

Peter Ackroyd's *English Music* as Romance of Englishness: A Response to Susan Ang*

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Susan Ang's wide-ranging, thoroughly researched article gives precious insights into the poetic and epistemological questions raised by Peter Ackroyd's *English Music*, a novel that rehearses most of the novelist, critic and biographer's obsessions, and especially his fascination with T. S. Eliot's vision of tradition. It also provides an interesting complement to Susana Onega's chapter on the novel, in her groundbreaking *Metafiction and Myth in the Novels of Peter Ackroyd*. In the chapter partly devoted to *English Music*, she uses the English visionary tradition which Ackroyd explicitly espoused both in his fiction and non-fiction to build a demonstration that addresses the circularity of myth as an image of transmission from one generation to the next (112). However, what may be seen as Susan Ang's most original contribution is her choice of the motif of the quester, as part of the fertility myth that she sees at work in the novel, taking her lead from Eliot or Weston (224-27), a reading that testifies to the presence of a hypertextual link with the Grail legend.

Addressing this question of inter- and hypertextual references may seem the obvious thing to do with a work that both thematises and performs the idea of a canon of Englishness and chooses to do so, as often in Ackroyd's work, through the borrowing of characters and situations from previous texts or works of art, or by imitating the style

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For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debang01513.htm>>.

and manner of other authors. However, I would argue that what Susan Ang's selection of the fertility myth of the Grail type and the figure of the quester does is point, beyond a series of hypotexts, to an architext, i.e. a formula that moves away from the individual to the generic, thus referring to the text's inscription into a genre or a mode.¹ And the mode that is referred to here is that of romance. This is an aspect of Ackroyd's fiction that I have explored elsewhere, reading Ackroyd's novels as variations on what might be seen as the romance of Englishness (Ganteau, *Peter Ackroyd*), and there is little doubt that *English Music* belongs to that paradigm more than that of the Victorian *Bildungsroman* (even though the Dickensian contribution to the genre harbours a fair deal of the inflections characteristic of romance).

By romance, I do not simply mean medieval romance and its contemporary offshoots, even though such a thematic component is present in *English Music*, through the reference to Mallory; nor do I particularly mean the narrative of the Mills and Boon type, which trades in the consumption of stories of emphatically romantic love. What I have in mind is less strictly generic and more modal, and belongs to the anti-realistic tradition, represented in Ackroyd's canon (and present in *English Music*) by such different authors as Bunyan, Richardson, Sterne, Emily Brontë, Dickens, Carroll, and above all Blake, artists who turn their backs on the representation of the phenomenal world so as to privilege a presentation of the supra-phenomenal, or at least of the relationships and connections between both spheres, an impulse that is at the heart of the visionary tradition as defined by Ackroyd in his famous lectures "London Luminaries and Cockney Visionaries" and "The Englishness of English Literature." This is precisely what happens in *English Music*, a novel that presents the reader with a fairly realistic evocation of the social and cultural background of Edwardian England, and also with the psychology of the protagonist and narrator, Timothy Harcombe, while at the very same time exploring the limits of phenomenal and psychological realism through evocations of magical occurrences, or through the resort to metaleptic passages in which the protagonist walks

across the ontological frontier that separates his own world from those of the heroes and heroines of the English tradition. Such baroque orientation, in which the novel's poetic opaqueness and ornamentation is resorted to the better to thematise and to point towards the other of realism (cf. Ganteau, "Post-baroque Sublime?") buttresses the narrative's romantic dimension, thus making it qualify as romance more than (or as much as) novel. Such a modal element is clearly signposted through the protagonist as quester and of the reader as quester that Susan Ang sees as a cornerstone of the book's hermeneutics (225).

This is made clear in her evocation of the reader's enquiry into meaning, more than his/her imposition of meaning (226), a point substantiated through the evocation of the tropes of the lock and key(s) (230) to which she resorts to argue that plurality (as distinct from ambiguity) is consonant with the polyphonic eponymous music that vindicates a comprehension of differences rather than the closure of unitary meaning and melody (233-34). This, one may argue, is central to the identity of *English Music* in that it provides the vision of an aesthetic plurality that is predicated on the diffracting powers of romance, a mode used to problematise the realistic idiom of the *Bildungsroman* (as present in the odd-numbered chapters), to break it open, in other words to refuse its totalising claims. What I see at work in *English Music* is an ethics of romance that privileges the open over the closed, the infinite over the total, the other over the same.² That such a vision informs the odd-numbered chapters, with the various scenes staging encounters with the vulnerable and marginalised, together with the treatment of occurrences of the spectral, is fairly obvious, as if the more realistic idiom itself were bearing the exotic seeds of romance. Furthermore, it is even more clearly thematised and actually performed in the even-numbered, metaleptic chapters which thwart the linear logic of the narrative the better to promote harmonics over the line of melody (Ganteau, "Post-baroque Sublime?" 26). In other words, the baroque orientation of the novel (an apposite label for an author who lays the stress on the Catholic essence of English-

ness, in the polemical lecture “The Englishness of English Literature”), which highlights, in Deleuze’s terms of *Le Pli*, a fold that runs into infinity, is seen to collaborate with the non-linear poetics of romance, a mode which privileges the far as opposed to the near, the then as opposed to the now, the strange as opposed to the familiar (such binary oppositions crop up in some of the canonic evocations of the mode, from Congreve’s preface to *Incognita, or Love and Duty Reconciled* to James’s preface to *The American*, through Hawthorne’s preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*). I would then see romance as an operator of narrative pluralisation and opening, a vision eminently compatible with Susan Ang’s analyses. For in fact the Grail motif—and the nexus of associations that accrue with it—are but devices meant to refract the narrative, to break it open and postulate the prevalence of the illimited, a priority that *English Music* both exploits and performs.

If provisionality is to be found in *English Music*, as underlined by Susan Ang (and confirmed by Annegret Maack’s response to her article in terms of plurality [305-06]), it applies certainly to the unstable, indefinite movement of romance that explores more than it asserts, and multiplies questions instead of providing answers. This corresponds to the ever fluctuating vision of an English canon that the narrative does not present as finite, although it gives the reader access to a finite number of parodies and pastiches, in the even-numbered chapters. What is not provisional, though, is the wish to promote a polemical vision of Englishness as essentially visionary, and as based on Eliot’s conception of tradition as presence of the past (a notion that the metaleptic chapters put at the very top of the narrative’s agenda). Provisionality may thus be said to be mitigated in one respect at least, i.e. in Ackroyd’s project at work in the novel and throughout the *oeuvre* to promote cultural resurgence and continuity as a hallmark of the contemporary. This is documented time and again in Ackroyd’s writings, most notably in his long essay of cultural criticism, *Albion*, in which Englishness is defined as openness. In fact, one of the main images of this book is that of hybridity (Ackroyd takes the image of

the mongrel as a figure of the impurity of the English imagination), a cultural impurity that is predicated on the principle of assimilation. *Albion* harps on the idea that the English genius is that of adaptation or assimilation of things foreign (170, 237) or, put differently and in ethical terms, on the idea that Englishness is characterised by a ceaseless move out of the same so as to take the other into consideration. Of course, the idea of mere concern or meeting with the other—the basis of the ethical relation—is somewhat thwarted by the image of assimilation, which implies something that goes beyond the ethical, in that it might be said to appropriate the other and to encapsulate it in some totality, heterogeneous as it may be. Still, such a vision might be taken with a pinch of salt in that the resulting culture, even if it assimilates the foreign, does so not in terms of neutralization and appropriation, but rather in terms of welcome and accommodation, as made clear in the attendant image of “creative borrowing” that Ackroyd resorts to in his biography of T. S. Eliot (117, 237, 270). By rehearsing the music of *Albion*, *English Music* welcomes the texts of the past and, according to the rules of classical *imitatio* (thus in conformity with the Reynolds epigraph), repeats and takes them up within an original design, one of the characteristics that Ackroyd sees at work in T. S. Eliot’s *oeuvre* (*T. S. Eliot* 147) and which he dramatises in this narrative. It thus appears that Susan Ang’s titular reference to Joyce and Eliot, those masters of Modernism, of the mythic method and of intertextual overkill reverberates with more than one meaning. The relevance of the Grail romances that she shows convincingly in her article points at a further presence of Eliot in the practice of creative borrowing and *imitatio*, which enhance the ethical potential of a narrative that is open to alterity through cultural assimilation.

In the end, what the baroque aesthetics at work in *English Music* foreground, in their promotion of linguistic, structural, tropic, intertextual and hypertextual excess (through their tapping of the Grail legends, as underlined by Susan Ang), is some architextual inscription into the mode of romance. The narrative thus enters the Ackroydian paradigm of the romance of Englishness, a configuration that is va-

lued for its diffracting power and works through the accommodation of the other within the same. Such a setup favours the adoption and practice of an ethics of romance which is an ethics of alterity, bringing in the far and the strange right into the heart of the familiar so as to provide an encounter with otherness in endless stimulating, opening reaction with the same of tradition. What *English Music* posits then is a model of English culture as predicated on openness, process and accommodation, of tradition as dynamic, of the canon as syntagmatically and paradigmatically open to influences. In his *Notes for a New Culture*, an obvious titular homage to Eliot's *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*, Ackroyd lamented the decline of English culture throughout the twentieth century and more specifically after the Second World War (9). *English Music*, as emblematic of the ethical romance of Englishness that Ackroyd has ceaselessly contributed to building up, is his dedicated response to that early diagnosis and clinches his commitment and faithfulness to an original idea.

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NOTES

¹I am borrowing this distinction between hypertextuality and architextuality from Gérard Genette's "Introduction à l'architexte" (89-95).

²This take on ethics is borrowed from the Levinasian and post-Levinasian conception of ethics as an ethics of alterity, as articulated by such critics as Robert Eaglestone, Andrew Gibson, or Sygmunt Baumann, among others, in the British context.

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