

“OOOO that Eliot-Joycean Rag¹”: A Fantasia² upon Reading *English Music*

SUSAN ANG

Fathers, Sons and Vegetation Myth

In “The Relics of Learning,” his review of Peter Ackroyd’s *English Music*, James Buchan institutes a comparison between Ackroyd and a hypothetical postmodernist architect, who, asked to build a tool shed, would encrust it in “ornamental detail of unusual colour, unsuitable material and hallucinatory style, littered with self-consciously witty references to hammers or screwdrivers, and with no way in” (24). The last, at any rate, is unfair. Opening in 1992, the year of its own publication, the action of the novel is swiftly returned to the childhood of its narrator Timothy Harcombe “seventy years before” (1); this unobtrusive detail is the first of many pointers to a literary relationship which shapes an approach to the novel, and might indeed be argued to offer a way in. I refer to that relationship which lies between *English Music* and *The Waste Land*, this landmark in modern literature, published in 1922.³

This essay attempts a reading of *English Music* as a work whose enquiry into the nature and interpretation of texts, their relationships with author, reader, and other texts, and whose contemplations upon the state of art and culture draw on the Grail legend and Frazerian vegetation myths which underpin *The Waste Land*. *English Music* is, however, also a work about process and change, and within such a work, all structures, all frames, must exist in a state of perpetual jeopardy, always confronting their own provisionality, their own death. Part of this reading thus involves understanding *English Music* not as a static, but as a consciously and intentionally dynamic work, the text

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realised in negotiation with the reader, who is himself continuously being made and remade in his interaction with the text, which therefore must also be always in the process of becoming, and being differently understood. There are no termini. One never arrives; one is always arriving. Provisionality is thus the rubric which governs any act of reading or interpretation, and this reading begins with such an acknowledgement.

Eliot's *Waste Land* requires minimal introduction. Written in the aftermath of the First World War, a period in which "the older generation had lost its authority, and the younger had not found any way forward,"⁴ it is, in part, an elegy for that which has departed, a depiction of enervation and hollowness within contemporary society, and an attempt at cultural salvage. The wasteland manifests itself in terms of "spiritual bankruptcy" and "deracinated ardour"⁵; these, and the sense of cultural and social fatigue, are echoed in *English Music*, where the wasteland is signified both in the literal world inhabited by the Harcombes, and in the literary/artistic world which Timothy accesses in the dream sequences punctuating the novel. Timothy describes the time as a "period of privation and mournfulness" (8) and the lives of people as monotonous and anxious. The novel is peopled by the ill and handicapped, the lonely, the marginalised and dysfunctional of society, the sessions at the Chemical Theatre being attended by the ill and those whom death has, metaphorically, undone. Stanley Clay has a twitching mouth, Margaret Collins is a dwarf, Timothy's maternal grandmother shakes continuously, and his schoolfriend Edward is crippled. Margaret's house, "The Island," alludes to the isolation which Arnold saw as typifying the human condition, and which many of the novel's characters are held within.

More pointedly, the spaces within the dream sequences in which Timothy encounters authors, painters, composers, and characters from the books he reads, also show subtle signs of ravagement. In the first of these, the conflation of Lewis Carroll and Bunyan produces no cross between Wonderland and the Celestial City. Instead, there are continuous, if subtle, signs of the wasteland: plains, dark woods, the

Slough of Despond, the City of Destruction, the Valley of the Shadow of Death with its dried stream. The Dickens dreamscape opens in a ruined garden and moves through “ruined and desolate” places (80) with marshes, dark and polluted rivers; elsewhere, Timothy walks through “a true waste land of woe” (303), “The Wilderness” (305), grim Hogarthian London, and various other manifestations of the waste land too numerous to cite in entirety.

What this might suggest is that the wellspring of English art/culture may have run, or be running, dry; that English art is fatigued, sterile, waste, and in need of restoration. Gibson and Wolfreys have suggested that *English Music*, is, in part, a “performative critique of crisis, not in English culture *per se* [...] so much as in its reception, transmission, and dissemination” (139); their reading in part examines *English Music* as a critique of the “institutionalisation of English studies within a ‘national guise’” (142) and the Leavisite ‘Great Tradition.’⁶ This is interesting and certainly germane to the argument pursued here; the literary ‘wasteland’ with which *English Music* is concerned may however be argued to be more widespread than this, also designating the domain of modern (English) literature, or art, and possibly the space of (critical) reading itself. It may be used, variously, as a metaphor for culture, this text—any text—and even for the reader.

English Music, however, does more than merely critique the perceived crisis in English art. It also discusses the possibilities of restoration and the forms such restoration might take. In the pattern of two particular relationships within the novel, each illuminating the other, may be discerned the shape of certain vegetation myths to which *The Waste Land* is indebted. These myths posit the health and fertility of the land as linked to that of the king, who, in certain cultures, was ritually killed either after a fixed term or if/when he grew old or ill, a new king then raised to his place in an act of symbolic renewal. These patterns of displacement and the transference of power, necessary death and consequent restoration are worked out within two relationships: that between Timothy Harcombe and his father, Clement, and

that which lies between *English Music* and the infinitude of works forming part of its intertextual webbing.

In considering both relationships, the terms 'oedipal' or 'anxiety of influence' spring to mind. The myth of Oedipus, who kills his father and marries his mother, has become a convenient emblem of that love-hate relationship between child and parent. It is a fact generally glossed over or forgotten, that while Oedipus is the agent of his own blinding, it is his parents who first damage him, driving spikes through his feet and laming him. The antagonism runs both ways. Harold Bloom, speaking of the way in which writers attempt to find space for themselves, says that "[t]o live, the poet must *misinterpret* the father, by the crucial act of misprision, which is the re-writing of the father" (19). The tensions (between affection for the old and an impatience for the new, between affiliation and antagonism) common to both models are present in the text, although what *English Music* has to say about inheritance and cultural/artistic health has a greater complexity than either model might be able to do justice to.

From the opening sequences these various tensions are subtly brought into play. The "Chemical Theatre," where Clement Harcombe (spiritualist, healer and magician) and his son Timothy bring "the spirits of your past [...] in dumb show before you" (2), "was supposed to be have been built on the site of a Dissenters' chapel which had been destroyed during the East End riots of 1887" (2), the chapel then rebuilt as a community hall which has become a hall of "miscellaneous purposes." At one level, this suggests the dissolution and adulteration of purpose and direction, authority and form. The image of buildings destroyed, and others erected upon the site of their demise, however, also invokes that pattern of the (necessary) death of the old king and the rise of the new found in the vegetation myths, this complex of meanings also present in "palimpsest," the "new" word Timothy is given by Clement, who reminds him that there are plenty of new words and that one should not use up the old.

In the relationship of Timothy and Clement Harcombe the issues of influence and power are repeatedly sounded. During the dialogue in

which “palimpsest” is first mentioned, Clement Harcombe tells his son, that instead of calling him “dad,” he should

“[...] learn to call me father. It has more of a ring to it.”

“Yes, father. More of a ring to it.” I knew this was a habit he detested—my repeating what he had just said. But I could not help it [...] I could *not* help it and I said again. “A ring to it.” (12)

Timothy’s inability to avoid repeating his father’s words, and then only to reproduce them as fragments (echoes only partially recording what they echo) underscores the point about influence. Timothy, in a conversation with the Red Queen about echoes in the first dream sequence, wishes that his “dad were [t]here,” only to be told “I shouldn’t say dead if I were you. I should say farther” (29). This echoes the earlier injunction to use “father” in place of “dad,” while also distorting the original sentence, rewriting it. If “father” is seen to represent an authority which ‘dead-ends’ aspiration, development or movement, the echo—as distortion rather than mere repetition—translates as defiance of that authority and thus opens a way forward—as the mutation of “father” into “farther” suggests. The echo is both the tributary and the assassin of the original.

These patterns emblemise the larger textual relationships in *English Music*, and here, the question of ‘quotation,’ through which those larger relationships between text and text are often signified, might usefully be introduced. With *The Waste Land* in mind, it is tempting to sum up *English Music*’s citation of earlier works as a mere shoring up of fragments against ruin. Yet, to understand the function of both *English Music* and *The Waste Land* in relation to the works gathered within them as being merely elegiac oversimplifies the matter. For while the quote may serve as metonymy (and hence, economy), the part invoking the whole, it may have other—perhaps less generous—agendas. As guest within another work, a quote may be used to enhance and sharpen meaning, elucidating the work which hosts it—this is, for instance, frequently the case with epigraphs. That which is quoted might, however, conversely, be subverted and reconditioned by its new context. The tension inherent in the relationship between

citing and cited is pointed out by Plett, who writes, "A quotation is always embedded in two contexts [...]. As these contexts are *per definitionem* non-identical, every quotation means a conflict between the quotation and its new context" (11). As part of the fabric of another work, the quote has in any case been reinvented, endowing it with fresh life. At the same time, the act of quotation in effect fractures the original text as the quote is broken off from it, and may be regarded as challenging the authority of the original. A fragment may stand for, but is *not*, the whole; has less authority than the whole; and the failure of authority is both occasion for elegy and celebration. The ambiguities inherent in citation emerge in Clement's attempt to recite:

"When April with his showers sweet—" He stopped, unable to remember the next words. "Etcetera. Etcetera. Etcetera. Then do folk long to go on pilgrimages. That's what we are, Timmy. Pilgrims." (15)

The choice of work, of course, flaunts its point. Simultaneously invoking *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Waste Land's* transmuted, painful, 'quotation' of *The Canterbury Tales*, the recitation also recalls, through the device of the 'forgotten' lines ("the droghte of March has perced to the roote/And bathed every veyne in swich licour/Of which vertu engendered is the flour"), the wasteland from which, metaphorically speaking, that "licour" is conspicuously absent. Yet, while the quote gestures gracefully towards literary forebears, it may also function as a space-maker, as its truncation, its rendering into modern English, and the interpolation of the place-holding 'etceteras,' serves to point out.

English Music, however, does not unequivocally celebrate the triumph of the new. While the novel is shot through with the constant reminder of the necessity and inevitability of change, and although death and replacement are understood in the Frazerian vegetation myths as a function of continued fertility, the force and influence of the earlier works which shape the text are neither belittled nor negated: the spirits of the past do not just parade in "dumb show" before us. This is repeatedly stressed and given concreteness both in little

ways and large. Stanley Clay is told to give thanks for his cure to his (dead) father. "Palimpsest," that "new" word, is doubly freighted, a site simultaneously inhabited by both old and new. Defined as a "parchment or other [...] surface [...] in which later writing has been superimposed on earlier (effaced) writing" and something "still retaining traces of its earlier form" (*OED*), the palimpsest is thus both predicated upon the continuance of the old as well as its erasure. The dream encounters between Timothy and literary characters, symbolising the interaction of *English Music* with its literary ancestors, while rewriting those works/authors, also acknowledge continuity and heritage. Alice and Christian, conscripted into *English Music*, also find themselves *rescripted*: Alice falls into the Slough of Despond, Christian into the Pool of Tears. Belonging to different traditions in English literature, "the didactic and the moral, the subversive and the carnivalesque," to quote Gibson and Wolfreys (142), they are here symbolically immersed within each other's frames of reference, renewed and also reinvented. However, the chosen form of *English Music*, with its dream sequences, also places it within the 'tradition' or 'line' of works framed as dreams, a tradition stretching back to medieval texts (e.g. *Pearl*, *Piers Plowman*) and which significantly includes both *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

That acknowledgement of affiliation is significant, for in the end it might be argued that the novel shows true power as residing neither wholly in the parent nor the child, but in their relationship, the whole greater than the sum of its parts. This emerges in the shifting power dynamics between father and son. During the healing session-cum-seances in which both Harcombes are involved, the question of who it is in fact that the 'power' belongs to is at first ambiguously presented. Timothy appears to believe that it is his father who has it, while the reader is led to suspect that it is Timothy himself who is the vehicle of the power, and that Clement is a charlatan and fraud. Clement's theatricality casts doubt on the genuineness of his power, and the way he clutches and leans on Timothy suggests the predator, the father feeding off the powers of the son and passing these off as his own. As

Clement later says, “[...] it was never really me. It was you. You had the power” (345). This, however, is not the total truth either, for when Timothy is later stricken with a fever, Clement heals him. His father’s fingers pressed against his temples, Timothy feels “the passage of something which set up a breeze or a vibration”; it seems to him that “some form of heat passe[s] out of him and enters into [his] father’s body,” and he “remember[s] thinking, Yes, you have the power after all” (366). The moment of healing, marked by the recognition that power resides in the father as well as the son, is also a moment in which sweat is seen to be running down Clement’s face, the heat and dryness of the wasteland broken as the waters return. And Timothy later ponders over whether it is their “combined presence which created the appropriate conditions” and whether, in fact, the power “belonged to neither of us separately, but resided in the very fact of inheritance itself” (378).

In the closing chapters, Clement heals Timothy’s crippled friend, Edward Campion, losing his own life in the process. A vision follows whose commencement is marked by the falling of a volume of Malory from a shelf, the falling book a trope which has run through the novel, and a part of whose significance—had it been unclear before—now appears to emerge through its juxtaposition with Clement’s own collapse. It would appear that we are seeing the working out of the mythic imperative embedded in the vegetation myths: that health can only return to the wasteland through the death of the old king or father, or text: the old order must change, yielding place to new, lest one good custom should corrupt the world.

This essay began, however, with a caveat about the provisionality of structures in a work like *English Music*, and it is time to resurrect that proviso. As the parent is present but not replicated in the child, so *The Waste Land* and the myths which inform *English Music* are shown present but in modified form. Timothy’s final vision begins with Merlin telling the Maimed King that “[y]our fate is greater than yourself, and truly if you die for your son you shall get great praise and soul health, and worship to your lineage” (385). But what follows, as

the dying King's barge moves away from land, departs from the established mythic pattern:

Then following upon these things there was such wretchedness and darkness in the land that in truth fathers knew not their sons, and the sons knew not their fathers: for it is said that on the death of a great king the son shall not love the father and the father shall not love the son, but every man shall bear his own burden. And so there befell a great pestilence, and great harm to the realm; there increased neither corn, nor grass, nor fruit, nor in the water was found no fish and in the air was heard no music. Therefore men call it the Waste Land, because of that dolorous stroke. (386)

The logic of the description here suggests that the wasteland, rather than ending with the death of the king, is also a *consequence* of the death of the king—the “dolorous stroke” that separates father and son—as well as on another level being the emblem of the emotion born of that sundering. If so, then, what *English Music* is saying through its representation of the relationship between parents and children (literal/figural/textual), and about the way in which the dynamics of that relationship impinge upon the state of the “land” (however interpreted), has a far greater complexity than the mythic model is able to take account of.

English Music may in fact be suggesting that it is the tension between affiliation and antagonism *itself* which is necessary to artistic and cultural vitality. To work only under the shadow of the past and reproduce its works is to condemn oneself to stagnation; to cut oneself off from the heritage of the past altogether is to do a harm no less great, for, as Ackroyd's own epigraph, taken from Reynolds's *Discourses*, reminds us, “[i]nvention, strictly speaking, is little more than a new combination of those images which have been previously gathered and deposited in the memory: nothing can come of nothing.”

What has thus far been noted: the way in which a text's rewriting of another text both honours and abolishes, defines itself as well as (re)defines that other text, may perhaps be summed up in the words of another work which has shaped *English Music*. Certain of the arguments which *English Music* makes use of originate in “Tradition and the Individual Talent”:

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism. The necessity that he shall conform, that he shall cohere, is not one-sided; what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. [...] Whoever has approved this idea of order, of the form of European, of English literature, will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.⁷

In this way, works within *English Music* are seen to be engaged in a relationship which is mutually defining, and as Susana Onega observes, Ackroyd's concept of 'English music' rests on the conviction that "the power to transcend the limitations of this fallen world does not lie in the individual, but [...] is rather a question of transhistorical connectedness" (107).

It is impossible to consider all this without asking what the implications are with regard to how *English Music* sees and positions itself in relation to the body of works informing it. It may be that part of the answer is to be found in the conclusions to which the novel comes, and which have been hazarded above. Its relation to *The Waste Land* is fraught with all the complexities of the parent-child relation already spoken of. But where *The Waste Land*, as evident in its closing reference to de Nerval's "El Desdichado," sees itself as disinherited, *English Music* returns to lay claim to its own.

Quests, Questions, and Looking-glasses: Authors, Readers, and the Construction of the 'Fertile' Text

In the earlier part of this essay the role of vegetation myth, as used by Eliot and adapted by Ackroyd, in shaping the understanding and presentation of cultural inheritance, was examined. Both works, however, are also informed by the Grail legend, a brief summary of which

may be useful. In its variant forms, the Grail legend depicts a quest to restore fruitfulness to the wasteland whose desolation is in some manner connected to the sickness or disability of its ruler, in some versions known as the Fisher King, in others as the Maimed King. The quester, coming to the Chapel Perilous, has to enquire as to the meaning of the things shown to him there: the Grail and the Lance, and if he does so, the land will be restored, and the waters freed.⁸

Kenner, speaking of the Grail legend, writes:

The quester arrived at the Chapel Perilous had only to ask the meaning of the things that were shown him. Until he has asked their meaning, they have none; after he has asked, the king's wound is healed and the waters commence again to flow. So in a civilization reduced to a "heap of broken images" all that is requisite is sufficient curiosity; the man who asks what one or another of these fragments means—seeking, for instance, "a first-hand opinion about Shakespeare"—may be the agent of regeneration. (147)

What Kenner is suggesting is that the act of inquiry is important because it signifies the existence of the emotional and intellectual commitment necessary to any act of reconstruction (and (re)constructive reading). But Kenner is also saying something more complex: his words suggest that the act of inquiry in fact is that which *creates* meaning or is invested with it, and this in turn suggests that the text itself may be a wasteland which can only spring to full, rich life under certain conditions. A text goes through several stages of concretisation, first in the mind of its creator, then in its writing and printing which give it a materiality, and then finally, as it is read and reconstituted in act of reading, where it may either be enriched—by meanings brought to it by the reader which authorial intention had not originally endowed it with, or sometimes impoverished, as when a reader is unable, or unequipped, for whatever reason, to access its riches. To use a different metaphor: it may be energised and given more complex existence, or may be condemned to a largely dormant half-life, depending on the reader and the intensity/complexity of reading activity going on. The attitude of enquiry is in itself valuable, but the *act* of enquiry, as presented by Kenner, is in fact seen to be

crucial to meaning-making: and therefore to 'inquire' is to allow the wasteland (the as-yet-unmeaning text) to bear fruit.

The reader of *English Music* thus discovers himself to have been thrust into the role of quester with *English Music* as the Chapel Perilous. (And it is very perilous. It is full of traps-for-heffalumps.) With Timothy, the figure of the reader in the text, the reader of *English Music* must ask about the meaning of what he sees. In Timothy's final vision, grail and lance have been replaced by the book, and he asks, "What is this book before me?" (391), which is the same question as that which confronts the reader. In considering this apparently transparent question and its implications, a whole philosophy of reading is involved. That the reader enquires into, rather than assumes or imposes, meaning, is both courteous and modest as well as a renunciation of authority over textual meaning. Or if the question is differently inflected so as to land emphasis on *this*, it may suggest the recognition that inasmuch as books (and readers) exist in/as communities, all books are also individual and different. Therefore, perhaps, they need to be understood on their own terms, rather than subjected to identical regimes of reading and interpretation, put through the spaghetti machine of a particular theory.

What needs to be ascertained, then, is what *English Music* might be saying about questioning and interpretation, and the roles of reader, author and text in the fostering of fertility within the domain of literature or art. In order to begin considering these things, one may perhaps not do better than—as *English Music* is constantly suggesting—"go back to the beginning," in this case to that oft-mentioned first dream sequence. Timothy, who is faced with the book-as-grail whose meaning he must search after and enquire into, is, in the first vision, carrying one—the book which Christian has earlier dropped. Being asked to look his name up in the book, he finds that he cannot read it, only to be told:

"Of course you can't read it. It's a looking-glass book. You're only meant to hold it and *look* as if you've read it. That is the meaning of criticism." (31)

It is at this point that the trope of the 'book' begins to generate meaning. The grail (which in *English Music* is the book), as Jessie Weston says, has a correspondence with the cauldron of the Dagda, the cauldron of plenty, which no-one ever left, unsatisfied (73), and the evidence of just such an inexhaustible semantic wealth is displayed in the "looking-glass book," that brilliantly polysemous image.

The image conjures up notions of reversal, texts which cannot be read or understood in the usual way but which can be read with the aid of mirrors (other texts?) or backwards. We think, too, of seeing/reading through a glass darkly, a metaphor which self-reflexively comments on the reader's problematic engagement with textual meaning, but which seems to promise the eventuality of understanding, a coming face to face with the text. We might also ask if textual opacity is in fact there to induce 'reflectiveness' in the reader by encouraging active thought in place of passive and facile reading. The text, as a metafiction, is both reflective and self-reflexive, reflecting on its own writing, the role of the author, the process of reading, the validity of interpretive practices.

The mirror, or "looking-glass book," may render visible the invisible: things which could not otherwise be seen (e.g. our own faces, the back of our heads) may be viewed with its aid; one of the ways in which this metaphor might perhaps translate is as a rendering visible of our own hitherto invisible assumptions or blind spots about reading or anything else. (Only the vampire casts no reflection.) Of course, all this discussion of mirrors also reminds us of illusionists, of magicians, of which fraternity Clement Harcombe is one. They, too, do it with mirrors ...

What the preceding paragraphs demonstrate is the way in which *English Music*, that prototypical looking-glass book, enacts what happens when the reader-as-quester asks questions. Asking about the meaning of the (looking-glass) grail-book enables the grail-book to answer, to fulfil its function, to become the agent of restoration, the cauldron of plenty—it has been enabled to begin its process of signification.

Earlier, it was mentioned that one of the aspects of a “looking-glass book” might be its resistance to conventional reading practices. Gibson and Wolfreys repeatedly issue caveats against ‘conventional’ readings, ‘conventional’ interpretations, warning the would-be reader/critic of Ackroyd that in his work,

[figures] appear to take on a structural regularity, even while that regularity is itself irregular, and are recurrent enough to suggest a pattern of reiteration across the textual surface. It is precisely this recurrence, this frequency and reiteration, which the critic conventionally wrestles into a pattern of similarity, declaring it a theme, erasing and marginalizing the differences of context, the differences of use, the difference from one example to another, and the difference between texts. Ackroyd plays with the critical reception of his work ahead of that reception by tracing through his texts, in a manner which is simultaneously continuous and discontinuous, figures that provide the possibility for reading conventionally [...]. Ackroyd’s writing should be read without giving in to the wholly understandable and conventional temptation of trying to discern a route out of the maze so as to come away from the act of reading with certain ‘general’ meanings for Ackroyd’s work [...]. (13)⁹

The larger point is a good one, even if it is not altogether clear what the ‘general’ meanings are which one must at all cost avoid coming away with. The text which resists ‘conventional’ reading and thus forces the reader to alter or at least review his assumptions about the way in which texts work, and to change his reading habits, works against stagnation and revitalises the practice of reading itself. The Harcombes, living in Hackney Square, occasionally attempt to “get lost” (13), and to approach it from a different direction to the usual one; and as Timothy notes, “Yet this was the curious thing: whenever we approached Hackney Square from a new direction, or from an unknown congeries of streets, the appearance of the square itself seemed to be subtly altered” (15). This can work (as it is doubtless intended that it should) at the level of metafictional/metacritical comment: the author, reader or critic, approaching the familiar, the hackneyed, if he varies the approach—if he can deliberately “get lost” and forget the time-honoured, ‘conventional’ approaches—may happen upon new things, new meanings.

The repeated injunction to ‘begin at the beginning’ running through *English Music* might in fact be understood as an attempt to institute the same kind of renovation, not only because this suggests a pattern of reading which departs from the linearity of ‘conventional’ reading, offering in its place a circular, or looping, path, but also because the reader who begins a work again is a different person from the one who first read it. As Byrd says in the novel: “[...] a song that is well and artificially made cannot be well perceived or understood at the first hearing, no more than a book at its first reading, but the oftener you shall hear it the better cause of liking it you will discover” (220). Consider this in tandem with Iser’s *The Implied Reader*:

[T]he reading process always involves viewing the text through a perspective that is continually on the move, linking up the different phases, and so constructing what we have called the virtual dimension [...]. However, when we have finished the text, and read it again, clearly our extra knowledge will result in a different time sequence; we shall tend to establish connections by referring to our awareness of what is to come, and so certain aspects of the text will assume a significance we did not attach to them on a first reading, while others will recede into the background. It is a common enough experience for a person to say that on a second reading he noticed things he had missed when he read the book for the first time, but this is scarcely surprising in view of the fact that the second time he is looking at the text from a different perspective. [...] This is not to say that the second reading is ‘truer’ than the first—they are, quite simply, different [...]. *Thus even on repeated viewings a text allows and, indeed, induces innovative reading.* (280-81; italics mine)

To always ‘begin again’ is thus to keep enriching both reader and text.

English Music also resists ‘conventional,’ and encourages innovative, reading in other ways; one instance of this involves the substitution of pictures for the more standard form of chapter epigraph. These, although non-verbal in nature, are also ‘readable’ (albeit not ‘conventionally’) in ways which spark off new concatenations of meaning. The facsimile of the title page “An Essay concerning Humane Understanding” (118) for instance, while not specifically naming its author, Locke, may be found to resonate at many levels: for example with

Austin Smallwood, the *Sherlock Holmes* figure in the dream sequence which follows, the resonance foregrounding questions regarding the heritage of rationalism, etc. But *Locke* also resonates with other elements, for example the prominent trope of the key which is left everywhere—perhaps a little *too* conveniently—for the reader to find.

The point made by Gibson and Wolfreys regarding the way in which Ackroyd's recurring figures invite the reader to thematise or make glib connections may be reiterated here; this is one of the traps-for-heffalumps referred to earlier. From the first key which Clement Harcombe returns to the caretaker, portentously announcing, "The key" (12); to the key which the Mad Hatter takes from his bookcase (44) to get them into the garden; to the 'key' to the mystery desired by Smallwood (124); to the 'key' conversation in which Byrd asks, "What is a key" and is told

"A key is a thing, sir, composed of a letter and a voice. And, like as a key opens a door, so does the key open the song."

"How many keys are there?"

"Keys are twenty-two in number, and are comprehended in a three-fold order [...]" (214-15);

to Byrd's observation that there are musicians who make "no account of keeping their key" (219); to Hogarth's enquiry to Timothy as to whether he yet has the key (256), and so on, the reader is invited to interpret, to make Something Of It All. J. Hillis Miller, in *Fiction and Repetition*, has said that "[...] what is said two or more times may not be true, but the reader is fairly safe in assuming that it is significant" (2). The insistence of the tropes indeed suggests a commensurate significance, the particular form of the trope in this case encouraging that belief—keys are, after all, traditional metaphors for ways into things, or aids to deciphering. (The key, however, may also become a tool which, instead of opening doors, ends by locking them: "we think of the key, each in his prison/Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison.") In the brand of self-conscious, late Modernist, fiction to which *English Music* belongs, the significance of the iterated trope might well lie in its refusal to signify.¹⁰

Returning, however, to the contemplation of keys and locks: the naive reader, made a gift of such a tempting trope, is unlikely to resist it. If the reader searches *English Music*, with sudden suspicion, for complying locks to convenient keys, one finds Locke and Sherlock blandly presenting themselves. The detective Austin Smallwood says to Timothy in his vision, “[...] he [the author] has shown too much of his hand in every sense” (132), and we might say the same of Ackroyd. Smallwood feels the ‘shown hand’ to have given them the advantage of surprise. However, just as Timothy says his father always manages to anticipate him, so the author might well be anticipating the reader, and the apparently inadvertant display of hand could well be a feint, a display to distract the reader while the real sleight is carried out by the other hand. As already pointed out, this is also a novel about magicians and illusionists.

The oiled slickness with which key is found to slip into complying lock(e) leads one to wonder what exactly it is which lies behind the door. (In fables of the forbidden, setting key to prohibited lock might either disclose bloody chambers or the contents of Pandora’s box.) Iser, discussing the blatant nature of pop art, says something which might be useful to consider here: “[...] what pop art does is to confirm what the interpreter seeks in art, only to confirm it so prematurely that the observer is left with nothing to do if he insists on clinging to his conventional norms of interpretations.”¹¹ The flaunted tropes may be doing precisely this, and their over-obviousness (once one has considered the matter) leads one to ask if that blatancy may not be meant to signal the fruitlessness of pursuing such connections, and perhaps even of the kind of critical practice that caused one to read those connections as significant in the first place. This is more questionable, however, in the sense that in order to see *beyond* those connections, one had to arrive at them first.¹²

At the very least, the reader is being asked to consider the implications of such a pursuit, and the usefulness of the connections themselves, more attentively and sceptically—after all, the key belongs to the caretaker—or ‘care-taker.’ As Byrd says, “Does an author signify

his meaning for the idle or incurious? No, but it is stored up in time for those who approach it with care and patience" (221). I will return to keys and locks a little later in this essay, but the issues of critical approach and the validity of interpretation have been, however implicitly, touched upon, and it may be as well to clarify in some degree my stance on these things.

In suggesting that the reader may need to desist from pursuing interpretive connections, I am not making the same point as John Peck, whose article on Ackroyd speaks of the pursuit of connections as that which attempts to "pin [...] down" the text,¹³ the implication being that one should desist from doing so. This would seem to beg all manner of questions, for instance whether all reading does not in some degree involve interpretation, and whether *all* interpretation does not finally, in some manner, 'pin down' a text. We also have to ask whether the assumptions which are implied are in themselves valid ones: that to attempt to 'pin down' a text is necessarily to limit the scope of its signifying activities, to impoverish it,¹⁴ or somehow to assault a text's inalienable right to liberty. Criticism which honours resistance within the text—as Peck's does, and as Gibson's and Wolfreys's does—will find only genuine respect coming from this quarter. Nonetheless, it is, I think, possible to make connections without necessarily being guilty either of insensitivity towards the text and its author, or of ignoring Strier's exhortation "to resist the final turn of the screw, the moment when resistance in the text is overcome rather than acknowledged" (4). "Damyata," after all, or 'control,' is part of "what the thunder says," and, as that which presages and promises rain, the thunder must surely be held to speak with some authority. The boat, responding to the hand expert with sail and oar, responds gaily. This does not, however, equate 'control' with 'dominance.' Kenner speaks of the sailor as one who survives by cooperating with a nature that cannot be forced, the hand that directs also needing to be a hand able to 'read,' with sensitivity, the pulsation of wind through the sheet (152). "Datta" and "dayadhvam," 'giving' and 'sympathising,' are co-regnant with "damyata."

I do not think, therefore, that *English Music* is suggesting that the only truly 'fertile' reading is that which eschews 'control' or desists from what Bloom terms "strong" reading (3). And while Gibson and Wolfreys might offer the view that "ludic performativity creates undecidability and, with it, the possibility of the text's regenerative affirmation" and that, "[r]esistant to being pinned down by the location of a single meaning, writing is the chance of continuation, of inheritance and survival" (69), I do not think that *English Music* necessarily suggests that maintaining the 'undecidability' of meaning is necessarily a *sine qua non* of that same regenerativeness, although maintaining plurality may be. The two may appear similar but are not in fact the same beast—as Empson pointed out, there are (at least) seven types of ambiguity. Maintaining plurality need not entail choice between meaning and excluding the others—it is possible to yoke multiple meanings without violence together and have them pull evenly in the same direction. Maintaining undecidability, however, results in the reader going nowhere.

We might perhaps refer the issue to *English Music*, whose titular concern with 'music' may perhaps lend the sequence involving Byrd—*Brittanicae Musicae parens*—a particular significance. (The paternal allusion problematizes, though, the exact degree of authority this is meant to accord Byrd, 'fathers,' as we have seen, in part being required to give place to their children.) The complexities of musical polyphony, of which Byrd's masses are asserted to be the finest achievements (195) and of which Byrd speaks at various points to his students, telling them in one instance that "the closer the parts, the better the harmony" (217), appear to beg consideration in conference with *The Waste Land's* doing of "the police in different voices" and even perhaps the Bakhtinian idea of 'polyphony' in the novel. Bakhtin's 'polyphony,' it should be pointed out, does not by definition necessarily connote conflict; he speaks of how they may stand alongside or "opposite one another," be "consonant but not merging" or "hopelessly contradictory," emerge "as an eternal harmony of unmerged voices or [in] their unceasing and irreconcilable quarrel" (92).

Thus, while the voices may indeed run counter to one another, the Bakhtinian concept of 'polyphony' can accommodate unmerging but harmonious strands of difference. Tudor polyphony likewise; there is room within its remit for discord and difference, even though these tend in the end to find harmonious resolution, and it may also be noted that while *English Music* is certainly a novel of many voices, many styles, those voices often find a common theme, polyphony then becoming homophony: "Must every part maintain that point where-with it did begin, not touching that of other parts? I think not" (219). The point of all this is that *English Music* might be argued, then, to endorse the idea of plurality, the elements of which may be able to find common cause.

Returning then to the matter of over-obvious tropes (I am keeping my key): while their prominence and frequent recurrence may beguile the reader into an initial belief in their ability to shed light on the mysteries of the text, it becomes clear that whatever significance they might have is either already on surface display, so deeply buried as to remain inaccessible, or utterly absent. The dream sequence with Austin Smallwood (the heir of Locke) serves to demonstrate this. Looking at the footprints on the ground, he notes that they have been made by a "child, a heavily built man in his twenties and a female dwarf" (122). Timothy, however, points out that he has already told Smallwood these things; there is no kudos in interpreting signs whose significance has already been made obvious. (At quite another level, while not necessarily debunking it altogether, this might also perhaps point to the limitations inherent in any Lockean rationalist-empiricist mode of understanding; as the form of *English Music* itself suggests, the visionary and imaginative¹⁵ mode is at least equal to—if not more equal than—the rational.) Or again, when Smallwood asks the cab driver whether he has been directed to his destination (there is no mystery here; we have been told he has), Smallwood claims to be "convinced that [he has] found the right locality" (125). Not only does this again point up the fatuousness of analysing the self-evident, but it may also be noted that in fact, the hall to which they were going, the "right

locality" to which they have been 'directed' (like the reader), is in fact not there. Or rather, it does not—yet—exist, only the ruins of an older building being present. It is unnecessary to belabour the multitude of points being made here.

But if we are indeed being shown tropes which are all surface, then that excess of surface may yet serve to deflect attention in more profitable directions; instead of contemplating them in themselves, we may consider what is being pointed out regarding their use. The final vision involving the Chapel Perilous, for instance, resolves itself with Timothy following the figure of his father, and finding "no gate nor door, but the hall was open. And at the last he found a chamber whereof the door was shut, and he beset his hand thereto to open it, but he might not" (392). The chamber door, however, then opens of itself. By analogy, the text may have halls without doors, where one may freely wander, and doors without locks, which cannot be forced and whose intransigence must be respected, although the text may then choose to open itself. The purpose of the key is to unlock doors; but in one instance at least we find Smallwood using a picklock instead of a key (137), and then, pointedly, on a door which was, a few pages ago, found to be unlocked. Not only might this raise an ironic eyebrow at over-elaborate critical methodology painstakingly directed at already-open texts (and yes, I am always and infinitely aware of all the potential for irony which lies waiting to ambush the writing of this essay), but it also serves to raise the issue of illicit or forced entry, returning to the fore the issue of interpretation as a form of possible coercion (even rape) which the reader must at least be made aware of, and also the question of whether all critical approaches to, or means of entry into, a text (or postmodernist toolshed) are equally justified, or licensed.

This is a question which I cannot claim to answer with any great degree of confidence. Ackroyd's *Notes for a New Culture* suggests that he finds criticism of the kind written by Leavis and Raymond Williams, which he puts under the general heading of "humanist" criticism, and which understands the value of literature to reside in its

relation to human values, the didactic function and its use-value within the human world, to be ultimately reductive, and responsible for the decline he perceives as having happened within the English departments of the universities.¹⁶ Yet, if we look to *English Music* itself to provide us with proof of its reluctance to be read along humanist lines, such evidence may prove to be less forthcoming. It is possible, on the contrary, to point to aspects of the text which permit, even if they do not exclusively invite, a 'humanist' interpretation.

It might be argued, for example, that if the novel is, in part, 'about' the way in which the understanding of texts is constructed, and thus in effect a novel concerning 'human understanding,' it is also, at least by implication, a work 'about' the understanding subject, the human being as the site within which cognition occurs. At an entirely another level, it might also be arguable that it is about 'human understanding' in the sense of being 'about' the understanding which lies, or should lie, between humans.

This last emphasis, on the need for connection and understanding, is conveyed in the image of the island, which first appears as the name of Margaret Collins's house; it is itself an intertextual reference to *Robinson Crusoe* which provides the framework for one of the dream-sequences and which, while connoting independence, also connotes loneliness; Margaret reads *Robinson Crusoe* to Timothy, but "she always stopped at that point where the castaway sees the savages upon the shore and realises for the first time that he is not alone" (142). As mentioned earlier, in another intertextual cross-reference, Arnold's "Marguerite" poems take this up, representing the—human—condition as one in which the individual is "enisled" in the sea of life, "[w]e mortal millions [living] *alone*," and once being "[P]arts of a single continent" (124-25). Perhaps significantly, that isolation is, albeit temporarily, erased by the music of the nightingales which pours from shore to shore, which sets up other resonances with 'birds' (and Byrd) and 'music' in *English Music*, as well as perhaps nodding in passing to Keats. Donne's famous "No Man is an Island" is invoked

by both Arnold and Ackroyd, a meditation which reflects on the intrinsic indissolubility of links between man and man.

Arnold's poem "To Marguerite—Continued," as its intertextual play with 'islands' demonstrates, is a declaration of independence which is undesired, the divorce between himself and the mainland of the earlier English poets (he, like Eliot, feels himself 'disinherited'). The use of Ackroyd's geographical intertextualities, on the other hand, would appear to affirm his connection to that tradition—and this links up with an earlier section of this essay. The second resonance set up by invoking Donne involves the question of critical approach itself, although it resurrects the tension between Ackroyd's views of humanist-oriented criticism and the elements within the text that lend themselves to such a reading. Ackroyd, in *Notes*, writes that in England, "[t]here has been none of that formal self-criticism and theoretical debate which sustained European modernism; [...] it has been the creative discovery of theory which has enriched the quality of French culture" (148); the point here being that England's perceived insularity, her isolation from the mainstream of European thought and critical thinking, has resulted in a form of intellectual and literary impoverishment, which the recognition of mutual dependence—and a consequent cross-fertilization of ideas—might serve to address.

All this should not to be taken to mean that I am un-ironically arguing for a 'humanistic' reading of *English Music*. What I am pointing out is that it is possible to find within it elements that offer such an approach something to chew on. However, it might conversely be argued that to undertake a humanist reading of *English Music* would result in a number of problems. One such problem would arise in the attempt to reconcile the value which the text implicitly assigns to the principle of human inclusivity, with the fact that *English Music* is a work whose enjoyment may in some sense be said to be predicated upon a principle of readerly exclusivity (which some might also consider to be mappable as social and educational exclusivity). However little attention one might wish to draw to the fact, it remains that there are good readers and bad readers, more informed readers and their

less-informed brethren—Ackroyd's acknowledgements page itself distinguishes between 'alert' readers and the merely scholarly. And while a reader of a lower calibre will still come away from *English Music* with something (which would not be true for a work like *Finnegan's Wake*), a good and more informed reader will have a greater capacity to enjoy a text, and to enrich and be enriched by it, than will one less well equipped. Perhaps the question of the viability of various critical approaches in respect of *English Music*, in the end, needs to be referred to in relation to a criterion of usefulness, or 'fertility' (that is, its potential for generating creative reading) rather than authorial mandate.

I would like to return, finally, in this discussion of 'fertility' in a text whose implicitly stated project is to restore it, to a figure whose role has not so far been touched on in this essay: that of the author. In much of this reading, questions of authority and plurality of meaning have emerged as having a significant part to play in that project, and the freedom of the text to signify plurally, and perhaps freely, is to a large extent, in the gift of the author. And the figure of the author, in the second, Dickensian, vision, is a man with bandaged eyes (74), in his cecity at once Tiresias, the blind seer who has foresuffered all, the blinded father Gloucester who in his blindness is reconciled to his son, perhaps even Samson who, though blinded, yet has the power to topple constructions, also the self-blinded Oedipus, and perhaps even the Maimed King, who in the final vision, is also Clement and King Arthur. Blindness may at one level be indexed to insight, the seer's ability to see and tell truth, but the bandaging of the author's eyes may also be seen to represent an act of humbling courtesy and generosity in its self-limiting. (And how much this generosity would be magnified if the work recording the death of the blind, clement, Maimed King Arthur were to turn out to be the *Morte d'Author*.) Miss Havisham's assertion that "[h]e wants to control everything" (77) is refuted by that election to blindness which paradoxically both confers power and helplessness on the author and which speaks of an abdication of control. (Not, in the end then, *damyata* but *datta*.) The gorgon or

basilisk power of the gaze to petrify and fix in formulated phrases is silenced by the blindfold, and in that pause, the reader may read more commodiously, and the text may sing.

National University of Singapore

NOTES

¹“Rag”: from “ragtime”: music characterised by a syncopated melodic line and regularly accented accompaniment; a piece of old cloth, especially one torn from a larger piece or the remnants of something (hence “these f(rag)ments I have shored against my ruin”); to rebuke severely.

²Fantasia: “[...] when a musitian takes a point and wrests or turns it as he likes, making either much or little of it according as shall seem best in his own conceit [...]. This kind will also bear any allowances whatsoever tolerable in other musick, except changing the air and leaving the key, which in fantasy may never be suffered.” Ackroyd, *English Music* 209.

³1922 also saw the publication of Joyce’s *Ulysses*. *English Music* also plays with the *Ulysses* connection, but to do justice to that connection would require the space of another essay entirely.

⁴Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot* 107.

⁵Kenner 136.

⁶Ackroyd, in *Notes for a New Culture*, observes: “It is clear that, now, England is a dispirited nation [...]. The ‘humanism’ which the universities sustain, and which our realistic literature embodies, is the product of historical blindness. It has been associated with a sense of the ‘individual’ and of the ‘community’ which stays without definition, except in the work of some literary academics who appeal to a literary ‘tradition.’ [...] The humanism which we take to be our inheritance and our foundation [...] has turned out to be an empty strategy, without philosophical content or definitive form.

It is a paucity that, with certain few honourable exceptions, manifests itself in English creative writing. Our own literature has revealed no formal sense of itself and has sustained no substantial language. Our writing has acquiesced in that orthodoxy which has already been described, resting as it does upon a false aesthetic of subjectivity and a false context of realism. And it is this conventional aesthetic which has been reified into the English ‘tradition’” (11).

⁷T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” 41.

⁸Cf. Jessie Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance* (1933), especially chapter 11, “The Task of the Hero.”

⁹The reader of Gibson and Wolfreys's study is provided with practice in *not* reading conventionally by the half-dozen or so blank pages which punctuate the study in order to disrupt any reading rhythms which might somehow inadvertently have been set up, or else to shift the reader into Zen mode. An enquiry to the publishers, made in order to ascertain the truth of the suspicion that this was intentional and not the result of some mere printing error, met with the confirmation that this was part of the "ludic performativity" of the work in question.

¹⁰In point of interest, the visual epigraph preceding the section on Byrd (200) focuses on a book entitled: *A Collection of Emblems Ancient and Modern*, above which is a scroll which reads "Vanitas Vanitatum et Omnia Vanitas," from which juxtaposition one may either confirm the 'vanity' of emblems, or not, if the connection be considered invalid. As a further set of twists, one might wish to consider that the latin tag is itself a 'quote'—with all the functions and limitations attendant on this, although the consideration of context: that the source of the quote is *Ecclesiastes*, a 'wisdom' book, might lend it authority ...

¹¹Iser, *The Act of Reading* 11.

¹²In the context of a discussion on 'fertile' reading, the thought occurs that Weston sees cup and lance as related sexual symbols (75), and that one might, were one so minded, see lock and key as permutations of those symbols. English art, according to Byrd, has brought to completion the "art of the virginal" (210); the *double-entendre* which suggests chastity, also suggests—in the normal way of things—a *de facto* inability to reproduce. Is the setting of key to lock the means by which to restore fertility? Or does it merely lead to 'barren' reading?

¹³Peck 447. The observations which follow seem to follow the same general tenor: he writes that "it would be hard to think of anything more unhelpful than showing off one's familiarity [with other texts] [...] as a way of establishing critical control" (447-48).

¹⁴Apropos of which might be mentioned Iser's discussion of James's "Figure in the Carpet," in which he says, "If the critic's revelation of the meaning is a loss to the author—as stated at the beginning of the book—then meaning must be a thing which can be subtracted from the work. And if this meaning, as the very heart of the work, can be lifted out of the text, the work is then used up—through interpretation, literature is turned into an item for consumption. This is fatal not only for the text but also for literary criticism, for what can be the function of interpretation if its sole achievement is to extract the meaning and leave behind an empty shell?" *The Act of Reading* 4-5. The argument, as Iser implies, teeters on the 'if' in the first sentence; but I would argue that the first premise is itself debatable: a critic may of course choose to take that ungenerous point of view, but this is not to say that it happens.

Consider A. S. Byatt's comment: "Mistrust of the author began with Wimsatt and the Intentional Fallacy and progressed to Barthes and the Death of the Author, and to the deconstructionists who read texts looking for what they can see that the writers did not see, did not 'foreground' and ipso facto miss what writers

can see that *they* do not foreground" (7). This certainly suggests that from an author's point of view, there may be less 'useful' forms of interpretation, even though Byatt does not even then rule absolutely against deconstructionist readings, extending to those critics a courtesy which she would appear to think they do not extend to writers. What she says, however, may also perhaps be taken to suggest that a critic's 'revelation of meaning,' if it run in tandem with what an author *can* see, might not be taken by author as 'loss' to him/herself.

Sontag, incidentally, in "Against Interpretation" does say that interpretation does constitute impoverishment: "It is the revenge of the intellect upon the world. To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world [...]" (7). Her comments, however, need to be read in context of the larger argument; her stricture, as I understand it, referring to interpretation which refuses to deal with a work on its own terms, but attempts to 'translate' that work's meanings into other terms.

¹⁵ ... and even the irrational, as evidenced in the Hogathian sequence, may have its proper place in the scheme of things.

¹⁶ See the chapter on the "Uses of Humanism." Also see Gibson and Wolfreys's study, already cited, in which there is an interesting and extended discussion of the matter.

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Connotations

A Journal for Critical Debate

Contents of Volume 15 (2005/2006)

On Cheney on Spenser's Ariosto
LAWRENCE F. RHU 91

*

Shakespeare's Country Opposition:
Titus Andronicus in the Early Eighteenth Century
ANDREAS K. E. MUELLER 97

*

The Tempest in the Trivium
DAN HARDER 127

*

Pivots, Reversals, and Things in the Aesthetic
Economy of Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham*
NEIL BROWNE 1

*

P. G. Wodehouse Linguist?
BARBARA C. BOWEN 131

*

The American Carnival of <i>The Great Gatsby</i> PHILIP MCGOWAN	143
Bakhtin and History: A Response to Winifred Bevilacqua MICHAEL TRATNER	159
A Modest Letter in Response to <i>The Great Gatsby</i> , Bakhtin's Carnival, and Professor Bevilacqua TONY MAGISTRALE	167
*	
Unscrambling Surprises ARTHUR F. KINNEY	17
*	
Vladimir Nabokov and the Surprise of Poetry: Reading the Critical Reception of Nabokov's Poetry and "The Poem" and "Restoration" PAUL D. MORRIS	30
*	
Waugh's Conrad and Victorian Gothic: A Reply to Martin Stannard and John Howard Wilson EDWARD LOBB	171
*	
Perversions and Reversals of Childhood and Old Age in J. M. Coetzee's <i>Age of Iron</i> CHRISTIANE BIMBERG	58
*	

How to Listen to Mamet: A Response to Maurice Charney DOUGLAS BRUSTER	177
Stylistic Self-Consciousness Versus Parody in David Mamet: A Response to Maurice Charney VERNA A. FOSTER	186
Mamet's Self-Parody: A Response to Maurice Charney DAVID MASON	195
	*
"Anti-novel" as Ethics: Lindsey Collen's <i>The Rape of Sita</i> EILEEN WILLIAMS-WANQUET	200
	*
"OOOO that Eliot-Joycean Rag": A Fantasia upon Reading <i>English Music</i> SUSAN ANG	215

*