

The Day of the Living Dead

Coming from someone who has written novels as artful as *Hawksmoor* and *Chatterton*, not to mention a well-received biography of T. S. Eliot, Peter Ackroyd's latest novel, *First Light*, is unfathomably bad. So bad it verges on being a pleasure to read. (Though now I've said it, I foresee a copywriter claiming: "A pleasure to read!"—*The Washington Post*.) There can be a kind of inverse genius to certain bad writing, so that the reader is always discovering some new godawfulness to cringe at. Such genius is most common in poetry; the work of the Scottish bard William McGonaghal is the supreme example, though Julia Moore, the Sweet Singer of Michigan, runs him a close second. Sometimes a memoir can do it, like *The Big Love*, Florence Aadland's systemically gauche account of her teenage daughter's affair with Errol Flynn.

But rarely is a bad novel entertainingly bad for more than a few chapters. To be bad on a grand scale one must aim high, and the premise of *First Light* is nothing less than Miltonic in its sweep, encompassing the farthest reaches of the starry heavens and the lives of English country folk. Millennia ago, just as tabloid readers have suspected, alien beings came to earth to build Stonehenge and other rough-hewn astronomical devices. Now in Dorset's Pilgrim Valley a forest fire has revealed the shape of a large burial tumulus, and archaeologists begin to excavate, uncovering an underground labyrinth. Countless chapters later, it is found to contain a coffin, which after some further flummery is opened to reveal a being who is a cross between Dreyer's Nosferatu and an undead Blakean archetype. In its withered face can be descried "the faces of all those who had come before him. And the faces of all those he [Joey, an elderly music-hall comedian who has been initiated into these ancient mysteries by wise old Farmer Mint] has known. . . . Joey is crying, his tears falling upon the ancient human form."

The ancient human form is then incinerated, and in the smoke of the pyre all the living characters in the novel see all the dead ones and they realize that "no one is ever dead, and at this moment of communion a deep sigh arose from the earth and travelled upward to the stars." The

ancient human form returns to Aldebaran whence he had come, after which follows the musings of Damian Fell, an astronomer driven mad by his terrible wisdom: “Why is it that we think of a circular motion as the most perfect? Is it because it has no beginning and no end?”

Though this strikes me as an essentially dumb idea, even dumber ideas have produced commercially viable hack novels, but Ackroyd’s execution, sentence by sentence, is what is truly McGonaghaesque. The characters have a genius for unwitting verbal pratfalls and marking time in ways that seem self-referential to the book’s longueurs, as when the archaeologist hero, after perusing an article in a scholarly journal (which is written in a style suited to the needs of the reading-impaired), “walked through into his study, a small room at the back of the flat which overlooked the yard of the antiques shop beneath them. And when he saw Jude asleep on the floor, its paws tucked in and its back slightly arched, it occurred to him that this was the way that dogs had always slept; even at that time when the great stone monuments were being erected. As soon as he entered the room the animal sprang into wakefulness and, yawning, jumped onto its hind-legs and leaned its paws against Mark. ‘Good boy,’ he said. ‘There’s a good boy.’ And the dog barked in return.”

Mark is constantly bumbling about through the scenery of the novel, having insights equally momentous, and then reviewing them at length. Chapter 4 exactly reprises the landscapes described in chapters 2 and 3. In chapter 6 the spinster heroine, Evangeline Tupper, visits her father and has tea with him, and the narrative thrust of the scene is that Evangeline and Mr. Tupper have nothing to say to each other. For chapter after chapter nothing happens but what we’ve been told will happen: the tumulus is excavated with meticulous patience.

Sounds boring? Well, so in synopsis might many novels of Thomas Hardy (to whom Ackroyd makes constant, self-aggrandizing reference). Perhaps Ackroyd intends his dull plot to be foil for other brilliances. Such as witty dialogue, like this:

The telephone was ringing as they returned to their room in the Blue Dog, and Evangeline rushed to answer it. “It’s me,” she shouted. “Miss Tupper!”

“Is it really? It sounded like Winston Churchill.” Augustine Fraicheur, enjoying a pre-lunch drink, was in playful mood. “Voices can be so deceptive, can’t they?”

“Along with everything else.”

He smiled at his gin. “Any news?” Augustine accentuated the last word, as if he were anticipating something very shocking indeed.

“Actually,” she replied, automatically delving into her handbag for another Woodbine, “I have the most fabulous piece of gossip.” She paused to light it. “But I don’t know if I should tell you.”

“Torturer!” He screamed with pleasure.

“Honestly. You’ll have to wait.”

“I can’t bear it.”

“But I promise that you’ll be among the first to know.”

“I think I’m beginning to go mad.”

I quote at such length because a briefer snippet could not convey the unrelenting and self-referential awfulness of the text. (“I can’t bear it,” indeed!) The book is peppered with enough such knowing winks that I am persuaded that Peter Ackroyd set out deliberately to produce a novel of exactly the thundering awfulness he’s achieved.

Why he would want to do such a thing I can’t imagine. Perhaps, having read a number of the more numbskulled sorts of novels that crowd the bestseller lists, he thought to out-Cartland Cartland. But *First Light* lacks the essential ingredients of a lowbrow romantic adventure—sincerity and libidinal energy. Perhaps, more perversely, Ackroyd has written a dreadful book for the sake of dreadfulness, challenged by the form as a poet might be by the form of the villanelle. If so, he has achieved his aim. *First Light* deserves a special niche among the curiosities of literature: it may well be the worst novel ever written by a novelist of certifiable distinction.