Churches Built of Stones and Words:
Semiotic Analysis of the Novel *Hawksmoor*
by Peter Ackroyd

1. Erecting a Cathedral

Once a cathedral was decided to be built, many men were summoned to carry out the work. Among those were masons, the craftsmen skilled in dressing and laying stones. The architect came to check the progress every now and then. Sometimes he started conversations with the workers.

"How is it going?" – the architect asked one of the masons who was wiping his forehead with a dusty cloth. – "Are you satisfied with your work?"

The mason cast an angry look at the architect.

"Satisfied? Look at my hands! They are bruised. Look at

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my back! It hurts me to stand upright. I am burnt by the sun and beaten by the wind. How on Earth can one be satisfied in such misery?"

The architect frowned. At that time another mason happened to sit down nearby.

"And what about you?" – the architect addressed him after slight hesitation. – "How do you feel about your work?"

"Well," – replied the second mason. – "It is certainly not an easy job but I am delighted to realize that I am building a magnificent cathedral."

So much for this old parable. It sketches the differences between two men's attitudes to the same job and, as any other parable, allows quite a range of interpretations. M.L. Mc Closkey and B.Thornton, who tell another version of this story, take it to represent the problem of appreciating the importance of the work done (McCloskey, Thornton 2002: 15). In the context of semiotic analysis of the images of churches in a novel this interpretation can be narrowed to the following one – the story above is about the disability/ ability to appreciate the **semiotic importance** of the work executed.

2. Semiotics of Churches

"Architecture has long been associated with a purpose beyond the utilitarian" (Smith 2003:211). Edifices and sheds, palaces and prisons seen by people as embodiments of wealth, poverty, freedom, captivity, liberation, etc., become signs, because in terms of U.Eco's definition of a sign, they **do not stand for themselves** (Eco 1984:20). Extrapolating Eco's explanation of the semiotic nature of a badge (Eco

1984:20) onto that of a building, it is possible to specify that a building "does not stand for itself" when it does not stand for its molecular composition nor for its stone/ wood/ concrete structure, it does not stand for its capacity to admit people nor for its direct function to protect them from cold, heat, and rain. But a building can stand for something outside itself. When it does, it reaches beyond the sphere of the practical into that of the semiotic.

For example, in the Middle Ages a cathedral was a symbol of the universe: the structure of a cathedral represented the cosmic order, every single detail as well as the overall design were heavily symbolically laden (Gurevich 1984:83).

"Through the twin mediums of Sacred Geometry and Divine Light, medieval cathedral architects sought to communicate the laws of harmony which underpin creation. Experiencing the God-given proportions washed by divine light, the worshipper gained a preview of the courts of heaven which awaited the righteous. Sculpted capitals and the great west tympanum vividly portrayed the pains of hell to those who were not 'on message'" (Smith 2003:211). Thus in the medieval cathedral one could contemplate the beauty and harmony of the God's creation. Since ordinary people at that time hardly ever used abstract linguistic categories to conceptualize the reality, the symbolic structure of a cathedral provided an easy and comprehensible way for understanding the world's structure (Gurevich 1984:83). As C. Nooteboom in his book about the detours in Spain put it:

*A **Romanesque church** is a cosmogony pictured in stone. All is meaning, morality, metaphysics, and it is not Christ on the cross who occupies the centre, as in Gothic art, but Christ in Majesty, lord of the universe, chronocrator, creator of that strange element in which the creation is vested: time. Within that concept **everything had a meaning, from the wall to the lintel, from the vault to the baptismal font.** [...] **everything had a meaning and everything was legible even for those who could not read** [...]* (Nooteboom 1998:179).

But the message so easily unpacked by a medieval man seems to be inaccessible to a modern person:

*[...] it is fair to say that Romanesque art is a world view expressed in stone. **Whether we can still read the image thus created is another matter** [...]* (Nooteboom 1998:175).

Even though one can realize that there is some meaning behind an edifice, it is no longer clear which one:

*The silent and usually cold building starts to **bombard you with messages.** That's the symbolic side, which **was as clear as crystal to medieval man**.* (Nooteboom 1998:174).

Similar to some verbal languages that become dead, their words turning into mere material objects with unknown meanings, **languages of architecture can become dead**, with a church remaining a particular kind of a building but losing its spiritual meaning:

*I am defenceless, also the lintel, the column, the arch, the cross, the acanthus leaves and the eastern mythic beasts on the capitals, the geometric stylized flowers on the high, narrow friezes **pelt me with their forgotten meanings and demand to be read as they were once read, recognized and understood the way they were recognized and understood [...]** (Nooteboom 1998:191).*

To recapitulate the main point of the current discussion, the language of architecture being a living language, a church has a material representation and it is a sign of faith (Stepanov 1997:21).

The word *church* manages to capture these both aspects of a church build of stone (or whatever other material found suitable by its architects). In the Oxford English Dictionary *church* is defined as *"the building, the Lord's house"* (Oxford English Dictionary). The first part of this definition – *the building* – reveals the fact that the word can refer to the material structure of a church, while the second one – *the Lord's house* – points to the word's sensitivity to the semiotic function of a building of church.

It is interesting to observe that, discussing in his book the semiotic role of Spanish Romanesque churches, C.Nooteboom seems to follow the path provided by the dictionary when he writes about the walls and mysteries of a church:

*The original significance of churches is of course that **they keep the air within their walls sequestered from the air outside**, from the secular air of the world. From the moment of consecration there arises, inside, **an atmosphere of mystery, of a place where God lives** and His creation is made visible. (Nooteboom 1998:179).*

The same pattern, as that of the word *church*, holds true for the words *temple* and *cathedral*. Described as *"an edifice or place regarded primarily as the dwelling-place or 'house' of a deity or deities; hence, an edifice devoted to divine worship"* (Oxford English Dictionary), the meanings of the word *temple* cover both the material and semiotic dimensions of a temple. *Cathedral* means *"the principal church of a diocese, containing the bishop's cathedra or throne; usually remarkable for size and architectural beauty"* (Oxford English Dictionary) and refers simultaneously to a cathedral as a material object having a definite size and particular aesthetic features and to a cathedral as associated with the key concepts of Christian faith. (To support the latter claim it is worth to cite the definition of the word *bishop,* used to explain the semantics of *cathedral*: *"a spiritual superintendent or overseer in the Christian Church"* (Oxford English Dictionary); as it is evident from this quotation, the meaning of the word *bishop* is connected with the knowledge of a bishop's semiotic function. It follows thence that the word *cathedral* is connected with the knowledge of semiotic function of the cathedral-building.)

From the analysis of the meanings of the words that name sacred buildings the conclusion emerges that **the verbal language has a double role concerning architecture as a semiotic phenomenon**: 1) verbal language describes the physical, material manifestations of buildings; 2) verbal language renders the symbolic associations ascribed to these buildings by people.

So some people toil to lay stones into beautiful, admirable, and awesome edifices to venerate and honour their deities, others labour to put words together to convey the material and semiotic magnitudes of those cathedrals.

3. Dyer's Churches: Making Stones Speak

Nicholas Dyer, one of the central characters of the novel *Hawksmoor*, was a skilled architect fully aware of the semiotic function of temples. He identified himself as *"a builder of Churches"* (Ackroyd 1993: 20, 146) and was indeed commissioned to rebuild a number of London churches after the Great Fire. Dyer's knowledge and skill were appreciated by Sir Christopher Wren – the Surveyor-General of the reconstruction in London. When still an apprentice, Dyer learnt the types of stones and their peculiarities to perfection, he acquired a profound knowledge in other materials and their appropriateness for different parts of a building; *"No need of a Master with such an Apprentice"*, – said Sir Chris, expressing his admiration (Ackroyd 1993:53). Later on Nicholas's independent designs were approved by Christopher Wren for their solidity: *"Your Draughts are well made, Nick. and **this work will stand tryal in a Hurricano, I have no Doubt"** (Ackroyd 1993:142).

But it was not only the art of erecting enduring edifices that Nick Dyer mastered. He became versed in *"the Principles of Terrour and Magnificence"* (Ackroyd 1993:5), *"the art of Shaddowes"* (Ackroyd 1993:5), professing what he thought to be *"the true Religion"* (Ackroyd 1993:172) and what was the *"Conception of Degenerated Nature"* (Ackroyd 1993:9). Thus his churches were built not to glorify Jesus Christ but to pay tribute to dark powers. As he made it clear himself:

I shall say only at this point that I [...] am no Puritan nor Caveller, nor Reformed, nor Catholick, nor Jew, but of that older Faith which sets them dancing in Black Step Lane. And this is the Creed which Mirabilis school'd in me: He who made the World is also author of Death, nor can we but by doing Evil avoid the rage of evil Spirits. (Ackroyd 1993:20-21).

So Dyer celebrated not the benevolent God but *"the Great and Dreadfull God"* (Ackroyd 1993:14) who *"like a Boy wags his Finger in the inmost part of the Spider's web and breaks it down without a Thought"* (Ackroyd 1993:16). This god is the god of darkness and Dyer envisaged his churches to *"live on, **darker and more solid than the approaching Night"** (Ackroyd 1993:148).

Strongly convinced that the Truth is learnt *"by Faith and Terrour"* and not via experiments praised by rational philosophers (Ackroyd 1993:146), Nicholas Dyer was all for *"what is most Sollemn and Awefull"* (Ackroyd 1993:7), for *"Strangeness and*

Awefulness" (Ackroyd 1993:52). Highly skeptical of reason, Dyer preached magic: *"not only our Altars and Sacrifices, but the Forms of our Temples, must be* **mysticall"** (Ackroyd 1993:9).

Thus making his churches signify (*"my Churches are the Vesture of other active Powers"* (Ackroyd 1993:180)), the architect intentionally made the message obscure. *"I build in Hieroglyph and in Shadow"* – said Dyer (Ackroyd 1993:180) and a bit later he added: *"I wish my Buildings to be filled with* **Secresy,** *and such* **Hieroglyphs** *as conceal from the Vulgar the Mysteries of Religion"* (Ackroyd 1993:180).

In terms of symbol–sign distinction suggested by U.Eco (Eco 1984:137, 145, 161) **Dyer's mystical churches** should be viewed as **symbols** rather than signs.

Sign is explicit about what it means: "what the sender intends to express, what he wishes to be understood, is so precise that the sender would be irritated if the addressee did not understand it" (Eco 1984:137). Symbol is always more equivocal: "the genuine instances of a symbolic mode seem to be those where neither the sender nor the addressee really wants or is able to outline a definite interpretation" (Eco 1984:137). U.Eco describes genuine symbols to be "ambiguous, full of half-glimpsed meanings, and in the last resort inexhaustible" (Eco 1984:145). Interpretations of a symbol are doubtful (Eco 1984:161) as "the content of the symbol is a *nebula* of possible interpretations" (Eco 1984:161).

It was typical of mystics to be concerned with symbolic visions (Eco 1984:145) and it is true of Dyer. He argued:

[...] look upon **my Churches** *in the Spittle-fields, in Limehouse, and now in the Parish of Wapping Stepney, and do you not wonder why* **they lead you into a darker World** *which on Reflection you know to be your own? Every Patch of Ground by them has its Hypochondriack Distemper and Disorder; every Stone of them bears the marks of Scorching by which you may follow* **the true Path of God.**

[...] regard **my Churches** *and the* **way their Shaddowes** *fall upon the Ground; look up at them, also, and see if you are not* **brought into Confusion** (Ackroyd 1993:102).

For Dyer's ideological opponent Christopher Wren churches are signs: clear representations of the Rational God who is celebrated in the rational age. *"Rational", "Demonstrated", "Propriety", and "Plainness"* were the catchwords of such rational philosophers and **"Religion Not Mysterious"** was their motto (Ackroyd 1993:101). This view was most clearly expressed by Parson Priddon in an argument with Nick: *"I cannot assent to spiritual Raptures; all this Darknesse is past, Mr Dyer, and it has been revealed to us that* **we have a Rationall God"** (Ackroyd 1993:134).

But putting mysteries above all and making his churches speak of dark powers, Dyer stood the hazard and faced mortal danger. He knew only too well that *"to feed, imploy or reward any evil Spirits is a Felony"* (Ackroyd 1993:103). Therefore Nicholas had to conceal the true message, to disguise it first of all from the Commission that regularly demanded reports about the progress in building the churches. In hiding his real message, Dyer developed two strategies. The first one was to pretend that his

churches are built in full compliance with the Christian order and bear the proper symbols of early and pure Christianity (Ackroyd 1993:24, 105). The second strategy was not to say everything, to wrap in silence the most significant for the mystical message parts of the edifices (Ackroyd 1993:9, 45, 185). Exploiting further the above used concept of the languages of architecture, it is possible to say that **Dyer made his churches speak in a secret language** that looked like a plain and familiar language to his contemporaries.

4. Ackroyd's Churches: Taking Words to Describe
Nicholas Dyer never existed in the world outside that of the novel *Hawksmoor*. The churches which he erected in the novel were in reality built by Nicholas Hawksmoor (Vianu 2006: 64; Doyle 2002:31). Hawksmoor in the novel is a XX century detective who investigates the murders committed at the sites of Dyer's churches.

Ackroyd took the words to create the images of churches in his novel and described both the material structure of the edifices and their symbolic meaning.

The **depiction of material dimensions of** Dyer's **churches** in the novel is very vivid. They are portrayed at two periods of time: when being built in the XVIII century and when decaying in the XX century.

Two different images of churches which were under construction in the XVIII century can be evoked in the reader's mind. The first image is that how the churches were seen by Dyer himself – his vision revealed to the reader but not to Sir Christopher Wren or the Commission. Dyer tried to build his churches where there were old places of human sacrifices (Ackroyd 1993:23, 134-135) or burials (Ackroyd 1993:7, 24, 62, 133) thus situating the churches in dark and gloomy loci. Among architectural structures Dyer particularly liked labyrinth (Ackroyd 1993:16, 24) and obelisk (Ackroyd 1993:8, 56, 61) and tried to build those under or near his churches whenever possible.

The second image of the XVIII century churches is that which Dyer wanted Wren and Commission to see. Talking to Wren about his designs, Dyer discussed the parts of the edifices (e.g., portico (Ackroyd 1993:7), cornice, steps (Ackroyd 1993:142)) and materials (e.g., stucco (Ackroyd 1993:142)). When Dyer wrote to the Commission, he described the precise size of a church (Ackroyd 1993:45); parts of his temples: foundation (Ackroyd 1993:10), walls (Ackroyd 1993:105, 185), ceiling (Ackroyd 1993:185), roof (Ackroyd 1993:9, 185), portico, gallery, (Ackroyd 1993:9), tower (Ackroyd 1993: 9, 185), steeple, columns (Ackroyd 1993:24), pillar (Ackroyd 1993:185), pilasters in the walls (Ackroyd 1993:9), sepulture sepulchre? (Ackroyd 1993:24); materials to be used: stone (Ackroyd 1993:105, 185), bricks (Ackroyd 1993:10, 91), mortar (Ackroyd 1993:91), lead (Ackroyd 1993:9).

Having all these details, the reader can construct in their mind a rich image of the material bodies of Dyer's churches.

The decay of Dyer's churches in the XX century is observed by Hawksmoor. He traced the overall shape and scrutinised the parts of the buildings. He saw the church of St Mary Woolnoth in decline:

*[...] a curved window, with pieces of glass as thick and dark as pebbles, and then above it three smaller square windows which gleamed in the autumn light. The bricks around them were **cracked and discoloured**, as if they had been licked by flame, and as Hawksmoor's gaze crept upward six **broken** pillars were transformed into two thick towers which seemed to him like the prongs of a fork which impaled the church to the earth.* (Ackroyd 1993:153).

The Church of Little St Hugh was not in a better condition:

*[...] the flagstones against the walls of the church were **cracked and pitted**. When he looked up at the front of Little St Hugh he saw how its large stones **were eroded** also [...]* (Ackroyd 1993:216).

So describing shapes, colours, fabric, and profiles of the churches, naming their parts, recounting the process of their building and representing the results of their decaying, Ackroyd evokes rich mental pictures of brick and mortar edifices.

The **symbolic meaning of** Dyer's **churches** cannot be missed by the reader because it is introduced in the very first lines of the novel, which are Dyer's instructions to his apprentice Walter (Ackroyd 1993:5), and is repeated and reinforced through almost every page. Dyer keeps talking to Walter about the great power of darkness and an architect's role in casting shadows (Ackroyd 1993:5, 7, 9, 87), he argues on the subject of supremacy of dark forces and weakness of reason with Christopher Wren (Ackroyd 1993:61, 145-147) and with parson Priddon (Ackroyd 1993: 134-136). Moreover, Dyer relates the story of his childhood significantly tinged by mystic experience and marked by learning to worship the Satan (Ackroyd 1993:19-21, 49, 51, 105). Hiding his true thoughts and intentions from the Commission, colleagues, and workers, Dyer reveals them to the *"Reader"* (Ackroyd 1993:9, 11, 45, 185).

Dyer intentionally built seven churches because this number represents *"the seven Planets in the lower Orbs of Heaven, the seven Circles of the Heavens, the seven Starres in Ursa Minor and the seven Starres in the Pleiades"* (Ackroyd 1993:186) as well as *"the seven **Demons**"* (Ackroyd 1993:186). Dyer expected those who have understanding to guess about the symbolic significance of this number (Ackroyd 1993: 186). He made the position of his seven churches symbolic too (Ackroyd 1993:186). In this context the decay of Dyer's churches in the XX century becomes symbolically meaningful.

5. (Re) Interpreting? London churches
Dyer succeeded in imparting the symbolic meaning of darkness to his London churches. Two centuries after they were built at least some people did interpret them in this way. For Mrs Hill, who lived near the church in Spitalfields, the church was the representation of the very darkness and dirtiness of the area (Ackroyd 1993: 34). Hawksmoor went further and guessed about the macabre meaning of the churches' pattern (Ackroyd 1993:214).

But what was the question of **interpretation** for the characters in the world of the

novel Hawksmoor, turned out to be the question of **reinterpretation** for the readers of the novel.

M.B.Doyle equates Hawksmoor's (a real architect's) and Dyer's (a fictional one's) churches and makes the conclusion that Ackroyd reinterpreted the real London churches as symbols of dark mysticism: "Hawksmoor's churches are symbolical of the revival of London after the Great Fire, as well as London as a spiritual and religious centre, but Ackroyd here inverts the symbol of the church from one of spiritual comfort and religious faith to one of death and occultism; it is a menacing and threatening, rather than grand, monument of the past. Hawksmoor's (Dyer's) churches [...] are turned into symbols of Ackroyd's own view of London as a dark and mysterious city" (Doyle 2002:31). J.-M. Ganteau obviously thinks in the same vein writing that in his novel *Hawksmoor* Ackroyd excites "a sensation of mystery and wonder" (Ganteau 2002:27).

It looks plausible to conclude that the London churches are described by Ackroyd as embodiments of mystic knowledge, which is represented in the novel as their true meaning in contrast to the usually and wrongly ascribed symbolic meaning of Christian teaching. There seem to be a good support for such an interpretation of the text and reinterpretation of the meaning of some London churches. After the text of the novel in the *Acknowledgments* Ackroyd expressed his obligation to the poem "Lud Heat" by Iain Sinclair for drawing his attention to the strange character of the London churches (Ackroyd 1993:218).

But in the interview to Lidia Vianu (Vianu 2007:59) Ackroyd made everything more complicated. Explaining why he had chosen to give the architect's name to the XX century detective, the writer said: "That was just a technical thing because I did not want the churches to be completely identified with the real churches, the Hawksmoor churches. I wanted to make it slightly more ambiguous in the novel. Of course, as it turned out, everyone had seen they were the same churches, so I missed the point in a way, but it was just a way of keeping the fictional plot slightly more ambivalent, slightly more mysterious. Yet, as it turned out, it didn't make any difference."

In this interview Ackroyd explicitly claims to have intentionally left a gap between the real Hawksmoor's churches built of stones and the fictional Dyer's churches created with the help of words. So the question about the real meaning of the London churches finds slightly different answers in different realities: almost absolutely certain in the world of the novel and more hesitant in the world outside the book. What can be definitely claimed is that the London churches viewed as symbols presuppose never ending (re)interpretations.

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Փիթր Ակրոյդի առեղծվածային եկեղեցիները. եկեղեցիների պատկերների մեկնաբանությունը «Հոքսմուր» վեպում

Մարդկանց համար խորհրդանշական իմաստ ունեցող իրողություններից շար-քում եկեղեցիներն, անշուշտ, կարևոր տեղ են զբաղեցնում: Հոդվածում ներ-կայացվում է եկեղեցիների պատկերների մեկնաբանությունը Փիթր Ակրոյդի «Հոքսմուր» վեպում` նպատակ ունենալով պարզել, թե ինչպես են այդ պատ-կերները ստեղծվում և թե ինչ խորհուրդ ունեն դրանք: Փիթր Ակրոյդի սույն վե-պում Լոնդոնի եկեղեցիները նկարագրվում են որպես միստիկ գիտելիքի մարմնավորում: