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THE INTERTEXTUAL SELF: WRITING THE SELF IN PETER ACKROYD'S DAN LENO AND THE LIMEHOUSE GOLEM

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Abstract: *Starting from Peter Ackroyd's essay, 'The Uses of the Self' in Notes for a New Culture (Ackroyd 64-89) where he focuses on the relation between the self and language and shows that the human self does not exist prior to language, I am going to enlarge upon his concept of the intertextual self in his novel entitled Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem. Moreover, I will demonstrate that all the characters in this novel are symbols of intertextuality. For Ackroyd, the self is a multiplicity of voices and texts adapted to the different situations and discourses it encounters. The self is dispersed, fragmented and defined intertextually. Dan Leno is the master of masks and a good example of the intertextual postmodern self; he is described by one of his colleagues as 'endless' (109); there is no part Dan Leno could not play. His identity is a multitude of different selves hidden behind the masks he assumes. Dan Leno is a symbol of intertextuality; he comprises several and countless personae, the same as intertextuality comprises countless texts, contexts and intertexts. The theatricality of the human behaviour and the idea of the intertextual self are closely related in the novel. They are woven around the crime plot in which the poststructuralist self – the influence of Thomas De Quincey upon the murderer – is inseparable from the theatricality of the killings themselves.*

A polyphonic novel, *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* associates fiction with the myth of the Golem as both fiction and the Golem take shape based on our interpretations. Writing gives life to the Golem just as our interpretations give life to writing. The novel is a patchwork of historical accounts, diaries, autobiography and third person narrative. It consists of four main narrative lines: 1) the journal of John Cree; 2) Elizabeth Cree's autobiography; 3) the court transcripts – extracts from the trial of Elizabeth Cree kept at the *Illustrated Police News Law Courts and Weekly Record* (9) – contemporary documentary sources and 4) the third person narrative which mainly deals with the murders, the story of the Golem and the stories of Lizzie Cree and George Gissing.

In line with the theory of intertextuality, the novel is full of literary commentaries, literary allusions, quotations, and quotations within quotations which remind us of Roland Barthes' theory of the plural, 'reversible' text, 'woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages (...) antecedent or contemporary, which cut across it through and through in a vast stereophony' (Barthes 160). The implied author quotes George Gissing who quotes De Quincey and Babbage. In the discussion about Babbage's vision, William Blake is commented on, based on a critical study of Swinburne's from the *Westminster Review*, which George Gissing had, allegedly, been reading before his visit to the site of Babbage's experiments with the 'Difference Engine' and the 'Analytical Engine' in Limehouse (*Dan Leno* 118). All of the characters in the novel live in the spiritual world of books, are basically familiar with Thomas De Quincey's essay on murder and act according to what they have read. In my opinion, their actions are limited by a cultural code which they cannot escape.

According to Jeremy Gibson and Julian Wolfreys,

commentary within commentary, text enfolding text, the significance of the location cannot escape Ackroyd's readers. We might suggest that the phrase 'Difference Engine' speaks not only of the complex layering of coincidences, of textual and historical events within the city; it also names the differential structure, the temporal and spatial construct, which is the novel itself (Gibson and Wolfreys 202).

The title of the novel – *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* – may suggest, in my opinion, a possible connection between the symbol of androgyny, of the unsplit whole, Adam Kadmon or the Universal Man – associated with Dan Leno in Ackroyd's novel – and intertextuality which I may associate with the Limehouse Golem. Intertextuality implies layers of writing and layers of interpretation; it is a thing without a form, the same as the Golem is, as long as there is no interpretation and no understanding of it. Dan Leno comprises several and countless personae, the same as intertextuality comprises countless texts, contexts and intertexts.

The third person narrator explains that

'Golem' is the medieval Jewish word for an artificial being, created by the magician or the rabbi; it literally means 'thing without form', and perhaps sprang from the same fears which surrounded the fifteenth-century concept of the 'homunculus' which was supposed to have been given material shape in the laboratories of Hamburg and Moscow. It was an object of horror, sometimes said to be made of red clay and sand, and in the mid eighteenth-century it was associated with spectres and succubi who have a taste for blood (Dan Leno 4).

The myth of the Golem is part of the history of London and, as Susana Onega has shown, 'Peter Ackroyd explains in *Dressing UP* (Ackroyd 97-98) that at the end of the nineteenth-century all these myths survived in displaced form in the burlesque transvestism of the comic theatre and their wisdom survived in the popular songs and ballads' (Onega 138).

The implied author starts his reference to the Limehouse Golem with a rhetorical question which suggests that the mythical creature belongs to a past that is to be brought to the present in order to be analysed and understood:

Who now remembers the story of the Limehouse Golem, or cares to be reminded of the history of that mythical creature? (...) The secret of how it came to be revived in the last decades of the nineteenth century, and how it aroused the same anxieties and horrors as its medieval counterpart, is to be found within the annals of London's past (*Dan Leno* 4).

The way the story is presented to the public in the daily newspapers and the way the Golem is described by alleged witnesses do not bear the hallmark of truth but of uncertainty. The myth is revealed through different stories told by different alleged witnesses, who invent or embellish the details about the Golem, which is nothing but a textual trace:

The daily newspapers reported every practice in which 'The Golem' or 'The Golem of Limehouse' engaged, while certain details were embellished, or on occasions invented, in order to ensure more notoriety for what were already gruesome accounts. Could it have been the journalist on the Morning Advertiser, for example, who decided that the 'Golem' had been chased by an 'irate crowd' only to be seen 'fading away' into the wall of a bakery by Hayley Street? But perhaps that was not an instance of editorial licence since, as soon as the report was published, several residents of Limehouse confirmed that they had been among the mob which had pursued the creature and watched it disappear (*Dan Leno* 6-7).

In a discussion with Karl Marx, Solomon Weil takes down a copy of Hartlib's *Knowledge of Sacred Things* in order to define the Golem. One may conclude that we give it life and shape according to our own interpretation:

Our ancestors thought of the golem as an homunculus, a material being created by magic, a piece of red clay brought to life in the sorcerer's laboratory. It is a fearful thing and, according to the ancient legend, it sustains its life by ingesting the spirit or soul of a human being. (...)

Of course we do not have to believe in golems literally. Surely not. That is why I read it in an allegorical sense, with the golem as an emblem of the Klippoth and a shell of degraded matter. But then what do we

do? We give it life in our own image. We breathe our own spirit into its shape. And that, don't you see, is what the visible world must be – a golem of giant size? (*Dan Leno* 68).

According to Solomon Weil, our expectations, needs and dreams trigger our images of the world: 'The world itself took that form for a moment because it was expected of it. It created that figure in the same way that it creates stars for us – the trees, and stones. It knows what we need or expect, or dream of, and then it creates such things for us. Do you understand me?' (*Dan Leno* 69). Susana Onega enlarges upon the connection between *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* and *The House of Doctor Dee*, 'for if the homunculus was the microcosmic evil emanation of Doctor Dee's house and "a figment and a sick man's dream" (Ackroyd, 1993b:266), the Limehouse Golem may be described as the macrocosmic evil emanation of the whole area of Limehouse and a figment of the dream of sick Londoners' (Onega 138-139). Like any myth, the Golem feeds up the strangest speculations:

But the most bizarre speculations came from those people who really believed in the legend of the Golem: they insisted that this man-made creature, this automaton, had simply disappeared at the end of his career of death. The fact that the last killings had taken place in the same house where the Marr murders had been enacted, almost seventy years before, only confirmed their belief that a secret ritual had been performed and that the clothes shop in the Ratcliffe Highway had once been some temple to a strange god. The Limehouse Golem had faded away within the blood and limbs of its victims, and would undoubtedly re-emerge in the same spot after a period of years (*Dan Leno* 269).

Gibson and Wolfreys demonstrate that the novel resembles the golem due to its possible multiple interpretations and due to the plethora of allusions related to fiction and to the monster at the same time:

We may therefore suggest, albeit provisionally, that Ackroyd implicitly acknowledges the truth of the Golem's truth, in his writing about the Golem without representing it. The act of writing the novel gives the golem shape. Or rather, shapes. For the Golem of the novel is multiple, assuming as many shapes as there are narrative and textual formulations in the novel, which is, moreover a novel always acknowledging its indebtedness and the possibility of its form to prior acts of writing which allow it to take shape, and without which it would be a shapeless mass, matter without form. Indeed, the novel is itself Golem-like, formed in its various true shapes according to the forms of inscription. Furthermore, the Golem is, in a certain sense, London, though never restricted to this, anymore than London is restricted to a single definition (Gibson and Wolfreys 206).

The Golem must always be redefined; it does not have a definite identity, the same as the city escapes definition and a true identity. As Gibson and Wolfreys show,

Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem is, like both city and Golem, an act of multiple, heterogeneous swirling voices, constantly reinventing its selves. In this the novel enters into the condition of London, as, Golem-like, it is determined from countless other places, others' texts, both real and imaged (Gibson and Wolfreys 207).

The novel focuses on the idea of recurrent patterns of existence, recurrent states of affairs suggested by the repetition of 'here we are again' (*Dan Leno* 282) – which reminds us of Ackroyd's theory of the 'patterns of habitation, and patterns of inheritance which seem to emerge from the very streets and alleys of the capital (qtd in Onega 140). The recurrent patterns of existence and the recurrent patterns of events – the murders in the Limehouse – are the key to our understanding of the novel. Before her public execution, Elizabeth Cree says 'Here we are again' and suggests the idea that events are repeated. The novel ends with the same words uttered by Dan Leno after Aveline Mortimer playing Mrs. Cree dies in an accident on the stage. *Here we are again* alludes to the cyclical time in the 'eternal city' (*Dan Leno* 282), to the human actions that are also repeated in the same places. The diary of Mr. John Cree of *New Cross Villas* reveals that the murderer – who seems to be John Cree, according to this diary – was familiar with Thomas de Quincey's essay, *On Murder Considered As One of the Fine Arts* where John Williams, the murderer of the Marr Family was "a solitary artist, who rested in the centre of

London, self-supported by his own conscious grandeur', an artist who used London as the 'studio' to display his works" (*Dan Leno* 30). Based on this model, John Cree is also concerned with the artistic representation of death: like John Williams in Thomas de Quincey's essay who 'had dressed for each murder as if he were going upon the stage' (30), John Cree decides to perform in his own 'private theatre' (27).

In Ackroyd's third person narration, the murders are commented upon by a group of historical and fictional characters – Karl Marx, George Gissing, Solomon Weil – who lived in the same area and who would frequently meet in the Reading Room of the British Museum. They would also meet John Cree, Elizabeth Cree and Dan Leno in the Reading Room that was 'the true spiritual centre of London where many secrets might finally be revealed' (269).

Almost all of the characters, Elizabeth Cree included, were familiar with De Quincey's essay on the Ratcliffe Highway murders. In the Reading Room of the British Museum, George Gissing writes *Romanticism and Crime* – an essay based on Thomas de Quincey's essay, *On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts*. George Gissing takes John Williams – the murderer in De Quincey's essay – for 'a wonderful Romantic hero' (37), 'an urban Wordsworth, a poet of sublime impulse who rearranges (one might say executes) the natural world in order to reflect his own preoccupations' (37), 'a genius of his own particular sphere, with the advantage that he is also associated with the ideas of death and eternal silence' (38):

There is one other curious and chance connection between murder and the Romantic movement. De Quincey's *Confessions* were first published anonymously, and one of those who falsely laid claim to their composition was Thomas Griffiths Wainwright. (...) Wainwright was an accomplished and malevolent murderer, a secret poisoner who dispatched members of his own family before turning his attention to chance acquaintances. He read poetry by day, and poisoned by night (*Dan Leno* 39-40).

George Gissing, the writer and newspaperman who, in 1880, at the age of twenty-three, married Nell Harrison, a seventeen-year-old alcoholic prostitute whom he hoped to rescue from the gutter, is described as a Romantic idealist, fascinated by Charles Babbage's *Analytical Engine* – the forerunner of the contemporary computer – which he considers the mechanical equivalent of the Golem, the product of a 'vision of the world, in which all phenomena were notated and tabulated; it had been conjured up like some golem here, in Limehouse, among the disease and suffering' (120). In line with Ackroyd's bent for pastiche and palimpsest, George Gissing repeats a comment of Charles Babbage's: 'The air itself is one vast library, on whose pages are forever written all that man has ever said or woman whispered' (117). Meeting some poverty-stricken Londoners in the 'maze of streets', Gissing comes to realize that 'if the air indeed were one vast library, one great vessel in which all the noises of the city were preserved, then nothing need be lost' (246). He had already mentioned the same idea when held within a cell for questioning over the murders. He 'had read in a recent copy of the *Weekly Digest* that part of the ancient city of London had been found during the building of certain warehouses by Shadwell Reach. Some stone walls had been uncovered, and it occurred to Gissing that this cell might have been constructed from the remnants of them' (146-147). Therefore, nothing is ever lost, the city being reinvented within itself. According to Gibson and Wolfreys,

Gissing is thus used as a medium for the city, for its traces and its textual reconfigurations. From Babbage's general comment, Gissing hypothesizes about the condition of London itself. Indeed, the partial reiteration and paraphrase of Babbage's conceit is performative in that it becomes part of the babble of London voices in the text, filtered via Gissing through Ackroyd's urban imagination (Gibson and Wolfreys 208).

Another important figure in the Reading Room of the British Museum is Karl Marx whose revolutionary theory rejected the Utilitarian and the Romantic Models. In Ackroyd's novel, John Cree observes that Marx was 'dividing his attention between Tennyson's *In Memoriam* and *Bleak House* by Charles Dickens' (45). Later on, he notices on passing by his desk that Marx had purchased a novel

entitled *Workers of the Dawn* (84) – Gissing’s first novel. He was Solomon Weil’s friend – a cabbalist scholar, an expert in ‘Hasidic lore’ (5). Like Doctor Dee, Solomon Weil has a ‘large library of cabbalistic and esoteric learning’ (64). As Susana Onega points out, ‘the books in Weil’s library may be said to contain all the elements needed to unravel the mystery of the Golem murders: the myth of the creation of a human being by means of words; the myth of original androgyny and the myth of Britain going back to a lost race of divine origin’ (Onega 137-138). According to Onega, ‘Weil and Marx, the occultist magus and the anticapitalist atheist, may be said to represent the polar opposites of Judaism. After meeting by chance in the Reading Room, they develop a friendship based precisely on the disparateness (or rather complementarity) of their world-views’ (Onega 138).

If Solomon Weil and Karl Marx have a definite identity of their own, the other important characters who meet in the Reading Room of the British Museum escape a definite identity: Elizabeth Cree hides her identity, invents a different life story for herself after she poisons her mother; John Cree’s identity bears the hallmark of doubt and uncertainty when Elizabeth admits that she has written his own diary putting the blame of the murders on him in order to escape responsibility and, maybe, to play an important part on the stage of London. Dan Leno plays the male and the female, ‘thinking through’ (194) the characters he plays in order to turn into their personae. Therefore, John Cree, Elizabeth Cree and Dan Leno create their own identity for the sake of illusion and of transgressing an uncomfortable reality.

Dan Leno may be considered a myth – the myth of the ‘Universal Man’ (67) or Adam Kadmon (67) as Solomon Weil explains. He plays all of his parts successfully on the stage based on his charisma and knowledge, too. He is familiar with the history of pantomime, the old playbills and, most importantly, the memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi edited by Boz (194):

The history of pantomime had been Leno’s study ever since he had made his name in the music-hall; it was as if ‘The Funniest Man on Earth’ wished to understand the conditions which had, in a sense, created him. He collected old playbills as well as such items of memorabilia as the harlequin’s costume from *The Magic Circle*. Of course he knew of Grimaldi from the beginning – forty years after his death, he was still the most famous clown of all – and one of the first theatrical souvenirs he purchased was a colour print of ‘Mr Grimaldi as Clown in the Popular New Pantomime of Mother Goose.’ He had been ‘the most wonderful creature of his day,’ according to one contemporary, because ‘there was such mind in everything he did’ (193-194).

For more authenticity, the third person narrator introduces a description of Dan Leno in the *Saturday Review*. The quotation is part of a rave review which focuses on the actor’s talent and charisma: ‘Dan Leno was widely believed to be the funniest man of that, or any, age but the best description of him is probably Max Beerbohm’s in the *Saturday Review*’ (22).

As the third person narrator tells us, Dan Leno’s real name was actually George Galvin ‘but he quickly discarded it just as Elizabeth Cree was never known to use her mother’s surname’ (22-23). Once he becomes an actor, he assumes a different identity and becomes ‘endless’, as one of the actors considers him: “‘He is endless’, Uncle said to me one night as we were leaving the *Desiderata* in Hoxton. Completely endless” (109). He spent his adolescence and youth on stage, so that he could hardly have time to be himself: ‘It was true: Dan was only fifteen then, but he played so many parts that he hardly had time to be himself. And yet, somehow, he was always himself. He was the Indian squaw, the waiter, the milkmaid, or the train driver, but it was always Dan conjuring people out of thin air’ (108). In time, he becomes more and more famous and is associated with an item of public property.

The novel ends with his words – ‘here we are again’ (282) – uttered on the stage in an intelligent attempt to disguise the unhappy accident when Aveline Mortimer dies. He implies that existence will resume its course of events, that we see what we have already seen so far, that we read what we may have already read but in a different form. We have read a literary work based on other literary works – Thomas De Quincey’s essays on murder – on ideas, images, quotations pertaining to different famous authors of the past. According to a quotation from Oscar Wilde, life has been presented under the conditions of art: “It was a scene which Oscar Wilde remembered when, in ‘*The Truth of Masks*’, he wrote that ‘Truth is independent of facts always, inventing or selecting them at pleasure. The true dramatist shows us life

under the conditions of art, not art in the form of life” (281). Susana Onega concludes that Dan Leno absorbs the Limehouse Golem: ‘Thus Dan Leno, the music-hall monopolylinguist, puts an end to the cycle of evil, absorbing the Limehouse Golem and transforming it into a humorous and harmless music-hall transvestite character.’ (Onega 146)

All of the characters in the novel live in the spiritual world of books or of the theatre. All of them are intertextually-defined. Real life does not satisfy them. Elizabeth Cree escapes poverty and unhappiness by going to the theatre, getting hired as an actress and getting married to a man that she met while an actress. She is the ‘unloved’ daughter of a reformed prostitute turned into a Methodist bigot (12) who used to live off ‘sewing the sailing cloths for the fishermen by the horse ferry’ (12). As a child, she went through brutal sexual repression because her mother used to ‘pinch it [a place between her legs] fiercely, or prick it with her needle, in order to teach me that it was the home of pain and punishment’ (13). From her early childhood she lived in a world of words, having the pages of the Bible pasted to the walls, and many passages learned by heart in those days. When she gets hired by the theatre and comes to stay with Doris, ‘the goddess of wire walking’ (80), she changes her life story and her past identity: ‘I told her that my parents had died when I was very young, that I had earned my living as a seamstress in Hanover Square, and that I had run away from a hard mistress before I had found lodgings with a sail-maker in Lambeth Marsh. Of course she believed my story – who would not – and throughout my narrative she patted my hand and sighed’ (81).

Elizabeth Cree marries John Cree and writes her own diary as she admits in chapter 49 – ‘I kept a diary in his name, which will one day damn him before the world’ (273) – and lays the blame of his murders upon him: ‘Well, I made up a diary and laid the guilt upon him’ (273). She creates her husband’s identity, assimilating his own self and personality. Her married life does not bear the hallmark of happiness as she is frigid and loveless. John Cree inherits his father’s fortune and gives up the job of newspaper reporter in order to write a social drama – *Misery Junction* – about the condition of the London poor. Elizabeth impersonates Catherine Dove, a poor orphan girl who is the main character of the play. She finishes her husband’s play without his own consent and turns Catherine Dove – the main character of the play – into a parody of her own ‘dark life’ (232). Then, she hires the theatre for one night, invites ‘all the loiterers and dawdlers of Limehouse’ (236) but her efforts are met with ‘general laughter’ (240).

Elizabeth’s inner golem gets destroyed after having triggered a multitude of interpretations and literary allusions:

The murders in Limehouse led indirectly to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, written by Oscar Wilde some eight years later, in which the opium dens and cheap theatres of that area play a large part in a somewhat melodramatic narrative. They also inspired the famous sequence of paintings by James McNeill Whistler, ‘Limehouse Nocturnes’, in which the brooding presence of the riverine streets is conveyed by viridian green, ultramarine, ivory and black. Whistler also described them as ‘Harmonies upon a Theme’, although they were conceived in the most disharmonious fashion (...) (*Dan Leno* 164).

In line with intertextuality, the Limehouse murders inspired other literary works:

It was in conditions such as these that Somerset Maugham and David Carreras, then young children, first become aware of their fascination for drama – and indeed Carreras himself in the 1920s wrote a play based upon the Limehouse killings entitled *No Man Knows My Name* (*Dan Leno* 164).

In conclusion, the novel is an account of intertextuality and all of the characters are intertextually-defined. They are what they have read and act according to what they have read. Nothing is new to them but reinterpreted in line with the theory of intertextuality. *The Golem* is a textual trace and a palimpsest which lies heavy upon the characters’ created identity and selfhood.

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