

Maintaining Plurality: A Response to Susan Ang*

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“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)

Ang’s complex and comprehensive interpretation of Ackroyd’s *English Music* takes as its starting point the year 1922 when Timothy as a boy assisted in his father’s public performances. She interprets this as a reference to the publication date of T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, which is alluded to in Ackroyd’s text in many ways. Thus Bunyan’s Christian is seen walking through waste land; such references are present in the Dickensian dreamscape as well as in Hogarthian London. While Ang posits *The Waste Land* as a decisive literary reference, she is well aware that 1922 is not only the publication date of Eliot’s poem but also of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and she deliberately defers commenting on the relationship between Ackroyd and Joyce, and of that between the novels of the two authors, to another essay (cf. 239). Though in no way anticipating that essay, I would like to point out some parallels between Ackroyd’s novel and the one of his grand predecessor.

It is Ackroyd himself who sees a link between these 1922 publications. He discusses Eliot and Joyce in two chapters of his *Notes for a New Culture*, and both times confronts an Eliot text with one of Joyce’s. In “The Uses of Language” he focuses on Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and Joyce’s *Ulysses*; in “The Uses of Humanism” he compares Eliot’s *Four Quartets* to Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, both published “during the last War” (94). At the same time Ackroyd’s summary of Joyce’s achieve-

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ment can be read as referring to his own attempts at creating a world out of language:

Joyce's *Ulysses* unfolds language in a comic transformation of what was once fixed stylistically and called the 'real' world; it is now within the power of the written language to create a world out of itself, and Joyce returns to patristic sources in his evocation of language, myth and human experience as parts of that opaque λόγος which establishes the world. (94)

Ackroyd again comments on *Ulysses* and its relationship to Eliot's *Waste Land* in his biography of T. S. Eliot:

Eliot found his own voice by first reproducing that of others—as if it was only through his reading of, and response to, literature that he could find anything to hold onto, anything 'real'. That is why *Ulysses* struck him so forcibly, in a way no other novel ever did. Joyce had created a world which exists only in, and through, the multiple uses of language—through voices, through parodies of style. The novel is, in that sense, the dramatic epic of the word. Its range encompasses the whole literary tradition which begins with Homer, and presumably, ends with Joyce; just as he will place the same scene in the perspectives of late romantic prose, scientific description or conventional journalese, so he also parodies the history of prose style from Anglo-Saxon to Romantic narrative. (118)

Ackroyd's assessment of the impact of *Ulysses* on Eliot can be read as a description of the impact of Joyce's novel on his own work. Both *Ulysses* and *English Music* make excessive use of parody and pastiche, realism as well as a mixture of different literary styles, language games and allusions to literature and myths; both present a literary tradition from its very beginnings—in *English Music* from Cædmon's and Cynewulf's time to roughly the end of the nineteenth century; the structure of both has been compared to music, in Joyce's case as a fugue, in Ackroyd's as a fantasia¹; in both we find the juxtaposition of past and present and the problematic father-son relationship in a sustained world of language.

In her essay, Ang decides to concentrate on "a reading of *English Music* as a work whose enquiry into the nature and interpretation of 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*" (215). Though repeatedly formulating a caveat about the provisionality of any act of reading or interpretation, Ang ultimately suggests the possibility of a "humanist reading" of *English Music* (216; 222). While looking for the "key" to an understanding of the novel, a trope that recurs like a red herring throughout the book, Ang is at the same time conscious of the danger to "'pin down'" a text, "to limit the scope of its signifying activities, to impoverish it" (232). She thus raises the issue of "interpretation as a form of coercion (even rape)" and the question "of whether all critical approaches to, or means of entry into, a text [...] are equally justified, or licensed" (235).

Reviewers and critics have indeed differed in their interpretations of *English Music*. Catherine Bernard understands the novel's end as "an elegiac prayer for the dead [which] seems to deny replenishment" (179), whereas for Janik "the further realization that time is a continuum that transcends individual consciousness turns it into liberation" (177). One argument which recurs in critical assessments is the difficulty of reconciling Ackroyd's presentation of a literary tradition with his critique of aesthetic realism as formulated in his *Notes for a New Culture*, where he finds fault with Leavis's general humanism (cf. 117-18). Thus Lezard calls *English Music* "sloppy enough to make a bigoted reading possible." Schnackertz sees "the convergence of personal development and cultural initiation" as a "structural fault of the book" (500). Roessner observes an "incongruity between its postmodern tactics and the conservative ideal of British identity it celebrates," a "disparity between style and ideology" (104). Galster argues in a similar vein (cf. 194).² Ang is aware of this problem and proposes the "viability of various critical approaches" (238), among them the possibility of a humanist interpretation of the novel, though this seems to contradict Ackroyd's critique of the Leavisite 'Great Tradition' in *Notes for a New Culture*.³ Ang finally stresses "the freedom of the text to signify plurally" (238).

As Ang states, the reading and understanding of texts is indeed a central concern of Ackroyd's book. Already the novel's first epigraph, taken from St Augustine's interpretation of Genesis, stresses the role of interpretation: "... he who can interpret what has been seen is a greater prophet than he who has simply seen it."⁴ According to my reading, *English Music* not only allows a plurality of interpretations, but is deliberately constructed to encourage such plurality, and even seemingly mutually exclusive interpretations. I am not convinced of the author's "abdication of control," but rather of his insistence to allow his book "to signify plurally" (238).

One need not be the "alert" reader whom Ackroyd addresses in his "Acknowledgments" to arrive at contradictory interpretations of *English Music*. A reading based on the odd-numbered chapters of the novel leads to a different interpretation than one mainly considering the even-numbered ones. In the odd chapters the life story of Timothy Harcombe is told by himself, and from the vantage point of old age, in a realistic style, which can be read as a rather conventional *Bildungsroman* following Timothy's development to maturity. The even chapters contain the trance-like dream-sequences in which Timothy enters books from the English canon, interacts with their characters or authors, steps into paintings of famous English artists, and confers with notable English composers. In these chapters, which are presented by an impersonal heterodiegetic narrator, Tim moves in a world that is literally made of words, in which "meaning" is either difficult to construct or merely a linguistic game. Thus in Chapter Two, Timothy sees a house with "chimneys in the shape of words" (27), he meets characters out of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* who play with the literal and the figurative meaning of words and with homonyms, like the Red Queen, who "must have pages. Just as a book must have royalties" (34), where a dead metaphor is indeed a corpse and "Figures of speech" run around (35). In the Dickensian dreamscape Timothy feels a breeze upon his face, "but it was no ordinary passage of air [...]. It was a stream of words" (75). Robinson Crusoe's island is "in the shape of a man's hand" and the

waters around it resemble “good writing ink” (160). Also in the chapters establishing an English tradition of music and painting, Timothy enters a world of words. Accordingly, Ackroyd quotes from Morley’s *A Plain and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke* (chapter 10) and from Hogarth’s *Analysis of Beauty* (chapter 12). While Timothy listens to Byrd’s lecture on the composition of music, he learns that “words have their own secret power” (213), and while walking with Hogarth he is—from the height of the Monument—able to “read” the city’s “graceful lines and masses [...]. We become masters of the meaning of the city” (257).

Juxtapositions of seemingly irreconcilable worldviews occur throughout the book, including “the visionary and specifically mesmeristic and mediumistic worldview” and “the anti-visionary rationalism of Cartesian logic” (Onega 100), the didactic literary tradition represented by Bunyan and the subversive carnevalesque world of Lewis Carroll, the oppositional poles of metropolitan London and the landscape of Wiltshire, “the nostalgic urge to return to the heroic past and a desire to escape its oppressive influence” (Roessner 122), “a profusion of textual matter or corporeality [...] and a hypothetical probing into its opposite” (Ganteau 36), a cyclical and a linear concept of time, time “rushing forward from event to event [...] but always circling around [Timothy]” (84); the list of such juxtapositions could even be longer. In his dream Timothy is determined “to find some meaning in all of this,” and he is not content with two stories (42; 35). This is also true of the reader. The text, however, provides a number of hints how to understand these oppositions in the structure of the novel as well as in its ideas—not as mutually exclusive but as coexistent, as “the symmetry of opposing forces” (261), linked by “that thread which unites all its parts together” (262).

Though Ang suspects that the significance of Ackroyd’s “over-obvious tropes”—Ganteau even speaks of “tropic overkill” (27)—is either “on surface display, so deeply buried as to remain inaccessible, or utterly absent” (234), one of his favourite tropes (not only in this book) might be read as central and as an image including all contra-

dictory interpretations. The pattern that Timothy looks for and that is most often referred to is that of a circle. In *Albion*, Ackroyd's English cultural history, the author begins and ends the book by comparing the English cultural tradition to a circle: "The English imagination takes the form of a ring or circle. [...] And so the English imagination takes the form of an endless enchanted circle, or shining ring, moving backwards as well as forwards" (xix, 448). Since by the term "'English music'" Timothy's father means "not only music itself but also English history, English literature and English painting" (21), the circle may be seen as an apt and central image for the novel. Early in the book, while wandering with Pip through London's labyrinthine streets, Timothy begins to understand what the circle means:

it seemed to him that they were moving in a circle—that all these contrasting and bewildering scenes were part of one another. [...] Each thing meant nothing by itself but, when it was seen in contrast or opposition to the next thing, the pattern began to emerge. (88)

Thus the frequently repeated request to go back to the beginning indicates a circle, and the book starts with the old Timothy's return to his origins.⁵ The circle-line recurs in variations, as a "serpentine line" (264),⁶ as "an undulating motion like a wave or moving landscape" (251), as "the line of beauty" (195; 221; 269), "the graceful double curve" (308), or in the travelling circus, itself a symbol of continuity and change.

Critics have suggested variations of a circle as a visual image of the book's structure; Onega compares the structure to a "double-loop arrangement of the major arcana of the Tarot," to "a Möbius-strip" (102), Ganteau speaks of a "structural double helix" and insists on the "'both ... and' logic" of Ackroyd's novel, "the paradox of a conjunctive opposition or coincidence between two poles" (36). Questioned by Julian Wolfreys whether he favours a cyclical rather than a linear model of time, Ackroyd himself opts for "a spiral" (Gibson and Wolfreys 255), which can be seen as a combination of the circle and a straight line, and thus as a 'both ... and' answer. And it is finally possible for Timothy, the protagonist of the rather conventional Bil-

dungsroman who has been trying to ““find out who I am?”” (32) in a world composed of language, to understand himself as scripted by “a grand English artistic tradition.”⁷

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NOTES

¹Cf. Galster 214-20.

²Critics also find fault with Ackroyd's artistic tradition which is almost exclusively male (cf. Roessner 105). The exception is a brief mention of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (cf. Lurie). None of the critics I have read so far have noticed the quote from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (““Wandering Spirits””), which Timothy comments: ““This reminds me of a story, of which the meaning has never been understood”” (318-19).

³In his preface to the revised edition, Ackroyd states that the book's central argument is “still broadly correct.” He is also convinced that “the concerns, or obsessions, of *Notes for a New Culture*” could be found in all of his later books (8).

⁴Cf. vol. 2, book 12, chap. 9. St Augustine seems to favour a plurality of interpretations: “in interpreting words that have been written obscurely for the purpose of stimulating our thought, I have not rashly taken my stand on one side against a rival interpretation which might possibly be better. I have thought that each one, in keeping with his power of understanding, should choose the interpretation he can grasp” (vol. 1, book 1, chap. 20).

⁵Cf. *First Light*: “Everything is part of the pattern. We carry our origin within us, and we can never rest until we have returned” (318). This can be read as a reference to Eliot's “East Coker”: “In my beginning is my end. [...] In my end is my beginning” (177-83).

⁶Cf. *Hawksmoor*: “Truly, Time is a vast Denful of Horror, round about which a Serpent winds and in the winding bites itself by the Tail” (62).

⁷Cf. Roessner 111.

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