:130-131).

Furthermore, postmodernist historical novels cannot avoid involvement with social and cultural relations: "Postmodern … representations – its images and stories – are anything but neutral, however 'aestheticized' they may appear to be in their parodic self-reflexivity" (Hutcheon 1989:3). In the same vein, Alan Sinfield in his *Literature, Politics, and Culture in Postwar Britain* argues that "literary texts raise complex questions of cultural affiliation and appropriation, while engaging with the most sensitive issues of our time" (1989: 2); he examines, on the basis of this keen observation, the interaction of literature with other sorts of cultural production. In consequence, representing or revisiting the past in these postmodern historical novels helps elucidate the contemporary politics of identity and belonging. In their attempts to challenge or rewrite history, these historiographic metafictional novels intervene in the dominant cultural discourse and offer new storylines, alternative narratives, and even dissident stories. Therefore, "[n]ot only are fiction and history mixed here … but class and race and nationality as well" (Hutcheon 1989:5). The way these novels retell stories of the past can shape the way we as readers understand the present. They engage us to reflect upon history and the nation.

In a similar vein, post-imperial English novelists have tried to define Englishness through appeals to narratives of belonging, re-membering the nation's continuity over time. They have stirred national awareness, reconstructing figures, objects, locales or habits from the past, as part of the rich English heritage. This fictional retrieval of the past may come to help the English understand better the state of their nation in the present. This is a crucial point, because "the English are suffering from a crisis of identity. For centuries they have been too self-conscious to assert their national identity. And since they have for generations been under intense pressure to define their identity as British this was hardly surprising" (Heffer cited in Aughey 2001:158). England has historically evaded popular nationalism and suppressed it in favour of a broader and more global project of imperialism. There was a time when the English were sure of who they were but after decolonization and devolution, England lost its own sense of identity; hence, "a puzzled England returns as a stranger to itself" (Baucom 1999:3).

Therefore, there has been, in post-war decades, a growing willingness to refashion English national identity. "The idea that there is a 'void' that needs to be filled is one of the most common tropes of the contemporary literature of Englishness" (Kumar 2010:477). In the field of literature, the new historical novel has shouldered the task.

Historiographic metafictional novels "*reproduce* familiar settings of 'English novel-land' such as the country house, or repeat the plot structures of classic English novels, or openly allude to the earlier tradition" (Parrinder 2006:407, emphasis added). In this definition the keyword is "reproduce": since we only know the past (of a nation) through textual traces, we can only *re*-produce it textually. This is high on the postmodern agenda: "That is what the postmodern world is all about. Most people have lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative" (Lyotard 1984:41). With nostalgia gone out of the picture, comes "critical reworking" knocking at the door (Hutcheon 1988:4) – opening an endless dialogue with the past.

There are many ways to engage in such a productive dialogue; the experience is rather akin to palimpsestic writing. Rewriting the past of a nation in fictional texts knows no boundary. Any representation is thus a new construction. The changing nature of English identity can be captured in fictional palimpsests, in different narratives of Englishness. The next section addresses this under-researched subject and examines Ackroyd's *Milton in America* as a case in point.

2. Interrelationship of History and Nationhood in *Milton in America*

In the taxonomy of historiographic metafiction in contemporary English literature Peter Ackroyd is a name to remember. As someone who "never wanted to be a novelist" and "hated fiction because it was very untidy", he has turned out to be one of the greatest contemporary novelists whose contributions to English literature cannot be overlooked (Ackroyd and Onega 1996:211). He is also an acclaimed writer of poems, essays, and biographies. The distinguishing characteristic of Ackroyd's writing is his rejection of strict generic boundaries; his works are usually marked by an uncanny mixture of history and story, biography and fiction, reality and fantasy: "I don't think of biographies and fictions as being separate activities. For me, they are part of the same undertaking." (Ackroyd and Onega 1996:212) Yet he knows well the rules of the game; like the perspicacious Ariadne who provided Theseus with a ball of thread through the Labyrinth, Ackroyd provides his readers with metafictional comments and paratexts so that they could find their way out of the labyrinth of language and linguistic plays.

Ackroyd wrote his first novel, *The Great Fire of London*, in 1982, yet his fame came with his third novel *Hawksmoor* (1985), which summarizes Ackroyd's thesis concerning the relation between history and literature: history, like fiction, is a form of writing, a narrative, a story among stories. The meaning of such a (hi)story is unstable, contextual, and relational. His novels are intertextual and parodic rewritings of history, playing on the truth and falsity of the historical record, as do *Hawksmoor*, *Chatterton* (1987), and *Milton in America* (1996), three of his most noted historiographic metafictional novels.

2.1. Ackroyd's view of history

Ackroyd belongs to a generation of writers who separated their ways from mainstream realism of novelists such as Anthony Powell (1905-2000), Angus Wilson (1913-1991), Kingsley Amis (1922-1995), Alan Sillitoe (1928-2010), Margaret Drabble (1939-), and so forth. Ackroyd is, according to Brian Finney (2006:21), "representative of a generation of English novelists whose education has familiarized them with poststructuralist literary theory", a generation so obviously against "the Leavisite New Criticism", and against "the entire humanist legacy of 'modernism'." Therefore, in line with other postmodernist writers such as Julian Barnes or Graham Swift, Ackroyd is critical of the idea of "History as a grand narrative" and believes that there is no

objective past, only its textual traces: "I suppose that's the trouble with history. It's the one thing we have to make up for ourselves" (Ackroyd 1987:226). From this point of view, there is no "historical truth" to be found, only different interpretations. According to Richard Slotkin in "Fiction for the Purposes of History":

> History is what it is, but it is also what we make of it. What we call 'history' is not a thing, an object of study, but a story we choose to tell about things. … Thus all history writing requires a fictive or imaginary representation of the past. There is no reason why, in principle, a novel may not have a research basis as good or better than that of a scholarly history; and no reason why, in principle, a novelist's portrayal of a past may not be truer and more accurate than that produced by a scholarly historian. (Slotkin 2005:222)

History is a kind of writing, as is fiction, and as Charles Wychwood, the failed poet and the protagonist of *Chatterton* says, "[t]here is nothing more real than words. They are reality. … The invention is always more real. The poet does not merely recreate or describe the world. He actually creates it" (Ackroyd 1987:157). As Ackroyd himself acknowledges, "everything is available for recreation or manipulation" (Ackroyd and Onega 1996:214). This is the capacity of literary writing to reinvent, rethink, or reimagine the past – a view not unlike John Barth's idea of postmodern literature as the "literature of replenishment", a literature whose value is not determined in terms of truth or falsity, a literature whose attitude toward representation, originality, and historicity could be playful and could thus revitalize the genre of historical fiction.

2.2. Remapping Englishness

Ackroyd's works mainly observe the history of England. With an imagination rooted deeply in the past, he explores the continuity of culture and national sentiments. Here, he has chosen a turbulent period in English history (the post-Civil War Restoration) to explore the connection between the legendary history of England and the evolving definition of national identity that, since the Reformation, has been tied to Protestantism. Nonetheless, Ackroyd's talent lies mainly in the dialogues he orchestrates between different modes of Englishness and, in the particular case of *Milton in America*, between different types of religiosity.

An important topic to discuss in relation to the novel is religion. Religion has always been "fundamental to the development of nationalism … because religious traditions have a certain depth and continuity that political systems lack" (Turner 2006:216). Beneath a façade of historicity, the novel spins a not-so-cheerful fantasy that pivots round the conflict of Catholicism and Protestantism in the context of post-Restoration emigration of Puritans to New England. In a manner reminding of Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, Ackroyd goes through the relation between Catholicism and Englishness and addresses the undeniable role of Catholic faith in the English national past.

When pursuing postgraduate research at Yale, he wrote *Notes for a New Culture* (1976) as "a polemic and extended essay directed against our declining national culture" (Ackroyd and Onega 1996:210). Here Ackroyd regrets to acknowledge that his country has forgotten the ancient faith of the land. The "new culture", an idea he develops in *Notes for a New Culture*, welcomes cultural and religious difference.

Ackroyd's prose engages the idea of national culture by focusing on the English inheritance and the continuity of English cultural identity, which he locates "in the Catholic civilization before the Reformation" (Neagu 2006:222). This is a very interesting idea since, in the majority of theories and theoretical works on Englishness, English authority is traditionally and almost unquestionably tied to the Reformation. With the Tudor King Henry VIII as the head of the Church of England – which signified the end of papal power – Englishness came to be associated with Protestantism. In *Milton in America*, however, Ackroyd challenges this excluding image and

suggests it is neither right nor even possible to remove all vestiges of Catholicism from Englishness.

2.3. Paradise lost in the new world: on empire and religion

Milton in America is, like *Chatterton*, a historiographic metafiction that opens with a foreword which offers seemingly biographical information about the life of its protagonist, yet, for someone who is familiar with Ackroyd as a writer of "alternative histories", the writer's purpose in composing counterfactual novels is clear: he offers alternative realities in order to examine different dimensions of historical phenomena, and, if necessary, give voice to silenced narratives.

In the pantheon of world literature John Milton (1608-1674) is a well-known name. The story of his uneasy life during and after the turbulent years of the Civil War and the Interregnum is familiar to every keen student/researcher of (English) literature. Or is it so? Are we really familiar with the story of his life? Do we know everything about his life after the Restoration of Charles II of the House of Stuart to the throne? What if, in the year the monarchy was restored (1660), Milton had left England for New England, an American settler colony, in fear of his life. These "what if" questions shape the core of alternative historiography. The novel thus opens as follows:

> *John Milton, the poet of* Comus *and of "Il Penseroso" was also Secretary for Foreign Tongues to the Council of Oliver Cromwell. His sympathies had been with the regicides, therefore, and he had even written a tract justifying the execution of Charles I. So, by the early months of 1660, when it became clear that the Commonwealth was about to fall and Charles II return to England, Milton believed himself to be a man forsaken. He would be hunted down, imprisoned and no doubt executed for his collusion with the new king's enemies. He had been struck by blindness eight years before and could scarcely remain unknown or unrecognized in London. He had no choice but to escape while there was still opportunity to do so. And where better to flee than New England, where he would be assured of a joyful welcome from the Puritans who had already settled there?* (Ackroyd 1996:1, italics in original)

Milton, who had lost his wife, his children, his sight, and – with the Restoration of Charles II – his status in his own country, is helped by Goosequill, his servant and scrivener, to escape England to the New World to be "free of all kingly follies" (Ackroyd 1996:9), and to establish "a mansion house of liberty", "a nation of sages, of prophets, and of worthies", a "new Canaan. The promised land" (Ackroyd 1996:30). There Milton becomes an insane, tyrannical magistrate, leading the Puritan brethren of New Milton into a bloody war against the Catholics and the Indians of Mary Mount, believing that "some different blood must be drawn before this commonwealth is healthy once again" (Ackroyd 1996:258).

Compared to, for example, Nathaniel Hawthorne's subtle satire of American Puritanism in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Ackroyd's attack on the perversities of the Puritans might appear rather coarse or at least heavy-handed; however, we should give him credit for capturing the spirit of seventeenth-century religious sectarianism. What is, however, interesting in this particular work of "what if" historiography – apart from the challenge the genre generally poses to any totalized conception of history – is its fresh, and indeed daring, treatment of two important subjects: empire and religion.

As to the former, Ackroyd exposes the proto-imperialist desires and struggles of English settler-colonizers in the early modern era. The seventeenth century was a very important period in British history because of the contact – cultural, economic, and political – with the world overseas, which not only led to the formation of the British Empire but also brought up the need to define and delineate the "self" from the "other". It was an age of expansionism and zealous quests for potential markets and new colonies. The novel unfolds – in a way reminding one of More's *Utopia* or James Harrington's *The Commonwealth of Oceana* – as a cartography of empire: "So proud a people will take root here that a tree will grow towards heaven" (Ackroyd 1996:8). When Milton

first caught sight of the new land, he saw it "empty", the stereotypically imperialist idea of *terra nullius*. The novel shows the birth of white settler communities in a territory formerly resided by native Indians:

> We intend to restore our lost liberties in the sad wilderness … [in] the savage deserts of America … to renew our lost heritage, our native and domestic characters. … Soon we shall possess a spacious land, good brother, little inferior to our native country. (Ackroyd 1996:40-58)

One might well ask: What about the Native Americans? Imperialism, which works by the Foucauldian "knowledge is power" system, through stereotype-making, degrades and reduces the indigenous peoples to "savages", "devils", "pagans", and in a word "others". Then, it would be easier to suppress them. Such ignoble acts are usually justified by falling back on religion, as we see in the novel when trespassing into the native lands of America is described as raising Eden in the wilderness, creating a new Canaan, leaving Egypt to find another Israel, and so on.

Another strategy of Milton's and other settler-colonizers' was to change the original, native names of places, people, and lands: "in this barbarous and heathen world, the very words themselves seem to be demons" (Ackroyd 1996:82). For example, the indigenous name of Wachuser is changed to "Mount Hope", Pequots to "New Plymouth", and so on:

> I [Milton] begged for fewer heathen and savage names. Aggawam, Nanepashemet, Chobocco, Naumkeag – these were more strange to me, I said, than Gehenna, Vallombrosa, Tophet or Goshen, where the devils of scripture had once made their home. (Ackroyd 1996:82)

By changing the indigenous names to English ones they are in fact erasing part of the indigenous culture and supplanting it with their own culture. For example, those Indians who desire to be part of the white settler communities – for needs of trade, medicine, etc. – are compelled to "dress in English clothes", bear English names, and follow English religion:

> This race of foolish heathen was wont to stumble at they knew not what. Now they kiss and embrace the Bible like any godly Englishman. … They are like children, good sir, who need force to tame and quiet them. (Ackroyd 1996:93)

The settler-colonizers trespassed into the Indians' territory with "hopes of rising a glorious commonwealth … the happy seat of some new race, where one day, by policy and long process of time, will rise a mighty empire" (Ackroyd 1996:87-88). The Native Americans were hospitable to them, "entertained the English in their houses, providing the best victuals they could" (Ackroyd 1996:99-100), yet the colonizers saw them as their "pagan enemy", and resorted to racial stereotypes to justify their extirpation:

> I am soaked in pity too, sir, but you must never forget that they are also savages and therefore vain and crafty. … They commit much filthiness among themselves. There is lust and lechery in their native places. … Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? Then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil. (Ackroyd 1996:94-95)

According to Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture*, "it is precisely this function of the stereotype as phobia and fetish that, according to Fanon, threatens the closure of the racial/epidermal schema for the colonial subject and opens the royal road to colonial fantasy" (2004:104). The stereotype is in the service of the homogenizing discourse of colonial power which fixates the colonial subject in an inferior position for ever. Then, the white English settler-colonizers could erect their communities:

> 'But what of the Indians, sir?'
> 'What of them?'

> 'What do you propose for them?'
> 'Oh, that heathen rabble can be dispersed in time. Think nothing of it.' (Bhabha 2004:103)

Not only does the novel refer to England's colonial past, it also reminds the reader of Milton's imperial mindset. The novel reflects its author's knowledge of Milton's biography and work; Ackroyd knew that Milton's poetry and prose were not in opposition to colonial expansionism, which was the dominant policy of English government at that time.

Milton's religious absolutism made him an ideologue of Puritan government, a staunch supporter of anti-Catholicism. In many works as diverse as "Avenge, O Lord, Thy Slaughtered Saints" or "Of True Religion, Heresie, Schism", he inveighs against Roman Catholicism as "the greatest Heresie". Milton's blindness has thus a historical function for Ackroyd in the sense that it shows a particular moment in the history of English national identity when the establishment of a sense of Englishness necessitated a "blindness" to cultural and religious differences, "the erasure of Catholicism's trace from Englishness" (Gibson and Wolfreys 2000:163). There are many textual references in the novel to Protestant hostility towards Catholics; one particular example is the confrontation of the Catholic Ralph Kempis (reminding of Thomas à Kempis (1379/80-1471), a Christian theologian and a major figure, almost a saint, in the Catholic Church) with the Puritan Milton, following the latter's unjust and inhumane punishment of Sarah Venn, only for *being* a Catholic:

> 'You are prepared to flog a poor woman, burn down her dwelling and banish her, simply because she professes the Catholic religion?'
> … 'The whore Venn is an abject slave of popery, and that superstition cannot be allowed to stay or grow within a well-founded commonwealth. This is why she is to be punished. … It is a necessary thing. We want no Rome in this western world. You cannot turn a scorpion into a fish, or a papist into a free subject.'
> 'Be careful, Mr. Milton, or you will throttle yourself with your own similes. You forget that there are many Catholics in your own old country.' (Ackroyd 1996:226-227)

Milton and other Puritans however continue calling the Catholics "pagans" and the Pope in Rome "Anti-Christ", and their faith "superstition", "idolatry", "the Roman sickness", and ultimately "the black arts".

These anti-Catholic comments were of course not unprecedented. Alan MacColl traces the construction of England as a "protestant British nation" back to the mid-sixteenth century, when the conception of a protestant nation emerged in literary and religious works such as John Bale's *Image of Both Churches* (c. 1545), John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* (1563), William Harrison's *Description of Britain* (1577), and Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590) – "in which the legendary history and English Protestantism are inseparably interwoven" (MacColl 2004:583-595). Discussing the poetics of English nationhood during the seventeenth century, Claire McEachern asserts: "The lurid imagination of an Other is an ever-present constituent of Englishness", and during that particular period Catholics played that role (1996:25). According to Elizabeth Sauer, analysing the dominant discourse of Milton's era, "the search for the 'one true Protestant politics,' which had ignited a civil war and the regicide, and had given rise to the commonwealth, … was directed at a common and deeply imbedded anti-Catholicism" (Sauer 2006:6).

In all these works, the Roman faith is said to "contayneth all doctrine of divils, all beastly errours and lyes" (Ackroyd 1996:46.), and Protestantism is instead introduced as "true religion" which has restored not only the English Church but a sense of pride in Englishness as well.

To Milton, the Catholics "are not even true Englishmen" (Ackroyd 1996:167), "pimps of the Roman whore" (Ackroyd 1996:179). Therefore, he raises an army to "destroy these papists", to extirpate "the enemies of true-born Englishmen" (Ackroyd 1996:241-242). However, before the war started, the Catholic Kempis says a few words to Milton, hoping that he would come to his senses:

> Why is it, then, that my heathen superstition, as you call it, has lasted time out of mind? … You forget also, Mr. Milton, that our country was almost sixteen hundred years a Catholic nation. … The English were a pious people once, sir. They were known for it across Europe. … You banished all our English drama in the years of your ascendancy. My charge, sir, is that your brethren destroyed a free and cheerful nation. (Ackroyd 1996:228-229)

Kempis is Ackroyd's spokesperson. Ackroyd was educated as a Catholic, and though he considers himself a "secular" writer, he firmly believes that "the English cultural tradition is *Catholic*", hence, performative and dramatic (Ackroyd and Onega 1996:208-209). Ackroyd contrasts the Catholic rituals, which are dramatic and stagy, with lifeless Protestant individualism and lack of communality. The example for the former, which is underlined in the novel, is the Mass. In "Peter Ackroyd's Englishness: A Continental View", Adriana Neagu says:

> One of the most cogent propositions that Ackroyd puts forward in his considerations of Englishness and Catholic heritage is the stagy, performative character of English culture. However disinclined to extrapolate one may be, it would be hard to disprove his theory of the representativeness of theatrical traditions for the national English temperament. Embedded in Anglo-Saxon (English) imagination, which in *Albion* he dissociates from the Celtic (British), are not just dramatic performances, but an entire formation of scenic modes of expression. Indeed, this is reflected in the English language itself, with its structural and euphonic aptitude for histrionics and its infinite combinational possibilities. (Neagu 2006:229-230)

Religion and religious rituals have been of tremendous significance in bringing people together, in creating and maintaining national consciousness. Even before the Reformation and the emergence of Protestantism – which was obviously a determining factor in the making of English national identity – Catholicism had served to unite people. For example, the Venerable Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (ca. 731) presumes a togetherness among English people based on religion.

Ackroyd underscores the antiquity of the faith in England. He firmly believes in the significance of Catholicism in a thorough sense of Englishness. Therefore, remapping Englishness in an interview with Susana Onega, he states:

> Of course, you know England has been Catholic for 1500 years and has only been Protestant for 400, and I am very interested to rediscover the Catholic roots of English culture. … [T]he Catholic sensibility of the English is innately strong. … You have to discuss what it meant to be a Catholic, what it meant in terms of writing, but certainly the interest in informal properties, the interest in display, the interest in melodrama, in the theatrical use of language, the interest in ritual, all these stem from a Catholic sense of life. (Ackroyd and Onega 1996:214-219)

The royal visit to Westminster Cathedral, the headquarters of the Roman Catholic Church in England, by Queen Elizabeth II in 1995 was a very important moment, which created a deeper sense of tolerance in the hearts of English people. The message of such a royal visit was the support of unity. Ackroyd's *Milton in America* (1996) was written is this atmosphere and asks for liberal tolerance of religious difference.

3. Conclusion

History and the nation go hand in hand; every nation has necessarily a history which shows (off) its heritage in order to evoke a sense of belonging among its members. There is thus a relationship between historiography and nationhood. Historical novels reflect, perhaps more than any other literary form, a consciousness of belonging to a nation. Also, religion has been an important aspect in bringing people together, in creating and maintaining national consciousness. Religious identity has always been among the main pillars of English national culture and has been undoubtedly a strong pattern of belonging. Since the idea of a national culture is at the basis of

almost all writings by Peter Ackroyd, in *Milton in America* he delves into the collective memory of his race in search of a sense of commonality, believing in the continuity of English national identity. Challenging humanist assumptions about historical authenticity, the novel calls into question the idea of religious homogeneity, offering a different narrative as equally valuable.

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