

## PATTERNS OF CONTINUITY IN PETER ACKROYD'S FIRST LIGHT

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**Abstract.** One of the most important characteristics of Peter Ackroyd's work resides in his ability to use the texts of his precursors for his own creative purposes and to insert in the structure of his novels fragments from an impressive array of sources, thus demonstrating the possibility of achieving uniqueness by combining elements belonging to the works of past writers with the products of one's own creativity, by acknowledging the role played by influence as well as original vision. Although to a certain extent quite different from his more famous novels, *First Light* is characterized by the same belief in the importance of both innovation and continuity at the level of artistic creation but most notably in terms of the eternal succession of the generations. This paper aims to identify the intricate ways in which time present and time past interact at the level of a text that ultimately represents, like all Ackroyd's novels, a complex repository of words and ideas belonging to a vast literary tradition.

*First Light* seems to have very little in common with Ackroyd's previous writings, most of which perfectly fit into the category defined by Bradbury as the “novel of intertextual pastiche” (Bradbury 1994: 405). Indeed, although echoes of other writers are still to be noticed in the text, pastiche seems to have been almost completely abandoned, or at least to have lost its status as a privileged literary technique. Another significant change resides in the choice of a location other than London, the mystical city universal invariably present as the setting of all Ackroyd's novels, with the notable exception of *Milton in America*. Yet, in spite of these obvious differences, *First Light* clearly resembles Ackroyd's other works in its preoccupation with the circular nature of time and the endless succession of generations and its exploration of the complex relationships between the historical past and the present.

In *First Light* the link between present and past is provided by the discovery of an ancient tumulus in Pilgrim Valley, but the action itself is concentrated on two sites: an observatory and an archaeological dig. The presence of two apparently incompatible places as well as the very combination of archaeology and astronomy that characterizes the entire novel serves as an indication of two basic human tendencies (digging down in search of a distant past and looking up towards the ever changing sky, the search for the origins of life and the quest for originality itself) and

further strengthens the link between different temporal and spatial dimensions. *First Light* can probably be best described as a novel in which the chief element is the sense of the past as an enduring present, a sense which “throws into relief the merely provisional nature of modern urban society (...) without falling into the portentous solemnity which has affected the serious English rural novel since Hardy” (Massie 1990: 63). It could moreover be argued that this belief in the survival of the past as an integral part of modern experience also represents the best proof of Ackroyd’s “faith in the enduring vitality of the novel” (Massie 1990: 67) and its capacity for endless renewal.

The relationship between *First Light* and the “serious rural novel” mentioned by Massie is clearly indicated by the presence of two fragments from Hardy’s *Two on a Tower* at the beginning of Part Three and Part Five respectively. The extracts chosen by Ackroyd as mottos for his own novel suggest the feelings of oppression experienced by both his and Hardy’s characters and triggered in both cases by the painful awareness of the vastness of the universe and the comparative insignificance of human destinies. It is moreover quite interesting to note that Swithin St Cleeve, the protagonist of *Two on a Tower*, is an astronomer, just like Damian Fall, one of the main characters in Ackroyd’s own novel, and that apart from the two mottos *First Light* contains numerous other references to Hardy’s book. At some point in the novel Mark Clare and his crippled wife Kathleen reach a strange tower built in the shape of a classical column: “It had always been known as Swithin’s Column although the origin of that name, and whatever purpose the tower itself once had served, had long ago been forgotten.” (*FL*, 206) In spite of the apparent mystery surrounding the name of the tower, the obvious suggestion is that this column that bears the name of Hardy’s protagonist is one and the same with the column known as Rings-Hill Speer situated on the estate of Sir Blount Constantine and used by Swithin for his astronomical observations.

*Two on a Tower* is by no means Hardy’s only novel alluded to in the text. In Chapter 29 Joey Hanover tells the story of a group of children tossed by the evil spirits from the air and turned into stone and then goes on to narrate the more prosaic version of the same plot, in which a wicked orphan tricked the children into jumping from St Gabriel’s cliff. This story Joey knows without being able to remember its provenance retains clear echoes of the misfortune suffered by the protagonist of yet another of Hardy’s novels, this time *Far from the Madding Crowd*, who was

financially ruined after his sheepdog drove his entire flock over a cliff. This realization is prompted not only by the obvious resemblance between the two stories, but also by the fact that the cliff in *First Light* bears the name of Gabriel Oak, the unfortunate shepherd in Hardy's novel. Incidentally, this is the same novel Mark Clare quotes from in order to suggest the clarity of the night sky after the rainstorm: "The rainstorm had passed and it had become a clear, calm night – on just such a night Gabriel Oak was tending his sheep on Norcombe Hill in Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd*." (FL, 34)

The relationship between *First Light* and Hardy's work is further emphasized by the choice of names for some of the characters. Thus, Mark Clare has the surname of one of the main characters in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and his dog is called Jude, like another of Hardy's famous protagonists. Moreover, the title of one of the chapters, "The Woodlander," alludes to yet another novel of the same writer. The choice of the location is perhaps even more relevant, as in giving up London Ackroyd sets the action of his novel in Dorset, the traditional setting of Hardy's novels. It could however be argued that, as far as the setting is concerned, *First Light* does not allude to Hardy's novels alone. Indeed, some of the protagonists of Ackroyd's novel live in Lyme Regis, a place already made famous by one of the most influential books of the twentieth century, and one of the characters, Kathleen Clare, happens to have an accident on the same stone steps where Louisa Musgrove fell in *Persuasion* and which were consequently admired by Charles and Ernestina in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. The importance of this symbolic location becomes even more obvious on considering the fact that Ackroyd's novels were listed by certain critics among those books that "make John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* look less lonely than it did" (Ford 1998: 442) and it could even be argued that Ackroyd may have perceived this choice of a setting as a way of acknowledging his own indebtedness to Fowles.

Apart from the frequent allusions in the novel to the various texts that influenced its author, this veritable "Borgesian Library of Babel" (Onega 1999: 190) also contains an impressive amount of direct references to numerous other literary works. In fact many of its protagonists are characterized by the tendency to compare their own adventures to those described in books or to associate the people surrounding them with famous literary protagonists. Thus Evangeline Tupper says with reference to her and Mark Clare: "Aren't we just like Lancelot and Guinevere?"

(*FL*, 9) and then compares the cottage inhabited by Damian Fall to the house of the witch in the fairytale: “Do you think,” she said, “that we have found Hansel and Gretel?” (*FL*, 94) Similarly, Alec resorts to a literary allusion during the course of a rather prosaic conversation: “Will I be wanted?” she said quickly. Alec had come up behind her in the passage, and squeezed her waist. “Not till Birnam Wood goes to what’s-its-name.” (*FL*, 157)

Augustine Fraicheur is characterized by an even more pronounced habit of resorting to literary references on almost all occasions, as he constantly compares his fellow villagers to the protagonists of famous books. He compares Kathleen Clare’s limp to that of Captain Ahab, Lola Trout’s knock on his door to the noise presumably made by the porter in *Macbeth*, and even suggests that the Mints’s festive dinner reminds him of a similar scene in one of Hardy’s novels: “He has this marvellous scene at a country dinner. Pass the turnip, and so forth. Tonight is exactly like that.” (*FL*, 274) It is interesting to note that quite few of these references actually fit the context in which they are used and that the characters often tend to confuse their sources, yet this fact only reinforces the idea that all texts invariably contain various readings and misreadings of previous literary works.

As far as this novel’s relationship with the rest of Ackroyd’s work is concerned, it might seem that although *First Light* has for its central theme the same complex interdependence between time present and time past that characterizes his other novels, it cannot be discussed in terms of the more specific relationship between originality and influence. Indeed, from this point of view at least, *First Light* doesn’t exactly stand comparison with Ackroyd’s previous novel, *Chatterton*, with its innumerable characters involved in acts of artistic recuperation, appropriation, plagiarism, forgery and fakery, and constantly tormented by the anxieties of influence, indebtedness or exposure. Still, the ideas of influence and originality are present in this text as well, although they are no longer directly connected with artists and their creative output but have to do with the more general problems of human continuity and tradition.

One of the few characters in this novel that bear a clear resemblance to the artists in *Chatterton* is Damian Fall. Although himself neither a writer nor a painter but an astronomer, Damian is affected at some point in his life by the same anxiety of influence that tormented numerous other characters and above all Philip Slack. It is quite interesting to note that once again the extremely suggestive topos of the

library is responsible for the character's realization of the power of the past, as Damian himself experiences this anxiety when he is surrounded by the texts of others. His evolution is quite complex and consists of successive stages marked by the influence of various settings. After the feeling of dullness generated by his suburban parental home, Damian experiences in his first university room "the pulse of generations of youthful ambition" to the extent that he believes himself capable of some original creation but he eventually proves to be quite unable to fulfil his dreams. On entering the university library, he feels himself "invaded by the words of the books around him" and flees in horror, unable to accept the influence of his precursors. His fear of influence leads him to try to "leave the buildings of the world and walk out beneath the stars" (*FL*, 128) but this rejection of human society does not prevent him from being haunted by his awareness of his own failure. Indeed, his refusal to accept influence of any kind is quite inseparable from the bitterness of having achieved nothing by himself.

His uneasiness gradually degenerates in fear of other people and eventually in horror of himself, as Damian becomes increasingly aware of the presence within him of some unknown creature: "There was some creature inside me. I was not of the human species. There was some presence within me, speaking through my own voice. And this was the greatest horror of all: that I was not my own self." (*FL*, 177) The fear of being invaded by another entity, of being influenced against his will, gradually makes Damian unable to recognize his own voice and identity, unable to separate his own thoughts from the external reality. Damian goes so far as to suspect that he is about to transform into a primitive, into one of his distant ancestors, and eventually explains his own madness as a "re-emergence of primeval images" (*FL*, 177). His anxiety is so strong that he not only becomes insane but goes on to cherish the idea that even in his madness he is being influenced by the others, that his very sickness is the result of someone else's influence: "The insane take the shape of other people's fears. Madness is copied." (*FL*, 178) It seems much more probable however that this obsession is the real cause of his sickness, and that the relentless rejection of any kind of influence can only result in complete insanity.

It is quite interesting to note that Damian's entire personality seems to be dominated by the constant struggle between the refusal to accept influence and the impossibility of denying the existence of continuity. Although clearly disturbed by the idea of influence, Damian surrounds himself with "the engravings of those who

had come before him" (*FL*, 128), with images of his illustrious precursors, constant reminders of his own professional failure. The walls of his dwelling are indeed covered with various prints, among which an image of Ptolemy, a portrait of Copernicus, an engraving of Tycho Brahe, a representation of Kepler, an image of Newton and a photograph of Einstein, clearly indicating a certain continuity of human thought. The same idea of continuity is further emphasized by the three prints "hung carefully in sequence" (*FL*, 97) suggesting the evolution of astronomical studies throughout the centuries. The most sensible explanation would be that not even a character like Damian can completely ignore the existence of continuity, the fact that all forms of human expression are invariably marked by the inheritance of the past.

Another possible yet rather far-fetched argument supporting such a theory has to do with Damian's fascination for the stars and with his very choice of a profession. Although the idea of influence seems to point exclusively to the complex relationships between persons or works of art, its prime and by now forgotten meaning was that of an "emanation or force coming in upon mankind from the stars." Indeed, the ancient use of this term indicated the fact that human beings were capable of receiving "an ethereal fluid flowing in upon one from the stars, a fluid that affected one's character and destiny, and that altered all sublunary things" (Bloom 1973: 26). The fact that Damian dedicates his entire life to the study of the stars that were once thought to influence people might be interpreted as a proof of his desire to recover the ancient meaning of influence, to be guided by the secret power of the stars rather than by the achievements of other people.

Another of the characters whose careers can be described in terms of originality and influence is Joey Hanover, the famous actor who comes to Pilgrim Valleys in search of his long lost family. As a stage comedian Joey is inevitably influenced by his famous precursors: "His persona was close to that of Dan Leno or Max Miller: (...) there were some who saw in him the lineaments of such clowns as Mathews or Grimaldi." (*FL*, 68) It is equally interesting to note that the brief portrait of this modern comedian clearly anticipates the much more complex figure of a quite similar character, the notorious Lambeth Marsh Lizzie, the protagonist of one of Ackroyd's later novels, *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*. Indeed, both of these music-hall performers are influenced by other famous actors and they both

manage to seem quite innocent of all the innuendoes which entertain their audiences, in spite of their rather coarse repartees.

It comes as no surprise that such a well-known performer as Joey Hanover should be constantly imitated by other people, such as the waitress that is quite unable to help telling him “It’s all very well, Mr. Pell, but you can’t sleep here” (*FL*, 71) and all the other people who invariably repeat his famous ‘Joeyisms.’ What is much more striking is that at least two of the catchphrases presumably coined by Joey are to be found in Ackroyd’s previous novel. On seeing a little boy that obviously knows him from the television, Joey Hanover amuses himself by whispering one of the phrases that made him famous: ““Does yer Mother know yer out?” This was a well-known ‘Joeyism’. (...) This attracted some attention and, from the other side of the street, a young man shouted ““Ow’s yer poor feet?”” (*FL*, 67)

It is quite interesting to note that both of these phrases appear in *Chatterton* and that the very situation echoes the brief exchange of words between George Meredith and two little boys present in the earlier novel: “He tripped against a stray gas-holder, ready for the pole of the lamp to be fitted into it, and two small boys screamed out in delight. ‘Do yer mother know yer out?’ one of them called over to him, and the other took up the refrain with ‘Ow’s yer poor foot?’” (*C*, 135) The presence of the same phrases in a quite similar context in a more recent novel not only serves to emphasize Ackroyd’s tendency to quote in his novels passages from his own earlier books and the inevitable indebtedness of all literary works to previous texts, but also anticipates a major revelation that appears later in the novel and which concerns the fact that Joey is not the real author of the ‘Joeyisms’ that made him so famous. If the novel somehow ‘steals’ the words and images of a previous text by the same author, Joey himself is famous for malapropisms “which in fact he stole from his wife’s ordinary conversation” (*FL*, 68). It thus becomes quite clear that Joey Hanover can be included in the same category as Chatterton, Harriet Scrope, Charles Wychwood, and all the other artists characterized by their tendency to appropriate the work of others and use it for their own creative purposes.

The use of words belonging to a previous novel serves as another indication of the fact that all texts can be perceived as rewritings of other texts, which is one of the ideas that systematically recur in all Ackroyd’s novels. It is quite interesting to note that *First Light* also resembles *Chatterton* in that it too contains both rearrangements of other texts and frequent rearrangements of its own elements. One

of these instances of self-quotation consists in the use of the same image of the giants that part the leaves in order to watch the intruders in two different contexts, that is in Mark's description of the Peruvian rainforest and in his wife's description of an English wood. Moreover, the text is also characterised by the constant reintroduction of certain figures, tropes and motifs (Gibson and Wolfreys, 2000: 12), such as the appearance of the black cat on two distinct occasions and with the same dramatic effect and the sensation of something crawling on one's leg experienced first by Evangeline Tupper and later on by Floey Hanover.

As far as Floey herself is concerned, the fact that she is less famous than her husband does not prevent her from being an equally interesting character, though not necessarily on the basis of her being the true author of Joey's catchphrases. Her portrait is only briefly delineated, but her main characteristic constantly emerges from the very phrases she utters, almost all of which contain some violation of basic linguistic conventions. Throughout the novel Floey constantly uses incorrect word forms, such as "mammonites" (*FL*, 64) instead of 'ammonites,' "kikes" (*FL*, 107) instead of 'dykes,' or confuses various words, describing her husband as "a great herbivore" (*FL*, 306) in order to indicate his passion for gardening, and speaking of "coagulated lorries" (*FL* 163), "champions and acrimony" (*FL*, 315) or "contagious borders" (*FL*, 315). She is frequently at a loss when it comes to finding particular words and has to replace them with paraphrases: "We were doing that thing people do with books" (*FL*, 75), or to ask the others to provide her with the exact word "What do you call it when two people meet by accident?" (*FL*, 109), "What's that word, Joey, which rhymes with rash?" (*FL*, 318) Moreover, she often modifies the wording of well-known phrases and consequently uses striking expressions such as: "Not for all the money in China" (*FL*, 63), "the cup that moves" (*FL*, 74), "These people would take the skin off your back" (*FL*, 151), "Pigs have ears" (*FL*, 221), "wild fruit chase" (*FL*, 173), or "persona no thank you" (*FL*, 222) in an act of defiance that actually echoes Harriet Scrope's attempt to create her own versions of traditional linguistic constructs:

'Let them eat cake,' she said.  
'Don't you mean humble pie?' (...)  
'What do they know of Harriet Scrope who only Harriet Scrope know? I mean  
*cake.*' (*C*, 98)



However, while Harriet's characteristic tendency was to misquote above all the words of poets or novelists, Floey only intervenes on common words and phrases and it is quite interesting to note that her only literary mistake, the reference to "the Hound of the d'Urbervilles" (*FL*, 164), clearly alludes to the best known work of the writer that exerted the greatest influence in the elaboration of *First Light*, as well as to a text belonging to the detective genre whose features are recognizable in this particular novel as well as in many of Ackroyd's other writings.

Floey's "unequal struggle with the language" (*FL*, 109), which represents beyond the shadow of a doubt her one defining trait and which is usually dismissed by the other characters as nothing more than "little mistakes with the language" (*FL*, 65), is not necessarily a simple handicap and may have some deeper meaning. What the others perceive as an incapacity to distinguish and use the correct forms of some of the simplest words and phrases might actually indicate Floey's desire to create some new way of expressing her thoughts and feelings, some original language of her own making. In her refusal to use conventional linguistic forms, Floey closely resembles one of the artists whose works are exhibited in the art gallery in *Chatterton*, that is Fritz Dangerfield, the insane painter who created his own alphabet because "words made him feel unclean" (*C*, 116). Although Floey doesn't actually create a new alphabet, her peculiar linguistic choices seem to spring from the same desire to separate from any kind of linguistic tradition and to create a new beginning.

Apart from these characters whose attitudes to originality and influence are closely connected to artistic creativity, there are some others that perceive influence in more personal terms, especially in those of the relationship between parents and children. Evangeline Tupper may not be haunted by the anxieties felt by Damian Fall, yet she is painfully aware of her father's influence, recognizing in his sunken face her own features and in his hurried movements her own gestures. However, in spite of her awareness of her father's influence, she feels remote from her father and thus from her very origins. Moreover, her tendency to regard him as a stranger results in her eventual estrangement from her own self: "She realized that she had been looking at him as if he were just another old man, not her father. And it was as if she had been looking at herself as a stranger." (*FL*, 22) The next step consists of a description of her unusual relationship with her various ancestors perceived in terms not just of estrangement but of actual hatred: "She thought of her own parents, and

their parents before them; they were strangers to her. But somehow worse than strangers. Somehow they were her enemies." (*FL*, 58)

One of the most revealing aspects of Evangeline's personality and probably the first to catch the readers' attention is her romantic involvement with a person of the same sex. However, the most interesting features of this situation do not reside in the exact nature of Evangeline's relationship with Hermione Crisp but in her tendency to treat Hermione as "the incarnation of womanhood," while cherishing the "illusion that she herself was a byword for masculinity" (*FL*, 88). Her insistence on playing a part that does not suit her own personality and her refusal to acknowledge Hermione's true nature, as well as all her gestures, however trivial, such as the assigning of male names (George and Harry) to her two female poodles, are part of her constant attempt to evade reality. Hermione's suspicion that "the whole of Evangeline's personality was, in that sense, a denial of true feeling" (*FL*, 88) best summarizes the twisted nature of this character and her inability to cope with the apparently simple issue of parental influence.

Yet, whereas some characters obsessively try to create some new reality and others are mainly interested in imitating the people surrounding them, there are some others whose attitude suggests the possibility of a different approach to the idea of influence. These characters are motivated by an almost obsessive desire for continuity, by the need of present generations to perpetuate the spirit of their forefathers. The people whose distant ancestor is buried in the ancient tumulus try to maintain this continuity by preserving throughout the ages the body of "the original Mint (...) The old one" (*FL*, 302), the "protector of their identity" and the source of their strength (Janik 1995: 175). On the other hand the archaeologists investigating the tumulus try to maintain this continuity in quite a different way, that is by bringing to light what the others try at all costs to keep hidden. Their wish to discover the secret of the tomb can be explained in terms of the constant human need for "a visible past, a visible continuum, a visible myth of origin to reassure us as to our ends, since ultimately we have never believed in them" (Baudrillard 1993: 351).

Far from representing a mere scientific approach to ancient history, archaeology thus stands for a much more complex phenomenon, for the unconscious human tendency to search for origins, to explore the past in order to reach some distant reality, some primeval truth. It could actually be argued that the archaeologist's attempt to discover the mysteries hidden in the ground can be

interpreted as a symbol of the novelist's approach to the literature of the past. Indeed, Peter Ackroyd's fiction, with "its complicated methods of late-modern literary archaeology, its structuralist fascination with layers and levels, codes and intertextualities" (Bradbury, 1994: 434), closely resembles the sustained attempt of the archaeologist to bring the past to light, to make it part of the present. It is exactly this interest for the distant past, this attempt to get closer to the origins of human life and creation that makes archaeology so similar to the study of literature, however little these two activities may initially seem to have in common.

It is interesting to note that far from constituting a homogeneous group, the persons investigating the ancient tumulus differ considerably one from the other, above all in their respective attitudes to the past they are studying and to the very idea of archaeology. Although they all tend to regard the past as belonging to them "as much as to anyone else" (*FL*, 38), each of them tends to conceive his exploration of the past in his own terms. Julian Hill for instance resents the very act of digging into the ground in search of ancient vestiges and dreams of a time when there would be no need for excavation, when the objects buried beneath the earth would be detected by means of soil-sounding devices and reconstructed in three-dimensional form. He goes on to imagine the museums of the future, filled with "perfect simulacra of objects that remained concealed within the close-packed earth," that is with imitations of those distant originals still hidden in the ground, with "all the evidence of prehistory resurrected in glowing form" and anticipates the simultaneous existence of two different worlds, "one buried forever in darkness and one filled with light" (*FL*, 81). Such a vision is particularly interesting because in envisaging the reconstruction of the art of the past by means of perfect simulacra Julian reinforces an idea already present in *Chatterton* and suggests that the copy of any kind of object can be just as authentic and valuable as the original it imitates.

The act of investigating the past is associated from the very beginning with the act of following in the footsteps of the previous generations. Mark Clare's initial question: "Shall we follow our ancestors?" (*FL*, 8), far from being a mere figure of speech, indicates the way in which the present generations are influenced by their precursors. It is interesting to note however that the particular character at whom this invitation is directed is not exactly eager to accept the influence of past generations. Not only does Evangeline Tupper resent the way in which her father influences her, but she is quite reluctant to assimilate the past. Unlike Charles Wychwood, who was

unable to resist eating pieces of old books or licking his finger after touching the dusty frame of a painting, Evangeline is to a certain extent tempted to do a similar thing but does not go so far as to actually consume the past: "She brushed past him and, with one finger outstretched, prodded the mound with the tip of her varnished nail. 'Something very ancient has entered me,' she said. 'Something old and precious is inside me now.' She was about to lick her finger, but at the last moment she decided not to." (*FL*, 10) Although unable to deny the importance of the historical past, Evangeline is equally unable to accept its inheritance and as such constantly oscillates between acceptance and rejection of any kind of influence, of the distant generations as well as of her own parent.

As far as the other characters are concerned, they all perceive the exploration of the past in terms of the continuity of human generations. Mark Clare's perspective is particularly interesting, as he is able both to detect clear traces of the past generations in the very landscape he inhabits and to accept this inheritance:

It possessed an almost human presence, as if the generations of those who had dwelt upon its surface had left some faint echo (...) When he lay upon the grass of Dorset it was as if he were being borne up by the hands of all those who had come before him. They were the ground on which he rested. Yes, this was a haunted place. (*FL*, 33)

Mark goes on to interpret his wife's decision to adopt a child as the result of her unconscious need to be a part of this chain, to bring her own contribution to human continuity and thus influence the generations to come. He further perceives this as a decisive moment, meant to change the lives of many other people: "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." (*FL*, 34) Kathleen's subsequent suicide could be thus regarded as a direct consequence of her inability to raise a child, of the pain of being influenced by others without being able to influence someone else in return.

As far as his own exploration of the traces of the past is concerned, Mark perceives his approach to human history in terms of an active communication between the living and the dead in which the former must learn to interpret the language of their ancestors: "This will be a kind of inquest. And yet it will be one in which the dead will speak to us, if we know how to listen. (...) There are signals

which come from the people who are buried beneath my feet, and it is these which we must really learn how to decode.” (*FL*, 36) The idea that the past generations can communicate with the generations following them also appears in Damian Fall’s theory concerning the possibility of sending signals into the future. However, although Fall believes in the possibility of receiving signals from the dead, he asserts that the reverse process would be quite impossible as “signals sent into the past would be killed by their own echoes.” (*FL*, 99)

Although the archaeologists are not actually able to actively communicate with the dead, they are to a certain extent capable of bringing them back to life, of performing a kind of “resurrection of the dead of anonymous and silenced generations” (Jameson, 1993: 322). The exploration of the past involves a revival of the ancestors echoing the ultimate revisionary ratio described by Harold Bloom as the return of the mighty dead “in our colors, and speaking in our voices, at least in part, at least in moments, moments that testify to our persistence, and not to their own” (Bloom, 1973: 141). As they dig around the tumulus in search of traces of ancient life, the archaeologists become increasingly aware of the invisible world surrounding them and finally understand how “the dead do surround the living,” how “everything is touching everything else” (*FL*, 43).

In order to really understand the past they are investigating the archaeologists obviously need to perform their own revival of the dead, to recreate through their own actions and movements the gestures of their ancestors: “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?” (*FL*, 41) Later in the book Mark Clare himself performs a similar kind of re-enactment, assuming the position of the crouching skeleton found in the tumulus: “He could see nothing but, without knowing why and with a low moan he did not understand, he lay down in the attitude of the hanged man whose remains had been found here.” (*FL*, 244) In adopting the posture of that ancient human body Mark actually shows his commitment to the belief that the people buried beneath the soil “represented the beginnings of human life” and even tries to become part of that “continuity of human feeling and human community” (*FL*, 119) suggested by all the evidence found at the site.

Although Mark feels a certain reluctance on first cutting into the surface of the tumulus and perceives his act as “a beginning for him, but an ending for those other workmen who had preceded him thousands of years before” (*FL*, 52), his final disappearance in the tumulus and his symbolic gesture seem to indicate his understanding of a deeper meaning, a continuity that can transcend the centuries, an “imaginative boundary crossing from the present world to its layered past” (Keen, 2001: 121). Inside the ancient tomb he feels neither the grief of destroying an ancient grave nor the pride of having made an important scientific discovery but rather “pride in the lineage and in the continuation. Pride in the words that issued from him but which had their origins among the long dead.” (*FL*, 185)

This continuity, far from being a mere figure of speech, finds its concrete representation in the succession of generations after generations of Mints, all of them retaining the features of their original ancestor. The remarkable perpetuation of the same features throughout the centuries is first suggested by the resemblance between Farmer Mint and Boy Mint and further reinforced by Evangeline's realization that the pictures and photographs hanging above the Mints' mantelpiece “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.” (*FL*, 58) The same remarkable continuity is later noticed by a long lost member of this quite unusual family. On hearing the identical bellows of his two relatives, Joey realizes that these calls had been inherited from the previous Mints and “echoed from generation to generation across this valley.” (*FL*, 174) Joey himself is characterized from the very beginning by an almost obsessive desire to discover his ancestors and learn about his past life. One of the most interesting aspects of his personality consists in his faith in “the image of some remote and tranquil past” (*FL*, 149) and in the feeling of permanence he seems to derive from the remnants of his infant life. It is only when he finds out the truth about his family, when he is able to look back and see his parents and their parents before them, thus realizing he is no longer alone, that he feels at peace with the world: “he was exhilarated by it – exhilarated not by their deaths but by his sense of origin; for the first time in his life he could feel that he belonged in the world.” (*FL*, 171)

Joey's final revelation is triggered by the vision of the original ancestor kept hidden for so many centuries beneath the ground, in the unlucky spot where the “dead could take hold of the living” (*FL*, 304). On opening the coffin Joey not only

sees the ancient human form but also hears what he believes to be “the original voices – voices which had known speech but not writing” (*FL*, 321), that is, the voices of people that had lived long before the appearance of literary creation and all its anxieties. Moreover, he is able to distinguish in the ancient face the features of all the members of the successive generations of his family:

And in this old face, now, he sees other faces – he sees the features of his mother and, extending his hand, he cries out to her. He sees his father, lifting him from a bed of purple flowers. He sees in this face, too, the faces of all those who had come before him. And the faces of all those he has known. This is the human face he recognised in all those he has loved. (*FL*, 323)

Watching the body of his ancestor Joey has a vision of the long line of people stretching back to the beginning of time in a scene that echoes the image of Thomas Chatterton, George Meredith and Charles Wychwood, symbolically joined at the end of *Chatterton*. The ultimate truth uttered by the first Mint through the voice of one of his last descendants concerns above all those “dreams of origin and of the darkness from which we come” (*FL*, 321) anticipated by Damian’s claim that the universe “cannot escape from the relics of its origin” (*FL*, 156).

One of the most significant elements of the prophetic discourse delivered by Joey is the reference to an unavoidable return to the distant moment of the beginning and the suggestion of a mysterious relationship between apparently distinct dimensions: the earth and the sky, the world of the living and that of the dead:

They are not fires above us but souls, the souls of those who came before us and light our way. They are the eyes of the dead, always watching. They are our hopes: that is why they are so distant and why there is darkness amongst them. They are the word for far. They are the word for dream. You must make your own fires in the same pattern. Place your fires here, in the valley, in the pattern of the sky. And so make the stars your home. (*FL*, 321)

The importance of this fragment resides both in the suggestion that true wisdom involves the imitation of past generations and in the association of the stars with the eyes of the dead. The reference to the wide-spread belief in the permanence on the firmament of the souls of the dead is only one of the numerous instances in which the sky and the earth, the hidden world explored by archaeologists and the vast universe studied by astronomers, are perceived as being deeply interrelated. Perhaps

the most interesting proof of this relationship is the fact that the name of the original ancestor of the Mints, Old Barren One, proves to be one and the same with that of the star studied by Damian Fall, Aldebaran, arguably the central symbol of the entire book.

The image of the star appears with remarkable frequency in the text and it could be in fact argued that each of the characters is in some way or another connected to the stars. Damian's entire career revolves around the stars, the ancient builders of the tumulus are thought to have been guided by them and at some point in the novel Kathleen, Owen Chard, Joey Hanover and thousands of other people "all over the dark side of the planet" (*FL*, 160) simultaneously watch the same group of stars. The ammonite discovered by Floey on the beach reminds her of the image of a star, "its various gases spiralling around a tiny central core" (*FL*, 64), the actors in the Theatre of Peace link hands during one of their performances "making what might have been the shape of a pentagon or of a star" (*FL*, 217), the rat king that scares away the invaders of the sacred burial ground consists of seven rats "tugging in different directions and forming the shape of a star" (*FL*, 237) and the distant ancestor of the Mints is in some mysterious way connected to the star that bears his name. The star is moreover defined by Corona as "the sign of unity through difference" (*FL*, 217) and can thus be perceived as a symbol of the simultaneous existence of similarity and uniqueness, of continuity and originality.

Another interesting element of this highly suggestive fragment has to do with Joey's belief that it is not only the living who are aware of the presence of the dead. On uttering the words "So you saw us, too, (...) You saw us at last" (*FL*, 323) Joey suggests the possibility of an authentic, two-sided communication between the living and the dead. The other protagonists experience a similar revelation when they watch the flames that rise from the coffin of the original Mint. Gathered around the burning vestiges, they become increasingly aware of the presence around them of their dead relatives, of their ancestors and of the protagonists of the various stories told in the novel and they finally understand that the ultimate truth they had been searching for resides in the circularity of time itself, in the simultaneity of past, present and future. The time they had initially perceived as linear is thus replaced at this crucial moment by a "cyclical, mythic time, having no beginning and no end" (Vlad 1998: 102).



It is quite interesting to note that all the main characters reach the same conclusion in spite of their essentially different natures and apparently incongruent beliefs and that each of them has his revelation in a place that symbolically matches his own condition. Whereas Joey becomes aware of the circularity of time in front of the coffin of his distant ancestor, Mark Clare and Damian Fall have their revelations in places directly connected to their respective occupation: the former beneath the ground, in the “fogou where it seemed that the centuries were collapsing together,” (*FL*, 269) the latter in his observatory, beneath the stars that represent his constant preoccupation. The revelations experienced by Joey and Mark Clare are by no means surprising, being quite congruent with their previous attitudes and beliefs. Indeed, both Mark’s involvement in the past and Joey’s life-long obsession with his unknown ancestors can be interpreted as crucial factors preparing them for their respective visions.

As far as Damian’s revelation is concerned, it involves the complete disintegration of his former set of values and as such is much more dramatic than those experienced by any of the other characters. After being tormented all his life by what could be best described as an extremely severe case of the anxiety of influence, Damian is forced to experience the pain of facing his famous precursors, Ptolemy, Copernicus, Tycho Brahe, symbols of authority, of the power of the past, as well as reminders of his personal failure as an astronomer. He is once more forced to acknowledge words that “were his own and yet not his own” (*FL*, 294), words that express his own thoughts and that have already been uttered by others. His experience culminates in a series of apocalyptic visions suggesting the return of the universe to its “unimaginable moment of birth” (*FL*, 296) and his own impossibility to escape the past:

At last the long agony of the universe was over. The flight from its moment of origin had come to an end. It had ceased to expand and was now rushing towards him. Damian. He held onto the equipment, as if he were in danger of being blown away. This was the time he had always anticipated and had always feared. (*FL*, 296)

At the end of this deeply disturbing experience Damian’s fear of influence is replaced by an even greater torment, by the “fear of emptiness, the fear of non-being” (*FL*, 297), of completely losing his identity. His last reaction is to creep into a corner of the observatory and to sit down “with his knees drawn up against his chest,

crouched under the vast emptiness of the universe.” (*FL*, 297) In assuming the position of the crouching skeleton found in the tumulus, previously adopted by Mark Clare, Damian openly acknowledges his failure to face the menacing universe and, what is even more important, demonstrates by means of this apparently trivial action the circularity of time, the recurrence of all actions and events and the inevitability of being influenced in one way or another by some unknown precursor. Moreover, Damian’s revelation enables us to interpret his highly suggestive surname, Fall, as an indication of his tragic fall from the glory of the stars to a prosaic and unavoidable terrestrial reality.

It is interesting to note that it is Damian who asks what could be regarded as the most revealing question in the novel: “Why is it that we think of a circular motion as the most perfect? Is it because it has no beginning and no end?” (*FL*, 328) The answer to this question is directly connected to his own revelation of the cyclical repetition of time and above all to the very construction of the novel itself. Indeed, one of the defining characteristics of *First Light* resides in its circularity, in the fact that its ending is nothing more than a return to the moment of beginning. ‘The Uncertainty Principle’ is the title of the first as well as of the last chapter, whose contents remain more or less the same and which serves both as a prologue and epilogue. This can be interpreted as a clear indication of the impossibility of reaching any absolute certainty as well as the most relevant proof of the tendency shared by all Ackroyd’s novels to quote and misquote themselves. The novel symbolically ends with the image of the “sky filled with light” (*FL*, 328), a projection of the original light present in its title and an indication of the eternal return to the distant moment of the beginning, as well as a symbol of the power of human imagination. It could be thus argued that in spite of the contradictory approaches to continuity and uniqueness present in the text, *First Light* clearly demonstrates the possibility of creating unique texts without rejecting the literary inheritance of the past and eventually asserts the value of both human continuity and individual vision.

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