

## Self, World and the Art of Faith-Healing in the Age of Trauma: A Response to Susan Ang's Reading of *English Music*\*<sup>1</sup>

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Susan Ang's thought-provoking reading of Peter Ackroyd's *English Music* (1992) is based on a double assumption: firstly, that it is a novel 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*" (Ang 215); and secondly, that it simultaneously displays a conscious and intentional dynamics of process and change, so that "within such a work, all structures, all frames, must exist in a state of perpetual jeopardy, always confronting their own provisionality, their own death" (215). From this, Ang goes on to argue that the self-conscious dynamism of the work, its refusal of stasis is "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" (216). Her approach to the novel, then, combines metafiction and myth, the two elements that, as I argued elsewhere, constitute the most salient features in the fictional work of both Peter Ackroyd (Onega, *Metafiction and Myth; Peter Ackroyd*), and of other contemporary British writers with a visionary stance (Onega, "The Mythical Impulse"; "The Vision-

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\*Reference: Susan Ang, "'OOOO that Eliot-Joycean Rag': A Fantasia upon Reading *English Music*," *Connotations* 15.1-3 (2005/2006): 215-42; see also Annegret Maack, "Maintaining Plurality: A Response to Susan Ang," *Connotations* 17.2-3 (2007/2008): 302-09; Jean-Michel Ganteau, "*English Music* as Romance of Englishness: An Response to Susan Ang," *Connotations* 18.1-3 (2008/2009): 276-82.

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

ary Element"). In the pages that follow I will try to respond to Ang's argumentation by elaborating on the main points she makes and by offering my own alternative reading of them.

The most innovative aspect of Ang's approach to the novel is the contention that *English Music* is a novel about the nature and interpretation of texts and culture, and that the protagonist, Tim Harcombe, is an archetypal quester in search of the Grail/Book capable of restoring fertility to the waste land of English culture. This outlook on the novel reinforces the association of *English Music* not only with *The Waste Land* but with modernist literature in general since the representation of the book as a world is a recurrent modernist *topos* expressing the writers' loss of faith in transcendence. Thus, in *The World and the Book*, Gabriel Josipovici, after analysing the mythical impulse suffusing the work of many a modernist writer, from Joyce, Proust and Kafka to Robbe-Grillet, famously concluded that, where the medieval artist reproduced 'the world in his book,' the modernist writer, incapable of conceiving the possibility of transcendence, turned the proposition upside down and succeeded in symbolically breaking up the boundaries of his solipsistic prison-house, by turning 'his book into the world':

[T]he book becomes an object among many in the room. Open, and read, it draws the reader into tracing the contours of his own labyrinth and allows him to experience himself not as an object in the world but as the limits of his world. And, mysteriously, to recognise this is to be freed of these limits and to experience a joy as great as that which floods through us when, looking at long last, with Dante, into the eyes of God, we sense the entire universe bound up into one volume and understand what it is to be a man. (Josipovici 309)<sup>2</sup>

With Josipovici's words in mind it can be stated that Susan Ang's description of Tim's quest for the "fertile text" envisions him, like the protagonists of many a modernist *Künstlerroman*, as a purblind artist in the making, attempting to write himself and his world into existence, while *English Music* becomes a World/Book, like Borges' "Li-

brary of Babel" or his "Labyrinth of Paper and Ink," containing nothing less than the sum total of English culture at large.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, Ang's contention that Tim's quest is a search for the fertile text of English literature and culture readily brings to mind John Barth's seminal essays, "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967) and "The Literature of Replenishment: Postmodernist Fiction" (1980). As is well known, Barth, in the first essay, described western literature in the 1950s and 1960s as being in a state of "exhaustion" after the extraordinary creativity of the modernist period, and he signalled Samuel Beckett and Jorge Luis Borges as the only writers who had seriously tried to transcend modernism, going beyond the writing practices of Joyce and Kafka. Thus, while Beckett created a paradoxical and minimalist art out of the sheer confrontation with the impossibility of originality and transcendence, Borges escaped solipsistic closure by discarding authorial originality not only as an impossibility but also an absurdity. Drawing on Montaigne, he defined artistic creation as a collective endeavour, the expression of an eternal Supra-individual Spiritual Voice composed of the voices of all the dead poets coexisting forever in an eternal Now (Worton and Still 13). Further, in consonance with the modernist reversal of the mimetic definition of art as a mirror copy of the real world, Borges defined the world as an infinite book or library containing all the contributions of every writer in the tradition. Thus, in his *Ficciones*, the Argentinian writer constantly identifies the world with books and also with mirrors, a *topos* that Susan Ang finds in *English Music* and interprets as an "image [that] 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" (227). As with other aspects of *English Music*, her analysis of the mirror *topos* is mainly focused on the question of the readers' difficulties of interpretation. However, the symbolism of mirrors in *English Music*, as in Borges' *Ficciones* and in mythical art in general, is much more complex than this. Books and mirrors, often employed as synonyms, are common medieval emblems of the world, and they are also often used as symbols of the

mimetic function of art.<sup>4</sup> Thus, William Caxton, in order to suggest the world-wide range of his popular 1481 encyclopaedia, called it *The Mirror of the World*. As such, mirrors can act as *umbilici mundi* connecting the lower and the upper worlds or, in Platonic terms, the world of Shadows and the Real world. They can also be magical doors connecting the real and the unreal, the world of common day and the world of dreams, as happens in Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*. This symbolism is made explicit in the episode analysed by Ang, which belongs in Tim's first dream, when the Red Queen from *Through the Looking-Glass* tells him not to worry about his difficulty in reading a copy of *The Pilgrim's Progress* (Ackroyd, *English Music* 28-29), and that: "Of course you can't read it. It's a looking-glass book. You're only meant to hold it and *look* at it as if you've read it. That is the meaning of criticism" (31, original emphasis). Although there is no denying that the Queen's words carry an overt ironic load aimed at critics, her description of *The Pilgrim's Progress* as a "looking-glass book" also begs for a symbolic interpretation, as John Bunyan's book constitutes the archetypal hero's quest story where Tim is hoping to find his name so as to confirm his uncanny impression that he has somehow entered the pages of the book his father had been reading out to him at bedtime. The "looking-glass book" in Tim's hand, then, reproduces *en abyme* the book he has entered in his dream, which is in turn a *mise en abyme* of the book his father was reading to him, which is a *mise en abyme* of *English Music*, the book Tim inhabits while he is awake.

From this perspective, the Red Queen's description of the volume in Tim's hand as a looking-glass text may be read as an allusion to the symbolism of mirrors as devices that can endlessly reduplicate the (textual) world, thus suggesting the plurality and openness and infinitude of *English Music*, its aspiration to the condition of *pure écriture* (Barthes, *Le degré zéro de l'écriture*). This reading is further enhanced by the fact that, in his dreams, Tim always enters various canonical books at once, as happens for instance in the first dream, where he encounters characters and lives episodes of *The Pilgrim's Progress* and of

Lewis Carroll's *Alice*-books. This is the sort of infinite reduplication *en abyme* that governs the construction of Borges's tale, "The Library of Babel," where the universe is conceived of as a "total" (89) library, with numberless shelves arranged in hexagonal galleries and bottomless wells around spiralling stairs without beginning or end, endlessly reduplicated by mirrors. As the narrator explains, this infinite and all-encompassing textual world is made up of "every possible combination of the twenty-odd orthographic symbols," that is, "everything that is utterable."<sup>5</sup> But this sort of infinitely specular Text/World can also have a more chaotic and labyrinthine structure, as happens, for example, in another of Borges's *Ficciones*, "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan." The protagonist, Ts'ui Pen, is described as a man who gave up everything in order to concentrate on the composition of a book and of a labyrinth. When, after thirteen years of total dedication to this double task, Ts'ui Pen is murdered, the only thing that is found in his rooms is a bulky manuscript containing a vague heap of contradictory drafts that simultaneously offer the reader not one alternative line of development among many, but rather, all kinds of alternatives, every possible combination and ending. The puzzled narrator eventually finds the labyrinth nobody had been able to spot when he realises that book and labyrinth are not two different objects, but one (Borges, "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan" 105), that is, that the book is "a labyrinth of labyrinths."<sup>6</sup> The reader of Ts'ui Pen's infinitely circular book, where all conceivable endings are possible, is thus given the possibility of endlessly reading, and so living, the same events in infinitely various ways. This tale is a good example of the paradox lying at the heart of all these looking-glass textual worlds, as it combines the circularity and closure of mythical time with the infinite openness of Umberto Eco's *opera aperta* (Eco, *The Open Work*).<sup>7</sup> Similarly, considered from a mythical perspective, the pattern cast by *The Pilgrim's Progress* and the other canonical books Tim enters in his dreams reveals its paradoxical condition as an infinitely open and changeable *imago mundi* of Tim's own circular and close life-quest along the pages of *English Music*.

A well-known feature of (magical) mirrors and looking-glass texts in fairy tales and gothic fiction is their proleptic and performative power. Borges offers a telling example of this power in another of his *Ficciones*, “The Mirror of Ink” (“El espejo de tinta” 341-43), where a magician brings about the tyrant’s death by forcing him to ‘write’ and ‘read’ the ceremony of his own future death in the mirror-like pool of ink poured in the hollow of his hand. The symbolism of this tale, which expresses the power of writing to create (rather than copy) reality, is echoed in Tim’s first dream, when Pliable, one of the characters in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, tells Tim not to trust what he takes for a fact, “unless it was written down” (*English Music* 28).

The rejection of the mimetic function of the work of art as a copy of the real world and its elevation to the realm of the sublime was an attempt to compensate for the loss of faith in transcendence associated with late nineteenth and early twentieth-century movements such as aestheticism, imagism, French symbolism, and modernism. In this respect, as Ackroyd pointedly remarks in his biography of T. S. Eliot, in his early poetry Eliot was very much influenced by F. H. Bradley, the British philosopher on whose work he wrote his doctoral thesis: “Since Eliot came to him [Bradley] by way of Bergson, the last great European philosopher by whom he had been affected, he felt an immediate affinity with Bradley’s own scepticism about the uses of conceptual intelligence in either recognizing or defining ‘reality’” (*T. S. Eliot* 49). As Ackroyd further explains:

For Bradley ‘Reality is One,’ a seamless and coherent whole which is ‘non-relational’—that is, it cannot be divided into separate intellectual categories. And in his subversion of such orthodox categories as ‘space’ and ‘time,’ which reflect only a partial comprehension of reality, Bradley is pushed back towards a larger description which can only be expressed as the Absolute. [...] The Absolute holds together Thought and Reality, Will and Feeling, in a sublime whole. (49)

Bradley situated the Real on a sublime, transcendental plane, but he was sceptical about the possibility of human beings ever contemplating this unitary and absolute reality, as he believed that, in the world

of appearances where we live, any knowledge of the Absolute can only be reached through the experience of “conditional,” “finite truths” (49). Eliot’s response to the problem of solipsistic closure stems from Bradley’s position as, instead of taking the impossibility of being original for granted, like Beckett, or advocating collective authorship, like Borges, he tried to overcome Bradley’s scepticism by reformulating the role of the individual artist within the tradition. In consonance with this, he argued for “a steady enlargement of our knowledge and a continual search for system, unity and coherence” (50). As Ackroyd reflects,

[t]o combine scepticism with idealism, to recognize the limitations of ordinary knowledge and experience but yet to see that when they are organized into a coherent whole they might vouchsafe glimpses of absolute truth—there is balm here for one trapped in the world and yet seeking some other, invaded by sensations and yet wishing to understand and to order them. (50)

One key to Eliot’s understanding of art lies, then, in his (god-like) aspiration to grant transcendental significance to the individual work of art by means of a titanic effort of absorption and unification of knowledge. Thus, as Ackroyd notes,

the act of creation was for him the act of synthesis, both in his poetry and his prose. He brought to bear upon such ideas a unique power of organization so that they seemed to form a coherent and persuasive pattern. Simplicity, order, intensity, concentration are the principles he applied to that end, and from them emerged something very like (but not quite) a poetic creed. (106-07)

Susan Ang mentions “Tradition and the Individual Talent”—together with *The Waste Land* and Joyce’s *Ulysses*<sup>8</sup>—as “another work which has shaped *English Music*” (Ang 223), and she adds that Eliot’s famous contention that “the existing monuments of literature form an ideal order among themselves, that they are not simply collections of the writings of individuals,” can help readers understand both the “mutually defining” relationship of the “works within *English Music*” and “Ackroyd’s concept of ‘English music’” itself (224). But she does not

pursue the issue any further, on the reflexion that “[i]t 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” (224).

In the next section, the critic moves from the presentation of *English Music* as an utterly open, playfully self-conscious and dynamic World/Book to what she describes as the construction of the “Fertile Text” and the difficulties readers have to respond adequately to the various questions that such a labile text sets. Drawing a parallel between protagonist and reader, she expands the application of the motif of the hero’s quest to the (male) reader, who is thus “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)” (226). From this unexpected position, the reader-as-quester would need “a whole philosophy of reading” to answer the “apparently transparent question: ‘What is this book before me?’” (226). However, the philosophy of reading Ang subsequently broaches is limited to the description of the attitude of the reader who “enquires into, rather than assumes or imposes, meaning” as “both courteous and modest as well as a renunciation of authority over textual meaning.” Her conclusion is that readers must be fully aware that “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” (226).

Though commonsensical, these remarks on the task of the ideal reader of *English Music* have a clearly ironic, as well as an incongruous ring, since her own reading of the novel in fact forces it through “the spaghetti machine” of the Grail legend and Frazerian vegetation myths while simultaneously recognising its essential openness and dynamism. After comparing the reader to a quester confronting a text which may have “doors without locks, which cannot be forced and whose intransigence must be respected, although the text may then

choose to open itself" (235), the critic herself admits the irony of her position:

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. (235)

It would be impossible to disagree with this cautionary warning. Unfortunately, however, instead of moving on to the formulation of the main tenets of her own "licit" or ethical philosophy of reading, Susan Ang once again avoids responding to the challenge she has just set herself: "This is a question which I cannot claim to answer with any great degree of confidence" (235), opting instead for the endorsement of Peter Ackroyd's broad division, in *Notes for a New Culture* (1976), between, on the one hand, the kind of "humanist" criticism associated with F. R. Leavis and Raymond Williams (235) and, on the other, the "[c]riticism which honours resistance within the text—as [John] Peck's does, and as [Jeremy] Gibson's and [Julian] Wolfreys's does" (232). After mentioning some of the pros and the cons of approaching the novel from either of these divergent perspectives, she concludes that "[p]erhaps 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" (238).

Ang's tentative advocacy of "creative reading" evinces a confusion between the tasks of writer and critic that is fully in keeping with her own definition of her essay as a "Fantasia upon Reading *English Music*" and shows the limitations of her interpretation of Ackroyd's distinction between the "modernist" and the "humanist" cultural outlooks, which Ackroyd characterises in terms of their respective

attitudes to self, world, and language. As I pointed out elsewhere (*Metafiction and Myth*),

[h]is main contention is that while for the humanists language is transparent[—]a mere tool for the expression of human values and human nature, that is, an aesthetic instrument for the communication of the experience of the moral self[—]for the modernists language is an autonomous entity, a self-begetting universe of discourse without referent or content. According to Ackroyd, aesthetic humanism reaches its peak in the 1930s and 1940s in the work of New Critics such as F. R. Leavis, John Crowe Ransom, and Cleanth Brooks, who define literature in aesthetic and moral terms as the linguistic expression of man, and criticism simply as the study of style. (7-8)

This outlook informs the literature written by Georgian and Edwardian writers like John Galsworthy, Leslie Stephen, and G. E. Moore, who postulate the morality and utilitarian nature of art. This tradition is continued in the 1950s by Movement writers such as Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis, and John Wain.

The most important arguments against this theoretical position are raised by modernist writers like James Joyce and Alain Robbe-Grillet, and by (post)structuralist critics like Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and their followers. For such writers and thinkers, aesthetic humanism is based on a false notion of the human individual (or subject) as a constant or identifiable essence or self. In fact, they contend, the subject is better described as a process, an interaction of material, historical, social, and psychological factors, each of which is in its turn determined by and forms part of numerous other processes. Likewise, where for the humanists language has a utilitarian function, for the modernists it becomes a self-sufficient and autonomous sign-system without meaning or referent. Thus, taking writing (as opposed to speech) as the original linguistic form, Barthes substitutes the notion of text for that of literary genres and defines criticism as the metalanguage of literature, and literature itself as the science of language (Ackroyd, *Notes for a New Culture* 112).

These antithetical positions gave rise, in the 1980s, to a heated debate in the related fields of literary criticism and moral philosophy between, on the one hand, adherents to the traditional humanist

critical approach, who defended the mimetic function of art and, on the other, post-structuralist critics who insisted on the textual dimension of literary works and tried to respond to the question Ang asks herself about the conceptual bases for a licit or ethical reading of texts.<sup>9</sup> J. Hillis Miller specifically addressed this issue in *The Ethics of Reading* (1987), where he contended that the ethical moment of reading is not achieved by simply responding to the moralising or educational contents of a text, that it necessarily requires a response to the *language* of the text. Echoing both Jacques Derrida's and Roland Barthes's concepts of "writerly text" and "scriptor" the then member of the Yale School of deconstruction contended that we must read carefully, patiently, scrupulously, always bearing in mind the fact that the text we are reading can say something different from what we readers wish or expect the text to say and also something different from what we have grasped. Thus, Miller defined the act of reading as a categorical imperative, or rather as the first ethical imperative, since for Miller, ethics is exclusively an ethics of reading, and of a deconstructivist reading at that. Thus,

Miller's insistence on the importance of being attentive and open to the perception of the unexpected and hidden meanings in the text confers on the act of reading a significant double function. It is productive, in the sense that the text, defined by Miller as essentially "unreadable" and abiding by its own internal laws, is always in danger of being betrayed (i.e., "misread") by the reader; and it is performative, in the sense that, by allowing the hidden meanings to surface, the act of reading may effectually contribute to the transformation of the social, political and cultural structures. (Onega, "The Ethics of Fiction" 62)<sup>10</sup>

Once the reader's attention is focused on the language of *English Music*, rather than on its moralising or didactic contents, it is easy to see that its fluidity and dynamism stem from its rhetorical and formal excessiveness and that this excessiveness has a clear ethical message. As Jean-Michel Ganteau points out in his path-breaking essay, "Post-Baroque Sublime? The Case of Peter Ackroyd," the novel's display of hyperbole, excessive troping, hypertextual citation and metaleptic leaps, together with the constant blurring of generic conventions and

ontological boundaries are all in keeping with the (post)baroque aesthetics characteristic of what he considers to be the most productive and challenging contemporary literary mode, the (postmodern) romance. As Ganteau forcefully argues in a later essay, the very excessiveness of this mode and its constant enhancement of emotion and affect efficiently convey a refutation of “any form of globalizing, teleologically determined discourse so as to make the other break through the heart of the same” (Ganteau, “Rise from the Ground” 193).<sup>11</sup> In other words, the openness, dynamism and rhetorical excessiveness of a work like *English Music* is not a gratuitous or playful flourish aimed at trapping critical heffalumps, but rather the expression of an ethical position which, in agreement with Emmanuel Levinas’ ethics of alterity and affects, is based on the refusal of any sort of totalising claims (193). Once the ethical component in the formal and rhetorical embodiment of the novel is taken into consideration, it becomes clear that Tim’s visionary dreams have a structural as well as an ethical function, since they break the directionality of Tim’s quest by providing “looking-glass” texts which, like Borges’s mirrors and labyrinths of paper and ink, endlessly reduplicate and disperse meaning in all directions.

Further, analysing the baroque aesthetics of *English Music* from the perspective of the birth and development of the mode, it may be stated that its excessiveness is the necessary expression of a violent effort at bridging the split between the two worlds brought about by the disappearance of God. As J. Hillis Miller has explained, once rationalism put an end to the possibility of transcendence, literature, like the ritual of the Eucharist after the Protestant denial of the transubstantiation, moved from “the old symbolism of analogical participation” to the “modern poetic symbolism of reference at a distance”, so that, from then on, “symbols designate an absence, not a presence. They point to something which remains somewhere else, unpossessed and unattainable” (Miller, *The Disappearance of God* 6). In other words, once God becomes “a *Deus absconditus*, hidden somewhere behind the silence of infinite spaces, [...] our literary symbols can only make the

most distant allusions to him, or to the natural world which used to be his abiding place and home" (6). It is at this point that baroque art spreads in France, Italy and Spain, as "the expression of the moment of this separation" (7):

In such poetry natural objects twist, curve, and distort themselves as if to express a violent effort to reach something which remains beyond them. [...] *Baroque poetry represents a violent effort by the human imagination to keep open the avenues of communication between man and God.* It tries to express, in a language which is visibly disintegrating and becoming empty, a divine reality which is in the very act of disappearing from the world. In baroque poetry we can witness the crucial moment of the change from a poetry of presence to a poetry of allusion and absence. (7; my emphasis)

This description of the aim of baroque poetry brings to the fore the importance of the human imagination to achieve the impossible task of reconnecting the two worlds after divine reality has evaporated and language can only record its absence. As the quotation suggests, the only possibility of success resides in the visionary power of the artist, who now becomes a shaman, or mediator between the two worlds, someone with the capacity of shaping and giving overall significance (a complete idea) to the anarchy and futility of particular phenomena by the use of myth. The task of the modern artist is, then, to heal the split between spirit and matter through the sacrificial rituals of the imagination.

This was the real task of Clement Harcombe, the "MEDIUM AND HEALER" who worked at the Chemical Theatre (*English Music 2*), conjuring up the spirits of the dead and faith-healing a whole gallery of bodily and spiritually crippled individuals, until he lost faith in his healing capacity, or, to put it in William Blake's terms, until his leap of faith in the power of his creative imagination plunged him into the abysmal spiritual blindness of "Single vision & Newton's sleep."<sup>12</sup> In this respect, the fact that the only education he gave Tim was the massive reading of books, just before bedtime, so that the child could enter the stories in his dreams, accurately describes the nature of Tim's training, since it is only during these visionary dreams, induced by the reading of canonical literary texts, that he could have access to

the power and knowledge his father used to absorb from “the spirits of the past or the spirits of the dead” (11), who reside in the “spirit world”:

“Of course there is a world beyond this one. Some people call it the spirit world, but the name is not very important ...” [...]. “It’s here. It’s all around us. It’s part of us.” He stopped for a moment, and I [Tim] heard a murmur of voices; but I did not want to come too close. Not yet. (337)

At the same time, in keeping with the desired union of soul and world that would restore health to the waste land, the invisible presence of this all-encompassing spirit world is registered by Clement as the accumulation in old buildings of “the spirit of place”:

“Look at it another way. You all know how the atmosphere of an old house is quite different from that of a newly built one. [...] And what is that, but the spirit of place? [...] That is what I mean when I tell you that the spirits are among us, and are a part of us.” (337)

This description clearly reveals Clement Harcombe as a visionary artist/shaman capable of accessing the archetypal forms of the imagination that shape life and art through his spiritual connection with the ancestral dead.<sup>13</sup> Needless to say, his imaginative lapse of faith, which takes place in the solipsistic and thoroughly traumatised London of the 1920s and 1930s, has important consequences, as it brings about the rupture of the precarious connection between the spiritual and the material worlds he had so far struggled to maintain through the sheer power of his creative imagination.

In her reading of the novel, Susan Ang describes the action of *English Music* as “[o]pening in 1992, the year of its own publication” and being “swiftly returned to the childhood of its narrator Timothy Harcombe ‘seventy years before’” (Ang 215). The year 1992 signals, then, the present of Tim-as-writer/narrator, when, already an old man, he sets about recounting his memories of childhood and youth. But the memoirs themselves stop earlier, as they run from the 1920s, that is, from the aftermath of the First World War, to the death of his father and maternal grandparents, which take place within a very short time

span, just a few months before the outbreak of the Second World War, as Tim states in the words that close his retrospective narration:

My grandparents had died in the autumn of 1938, and in the following year all prospects of peace and safety disappeared. I was called up, and did not come back to Upper Harford for another seven years. (399)

The story Tim tells, then, stretches between the two World Wars, with the aftermath of the First marking the beginning of his visionary father's physical and spiritual decay, and his death heralding the outbreak of the Second. The fact that the Second World War is barely mentioned should not prevent readers from seeing its symbolic significance: Tim places it strategically at the end of his memoirs, and he uses it to mark the death of his father and grandparents, thus signalling the end of the world of light they represent. Further, the narrative ellipsis that links the end of these memoirs (1939) with Tim-as-narrator's present (1992) is in keeping with the unutterability of the traumatic experience of war and the difficulty of putting this experience into words. Tim's traumatised condition can be gauged by the fact that, although he was in the army for seven years, he only mentions his participation in the war in a passing remark in the paragraph quoted above. Further still, the framing of the memoirs by the two World Wars is significant in that they bring to the fore yet another related source of anguish that characterises the modern period: the transition from religious belief to historicism. As J. Hillis Miller explains, while the ancient world believed in the possibility of knowing the difference between good and evil, right and wrong, the historical sense that arises in the modern era involves the impossibility of ever discovering the right and true culture, the right and true philosophy or religion. Thus,

Historicism, which begins as an interest in the past, ends by transforming man's sense of the present. As time wears on towards the twentieth century, and especially after the destructive cataclysm of the First World War, this sense of the artificiality of our culture is changed into an even more disquieting certainty that not just the outer form of our civilization, but civilization

itself, is doomed to go the way of all the cultures of the past. [...] Like Babylon, Nineveh, and Elam, our civilization will become mere heaps of broken artifacts, fragments whose very use, it may be, will have been forgotten. (Miller, *The Disappearance of God* 11)

The feeling of anguish and sense of cultural catastrophe that erupted after the First World War continued in a crescendo that reached its climax in the unprecedented horrors of the Second. As is well known, in *Prisms* (originally published 1949), Theodor W. Adorno argued that “[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (34), on the contention that the arrogance of reason had led Nazism to barbarism. As Roger Luckhurst points out, this declaration was subsequently modulated in *Negative Dialectics* (originally published 1966), where Adorno admits that silence is no option either and that the denial of culture is equally barbaric. However, the Jewish philosopher continued to consider all western culture as “contaminated by and complicit with Auschwitz,” so that “Adorno sets art and cultural criticism the severe, and paradoxical, imperative of finding ways of representing the unrepresentable” (Luckhurst 5).

With Miller’s and Adorno’s ideas in mind, the baroque excessiveness, fluidity and unreadability of *English Music* becomes a symptom of the difficulty in representing the events narrated, while the role of Tim as quester for the Grail/Book that would restore fertility to the waste land acquires a further dimension well beyond that of renewing English literature and culture after a period of exhaustion, for what is really at stake is the cleansing and regeneration of western culture after its apocalyptic demise. From this perspective, the fact that Clement’s doubts about his faith-healing capacities begin in the aftermath of the First World War and take him to his death just before the outbreak of the Second has great symbolic significance since, according to the Grail legend, the health of king and land depend on each other.

After the First World War, Clement falls prey to growing feelings of anguish, despair and nihilism, expressed in drunkenness, aimlessness, mutism, aloofness and his transformation from faith-healer into card player and fortune teller (like Madame Sosostriis in *The Waste Land*),

while at the same time the Chemical Theatre and the area of London where he lives with Tim progressively deteriorate, so that Tim is more and more worried about getting lost or abandoned in the dark and labyrinthine streets of London.<sup>14</sup> Though they live in a very poor and bare place, Tim always feels safe in his father's house, with its sunflowers in the garden pointing to the light above. As Clement explains to his son: "they're not wild, Timmy. [...] They're trained to follow the sun. Everything follows the sun in our house" (*English Music* 94). As in *The House of Doctor Dee* (178-79), the rays of sunlight captured by the sunflowers point to the house as an *umbilicus mundi* connecting the two worlds and keeping in check the universal darkness encroaching upon London. It is after this remark that the sad faith-healer decides to take Tim to his maternal grandparents' farm in the country, a place full of kindness, vegetation and light. The child never pardons his father for this separation, which he misinterprets as a sign of lovelessness, where in fact it is prompted by his desire to remove him from London's increasing physical and spiritual barrenness. At this stage, Clement Harcombe is the already sick and ailing last visionary artist/shaman with the capacity to keep open the avenues of communication with the spiritual world and so with the capacity to avoid the impending transformation of the material world into a Dantean *inferno*, or, in Nicholas Dyer's terms, a *mundus tenebrosus* harbouring degenerate nature (Ackroyd, *Hawksmoor* 101). The extinction of western culture associated with the horrors of the Second World War may be said to culminate this evil process of transformation.

In the post-apocalyptic new age of global desolation and collective trauma, the only hope of regeneration and salvation lies in Tim's capacity to resume his father's shamanistic work. This possibility seems to come to a definitive end after his return from the War, seven years after his father's death, when not even Edward Campion, whose health was restored by Clement at the cost of his life, seems to care any longer about the sad mesmerist's visionary wisdom:

By the time I returned Edward had married, and soon I looked upon his children as part of my own family. I had no other now. I told them all about

my mother and father, and about the circus, but to them it seemed from so distant a time that there were occasions when I preferred to say nothing and keep my memories to myself. (399)

After he had given up the role of faith-healer, overpowered by the darkness of the age, Clement had eventually returned to his old job as clown in a travelling circus, working as a “thought-reader” and a “ventriloquist” (396), significantly, like his own father (374). Similarly, Tim, after his father’s death, also remained in the circus and “soon discovered that [he] had an ability to ‘throw’ [his] voice in any direction [he] pleased [...]. Sometimes there were many voices, and the ring [...] amazed the audience, who were as bewildered as if they had heard various spirits haunting the circus” (396).<sup>15</sup> In other words, Tim has become a “monopolylinguist” (Ackroyd, “London Luminaries”), like Dan Leno, the nineteenth-century music-hall comedian who appears in *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994), and who managed to put an end to another utterly traumatic age of spiritual barrenness through the cathartic ritual of comic laughter.<sup>16</sup>

Needless to say, Tim’s training as a ventriloquist would be priceless for what Susan Ang considers to be his allotted task of finding the Grail/Book that would restore fertility to the waste land, for if Tim is to succeed where his father had failed in the attempt to heal the traumatic split between soul and world initiated by modernity’s lapse of faith in transcendence, he must first absorb the voices and knowledge of every visionary artist/shaman preceding him and recast them in a new form, one capable, as Adorno demands, of representing the unrepresentable. In this sense, the best proof readers can have that Tim eventually overcomes his reluctance to accept his father’s sacrificial role and is ready to continue his mediating task is his own reflection, at the end of the novel, that, he has “inherited the past because [he] ha[s] acknowledged it at last” (399). This recognition is significant in that it involves his realisation that historical determinism is as imaginary as any other human creation:

Edward was wrong when he described the recurring cycles of history: they disappear as soon as you recognize them for what they are. Perhaps that is

why I have written all this down, in a final act of recognition. I do not know what is left for me now, but I feel able to rise to my feet in expectation and walk steadily forward without any burden. (399-400)

Tim's comment may be read as evidence that, by refusing to forget and sitting down to record his memories of childhood and youth, he has indeed succeeded in finding the "fertile" Grail/Book capable of regenerating the waste land of western culture. This interpretation is confirmed by his realisation, after finishing it, that he "no longer need[s] to look back" to remember (399), or "open the old books" (400), as the knowledge his father had so strenuously tried to pass onto him "also belongs with [him]" (399). Thus, he is able to console Edward's granddaughter Cecilia for the death of a bird on the reflection that "[i]t's safe now. Its soul has flown away" (400). It seems, then, that Clement Harcombe's faith-healing wisdom was not completely lost after all, that it is preserved in Tim's book (and soul) and ready for transmission to those readers willing to make the ethical effort of interpretation that J. Hillis Miller demands and *English Music* deserves.

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## NOTES

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<sup>2</sup>For an analysis of the evolution of the theories of authorship that brought about this reversal and its further development in the postmodernist period, see Onega, "Self, Text and World."

<sup>3</sup>Ackroyd plays with this idea once and again in his novels of the 1980s and 1990s. See Onega, *Metafiction and Myth, passim*.

<sup>4</sup>Thus, Hamlet, in his recommendations to the players, famously defined the purpose of play-acting as: "to hold as 'twere the mirror up to Nature to show Virtue her feature, Scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure" (Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 3.2.21-24).

<sup>5</sup>My translations of “todas las posibles combinaciones de los veintitantos símbolos ortográficos” and “todo lo que es dable expresar” (Borges, “La biblioteca de Babel” 89).

<sup>6</sup>My translations of “un laberinto de laberintos” (Borges, “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan” 102).

<sup>7</sup>As I argued in “The Mythical Impulse,” the same ontological hesitation between the book as closed fictional world and as transcendental labyrinth takes place in British historiographic metafiction in general and in Peter Ackroyd’s novels in particular.

<sup>8</sup>Although Ang includes a reference to Joyce in the title of her essay, she only mentions his work in endnote 3, where she points out that 1922, the year of publication of *The Waste Land*, “also saw the publication of Joyce’s *Ulysses*.” This is followed by the remark that: “*English Music* also plays with the *Ulysses* connection, but to do justice to that connection would require the space of another essay entirely” (Ang 239n3).

<sup>9</sup>For a more detailed account of the main tenets of neo-humanist criticism and post-structuralist theory and the controversy surrounding the return of ethics in literary criticism and philosophy, see Onega, “The Ethics of Fiction” 57-64. See also Ganteau and Onega, Introduction.

<sup>10</sup>More recently, critics like Robert Eaglestone (“One and the Same”), Kathrin Stengel (“Ethics and Style”), James Phelan (“Rhetorical/Literary Ethics”) have offered highly productive developments of this critical approach by arguing that ethics and aesthetics are inseparable and that the ethical value of a literary work resides in its stylistic and formal features. See Michael Eskin’s introduction to the special 2004 issue of *Poetics Today*, for an understanding of the ideological basis of this position.

<sup>11</sup>See also Ganteau’s introduction to *Peter Ackroyd et la musique du passé*.

<sup>12</sup>According to Blake, visionary poet/prophets like Isaiah, Ezekiel, or the titan Los enjoyed “fourfold vision” or enlarged consciousness. Opposed to it is the “Single vision & Newton’s sleep” brought about by the advent of rational materialism (Blake, “Letter to Butts”). “In a lecture entitled ‘Blake and London Radicalism’ (1995), Ackroyd claim[ed] that it was William Blake’s visionary capacity and his allegiance to religious dissent that led him to ‘create a poetry and an art as intricate and as elaborate as anything to be found in Michaelangelo or in Dante.’ Ackroyd’s fascination with these aspects of Blake’s art may be said to lie at the heart of a deeply felt desire to create a similarly intricate and elaborate art, the expression of his own Cockney visionary sensibility” (Onega, *Metafiction and Myth* 99).

<sup>13</sup>This reading of Clement Harcombe’s shamanistic role is in keeping with Evans Lansing Smith’s contention that the most important motif in modernist literature is that of the *nekylia*, or descent to the underworld. As he explains, in the modernist adaptation of the myth, the underworld has three main functions: as “granary,” or repository of the archetypal forms of the imagination revealing “the

fundamental patterns shaping life and art" (Smith 2); as a sacred site of initiatory transformation (*temenos*); or as an *inferno*. In its function as granary, the underworld is the place where the mythic patterns of the imagination are revealed, the place capable of bringing about the transformation from the naturalistic perspective of ego to the psychic perspective of soul, that is, the place of miraculous transition from ego to *eidos*, from the individual to the archetypal (14-15). In its function as crypt of the ancestral dead, the underworld might be compared to Borges' World of Art, as it "contains those great poets of the tradition whose voices haunt the work of Eliot, Joyce and Pound" (Smith 3-4). This crypt is the place where such Ackroydian characters as Oscar Wilde (*The Last Testament*), Chatterton, Meredith and Charles Wychwood (*Chatterton*), as well as Tim's parents and grandparents, travel at the moment of their deaths in order to meet their ancestors. Thus, Tim explains that, after their deaths, he realised that "they were all together at last. My grandparents, with my mother and father, and others besides" (*English Music* 398; my emphasis). For a more nuanced analysis of Ackroyd's recurrent use of this motif, see Onega, "The Descent to the Underworld."

<sup>14</sup>Clement tries to teach Tim how to find his way in this infernal London, by playing at "get[ting] lost," when they are on their way home after the sessions at the Chemical Theatre: "By which he [Clement] meant that we would approach Hackney Square from a different direction" (13). But Tim hates this game and is "possessed by some general dread of being abandoned" (14).

<sup>15</sup>Although Tim never met his mother, since she died in giving birth to him, he learnt music by playing her old records while he was staying in her birthplace with his maternal grandparents. Like the rest of her family, she is associated with the tradition of what Ackroyd calls "London Luminaries and Cockney Visionaries" through her name and religion. Aware of this, Clement called his wife "Bright Cecilia" (*English Music* 98). As Tim explains, she was named after "the patron saint of music. A Catholic saint, of course" (197). On his conception of the English visionary sensibility at large, see also Ackroyd, "The Englishness of English Literature."

<sup>16</sup>See Onega, *Metafiction and Myth* 133-47.

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