

## POST-BAROQUE SUBLIME? THE CASE OF PETER ACKROYD<sup>1</sup>



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The purpose of this essay will be to examine a postmodern British novel, i.e. Peter Ackroyd's *English Music* (1992), in the light of contemporary discoveries concerning baroque aesthetics. This dimension is inscribed in various ways in Ackroyd's works, through the resort to specific textual ploys, but also thanks to the presence of characteristic *topoi*, which include the fascination with and spectacle of death, existential anguish, metamorphosis, disguise and dressing up, illusions, etc. These thematic characteristics and strategies contribute to the building up of an atmosphere or colouring which is comparable to that pervading the novels of other contemporary British authors, such as Angela Carter, Jeanette Winterson and even Salman Rushdie, whose works will be used sporadically to illustrate our point. This tends to suggest that the baroque is still very much present as the distinct tessitura of the novels of some of the most prominent contemporary British writers, and thus appears as a distinct component of postmodern fiction.

As may be surmised from these preliminary considerations, our approach will be based on a transhistorical conception of the baroque as a thematic, formal and aesthetic constant (Eugenio d'Ors), as a function or an "inflexion" (Deleuze), or even as a way of seeing (Buci-Glucksmann), and is not directly concerned with the periodization theory of the baroque. However, the notion of periodization will have to be tackled in so far as one may find it difficult to deal with a postmodern artefact without taking into account the text's inscription within a period, a culture, an ideology. This will be done through Buci-Glucksmann's (1996) notion of the "ultramodern", a period characterised by a shift away from stability and finitude towards an "infinite dispersal of the real and the virtual" which is tantamount to a form of entropy (Buci-

Glucksmann 1996: 18). More specifically, this essay will try to address the question of the status of the baroque as an infinite fold or "pli infini" (Deleuze 1988), or more particularly, that of the connection between the baroque and the notion of infinity.

In fact, we shall try to concentrate on Buci-Glucksmann's conundrum, i.e. does postmodern/ ultramodern/ post-baroque culture retain any link—despite its obsession with the baroque categories of artificiality, superficiality, ephemerality—with a culture of the sublime (in Jean-François Lyotard's (1988, 1991) acceptance of the term) or does it lead to a form of "de-sublimisation"? This should allow us to concentrate on the relationships between what is traditionally considered a representative of religious art from the time of its emergence and development in the countries of the "baroque crescent" and its post- or ultra-modern, potentially "de-sublimised" avatar.

This will be done in three stages: first by noting the presence of baroque elements in Ackroyd's novel converging in the building up of some sort of a baroque diction/eloquence (which might sound paradoxical within the framework of fiction in print). Secondly by focusing our attention on the representation of artifice and on the artifice of representation in the novel (bearing in mind the represented/ representing dichotomy). The last movement will be concerned with the problem of expressiveness and presentation (as opposed to representation), which will lead us to ponder on the necessary readjustment of *mimesis* (its modalities and finalities) in a postmodern, post-baroque context.

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The purpose of this article is certainly not to broach yet another poetics of the baroque. However, we would like to take a look at some elements which seem to be characteristic of this aesthetic movement or manifestation. *English Music* is a novel concerned with reminiscing, tradition, continuity—in other words permanence—under various guises. It thus analyses various aspects of inheritance: the biological, the cultural, the creative, etc.<sup>2</sup> What is remarkable is that this is done (as is often the case with Ackroyd, *Hawksmoor* being a case in point) through a great deal of repetition and redundancy (at the thematic, symbolical and narrative levels among others) leading to the establishment of a specific tonality and a superficial ornateness traditionally associated with things baroque. In other words, the text evinces many of the figures of amplification analysed by Gérard Genette (1969: 195-222) in an essay entitled "D'un récit baroque". Not only are the style and the descriptions inordinately ornate (a quick look at page one will convince the reader on that account) but one must realize that the author's

a quick look at the *incipit* will make this clear. In order to introduce the notion of permanence (metaphorised through the geographical or rather geological/ archeological notion of superposition, an option already amply resorted to in *Hawksmoor*), the narrator gives two juxtaposed instances of replacement and continuity, where one would have been sufficient. This cumulative rhetoric is a constant in the novel and will be omnipresent to the last paragraph. Interestingly enough, those repetitions are linked to the evocation of the permanence process evoked through the image of a fusion, a melting down from one age/ generation to the next. This is conveyed through the candle metaphor in the second paragraph: "On the other side of the hall there had been a dairy, and the family who owned it kept a cow in the backyard; they also sold soap and candles which, it was rumoured, were melted down from its predecessor" (Ackroyd 1992: 1). The opening description, by concentrating on the geographical evocation of the *locus* of the protagonist's childhood, thus provides a series of spatial metaphors of the process of permanence, transformation and inheritance. The whole scene tends to appear as some pictorial composition, a vignette or tableau, and this opening *hypotyposis*, by soliciting the reader's eye, introduces what is generally considered a characteristic of the baroque, i.e. its reliance on vision or, in Christine Buci-Glucksmann's (1986: 29, 51) term, "voyure".

Besides, the spatial metaphor of inheritance or permanence is resorted to time and again, in cumulative fashion, as is made clear in the following lines: "Houses are always built on, Timothy. One gives place to another. Foundations laid upon foundations. The end of one is the beginning of another. And this one, now, is coming to its end. [...] The inhabitants of this place have all gone their own ways, their adventures finished, and whatever stories have been told beneath the roof of this old house have come to their conclusion" (Ackroyd 1992: 92). In such passages, the architectonic metaphor of permanence goes hand in hand with the literary metaphor of the palimpsest to echo and prolong a paradigm already present in Ackroyd's equally baroque earlier novel, *Hawksmoor* (1985).

Now, as announced on the first page, this notion of continuity is going to be relayed throughout the novel, both as regards its micro- and macro-structure. In fact, the narrative is organised around the alternation of odd-numbered chapters devoted to the evocation of the protagonist's life from childhood to old age and of even-numbered chapters concerned with aesthetic experiences, the protagonist and narrator being a highly gifted person, of a very sensitive, medium-like disposition, which allows him, in true modernist fashion (in accordance with the basic rules of impersonality) to lose himself

world migration (McHale 1987, 1992) under the  
 stance, he may be seen to break through the  
 a painting/ book so as to be granted access to  
 Now, those alternative chapters are concatenated  
 called a thematic, tonal and even structural  
 structural image of the notion of continuity  
 and is highly illustrative of the sensation of  
 esthetics of the baroque. For instance, Chapter  
 of the protagonist's favourite books as a child  
 which his father spent reading out to him, at  
 and here are the *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Alice in*  
 on the following words, while the grown up  
 saying: "I hear the sound of his voice again, I  
 sees and his glasses slipping from the bridge  
 urn and I am once more curled up within my  
 of the ceiling and, sometimes, as he reads,  
 er begins with the following polyptoton, in  
 lancy option at work in the text: "And as he  
 a dream", giving the reader access to the  
 land/ wonderland with Alice and Christian,  
 nsiderations, partly written as a pastiche of  
 mplete with allegories and archaisms): "So he  
 am. His father was beside him; he had fallen  
 on, and the book from which he was reading  
 from the outset, Chapter Three mixes literary  
 alimpsest," my father said, at breakfast on the  
 1992: 24, 27, 48).<sup>3</sup> All transitions function in  
 make the meaning obvious, inescapable,  
 the novel, by resorting to infinite  
 nd redundancies, promotes an impression of  
 t which is to be found in such genres (or  
 al hammering and the overkill technique  
 ences, other figures of excess are present in  
 pear in the diegesis. This is the case because  
 ch is generally depicted in some detail, yet  
 f shadows and of the imprecision linked to  
 the foreignness of past time and territory)  
 pernatural events and characters. In fact,  
 nities with the mode of romance (its happy

ending, for instance), *English Music* is concerned with an exotic world in  
 which magical occurrences are bound to take place. They are accommodated  
 within the framework of a generally realistic narrative, but at the same time  
 they do strain realism (in the same way as the cumulative excesses and the  
 rhetoric of redundancy alluded to above) to create what might be termed some  
 sort of a baroque realism or simply atmosphere. From the beginning, the  
 reader is presented with a protagonist whose working life as a child in  
 Edwardian London consists in being the assistant of his father's performances  
 in faith-healing sessions —one might be tempted to call them numbers— in  
 the hall called the Chemical Theatre. Throughout the text, the reader is thus  
 presented with extraordinary circumstances, even though they are treated in a  
 realistic way: people are healed in dramatic circumstances, some sort of a  
 dialogue with the afterworld —or with that of the past— is also made  
 possible. Likewise, through the chiaroscuro of its reminiscing shades, the  
 text allows for the apparition of figures of a special kind, creatures of the  
 night and of the circus, which in other circumstances might be called freaks.  
 The character of Margaret is a case in point: she is a diminutive person, a  
 member of the Harcombe Club (i.e. the group of eccentrics or marginal  
 figures gathering around Clement Harcombe, the protagonist's father), and  
 she is depicted as a creature of the air, some sort of an elf, sharing affinities  
 with fairies or other legendary folk, or with literary precedents like Alice  
 herself: "'There isn't much weight to take off,' she replied. 'I'm a very light  
 creature, you see. We light people just float around'. In fact she began to  
 skip along the path: I opened the door for her, she slipped past me into my  
 father's room, and immediately flung herself into an old brown armchair"  
 (Ackroyd 1992: 52). This elfish creature, of a very hybrid nature, half human  
 and half spirit, half realistic and half paper-thin in its intertextual  
 determination, is evocative of other such characters that people the composite  
 worlds of postmodern novels. This is for instance most notably the case with  
 Angela Carter's creatures, and more especially with Fevvers, the winged  
 protagonist of *Nights at the Circus* (1984), with its host of freaks and  
 improbable allegories, but also with the heroine in Jeanette Winterson's *The*  
*Passion* (1987), Villanelle, with webbed feet and amphibious powers, or  
 again with Winterson's Rabelaisian Dog Woman, in *Sexing the Cherry*  
 (1989). Such textual constructs also people the worlds of Salman Rushdie's  
 novels, as is the case with Saleem Sinai and all the *Midnight's Children* who  
 telepathetically haunt the world of the novel bearing the same title  
 (*Midnight's Children*, 1981). In those cases (which represent but a sample of  
 contemporary British fiction) those amphibious creatures of ambiguity  
 underline the limits of the phenomenal world of realism, introduce a distinct

note of fantasy or magic into the text and contribute to the euphoric proliferation of extraordinary elements and occurrences that decorate a world richly ornamented with grotesque textual carvings highly reminiscent of a baroque atmosphere. Their purpose is to promote some hesitation as to their ontological status. Being half human, half angelical, those creatures are granted a special freedom, being apt to cross the boundaries between this world and that of spirits. One of the consequences is to make their status as purely literary constructs obvious, as will be explained later.

Besides, the structure of *English Music* is also characterised by the amplification devices singled out by Gérard Genette (1969: 195-205) in his analysis of baroque narrative, i.e. development, insertion and intervention. The first two categories are easily identifiable. In fact, *English Music* may be considered as a dual book, itself a hybrid, in that it is made up of what might be called a fairly traditional *Bildungsroman* structure whose ingredients alternate with more poetical, intertextual and parodic passages. The structure of the novel can be seen as a double helix, with two intertwined strands: the realistic, *Bildungsroman*, odd-numbered chapters juxtaposed and interconnected with the intertextual, more modernist, even-numbered chapters, which Catherine Lanone (1997: 17-30) might call a meeting of impossible perspectives, taking up Deleuzian and Leibnizian terms. In terms of structural progression, the even-numbered chapters do not help fuel the plot at all. They may be considered as parasitic growths of a highly metaphorical nature, meant to give more (historical and intertextual) depth to the surface structure of the *Bildungsroman*. To resort to a hackneyed analogy, one might argue that the odd-numbered chapters are concerned with the horizontal development of the plot and assume a syntagmatic function, whereas the province of the even-numbered chapters is that of paradigmatic resonance and embellishment. This distinction is quite useful in that it duplicates two *topoi* of baroque art and may be applied to its architectonic expressions (the syntagmatic structure of the building as distinct from the paradigmatic profusion of ornaments) and its musical manifestations (the *basso continuo* running horizontally as opposed to the vertical fanning out of harmonics)<sup>4</sup> (Deleuze 1988: 184). In *English Music*, the use of the double structure is not merely motivated by an illustrative function —though it obviously is to a great extent. The even-numbered chapters gratify the reader with parodies and pastiches of the main elements of what the narrator calls English music —i.e. the matrix of cultural Englishness. The reader is thus presented with revisitings of *The Pilgrim's Progress* or *Alice in Wonderland*, as specified above, but also of *Robinson Crusoe*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *Pamela*, *Great Expectations*, *Wuthering Heights*, etc. Besides, Ackroyd's presentation

of the English cultural tradition also extends to other arts like music (with incursions into the worlds of Purcell and Byrd) or painting and engraving (Hogarth, Gainsborough, Turner, and other architectural painters or engravers). Those illustrations also allow for the multiplication of allusions and correspondences, and thus are part and parcel of the saturation technique at work in the novel, of the metaphorical overkill which helps grant the text such a convoluted aspect and at the same time the impression that it is "saturated in *Heimlichkeit*" (Bernard 1994). The even-numbered chapters thus assume the function of textual insertions or incrustations (more on the use of narrative embeddings later) which is the second criterion for amplification selected by Genette, and at the same time they provide a development of the novel's main theme, by prolonging its associations and correspondences, thus contributing to the profusion of references and echoes which characterise the overall tonality. Now, one may remember that development is Genette's first criterion.

The notion of intervention may be said to be one of the constitutive traits of *English Music*. As suggested above, this novel is characterised by a high degree of eloquence, the main modality of which is the recurrence of hyperboles, cumulative devices, tropic overkill, etc. It may be said that *English Music* as a narrative —and this essentially thanks to its paradigmatic/ metaphorical components— unmistakably belongs to the category of "telling" (as opposed to "showing"). The metafictional aspect of the work will be developed in the second part of this article, but it must be said that the saturated resort to conventions, the metaphorical hammering and intertextual layering are conducive to the emergence of structural rhymes and rhythms, and lead to the building up of a series of echoes which run through the novel. In fact, *English Music*, as is made clear from the title and from the echoing presence of a pictogram representing a horn metaphorically sounding the chords of tradition at the beginning of some even-numbered chapters, is an extremely vocal and sonorous text, in which sentences, references and fragments keep echoing each other to evoke the rustling atmosphere, precisely, of an echo chamber. Yet, as a text characterised by a strong hermeneutic dimension, the novel does not provoke a paranoid reading but rather a rhythmical one.

However, against this musical background which solicits the reader's ear and sense of rhythm, the novel generates an eloquence of another type. The narrator, whether directly or indirectly, is extremely present throughout. The odd-numbered chapters are narrated by the protagonist, Timothy Harcombe, as an old man reflecting on his childhood, adolescence and early manhood. The even-numbered chapters are voiced by an impersonal heterodiegetic narrator

who evokes Timothy's adventures in the imaginary *loci* and periods of English music. Now, both narrators and characters harp on the theme of permanence, and the title is taken up time and again throughout the novel, so much so that the general meaning, about the role of tradition as a modality of permanence and inheritance—cultural, spiritual, biological—is redundantly made clear throughout. Never do the narrators allow the reader to lose sight of the general import of the novel, and they provide innumerable embedded commentaries. In other words, the eloquence of the text is not only poetical, but also structural, narrative and even narratological. The text profligately provides the keys and tools which command access to its general meaning, thus jettisoning all hermeneutic pretensions the better to promote an aesthetic of the obviously told and of the well sign-posted characteristic—in its profusion—of the baroque.

One may find an allegorical illustration of this principle in the last pages, when Timothy Harcombe evokes his job in a circus (a place in which his father and grandfather plied their trade before him). Interestingly enough, his number is that of a ventriloquist, as is made clear in the following lines: "I would sit quietly in the middle of the ring, and my voice would come from the region of the high wire, or from a certain row in the audience, or even from a particular person. Sometimes there were many voices, and the ring would come alive with sounds and echoes" (Ackroyd 1992: 396). One might see in this (almost) concluding vision a means to recapitulate and encapsulate the way in which the text works, since it is essentially based on the polyvocal device of the palimpsest. In this passage, the protagonist is presented as an allegory of the text and, more specifically, of the intertextual method at work throughout, being itself a means to metaphorise the notions of inheritance and permanence. This is a way of providing indirectly, through an illustration taken from the represented universe of the novel, a comment on how representation works in this text. The baroque eloquence of *English Music* thus owes much to its resorting to a running commentary on the way in which it is to be read, be it directly or indirectly, explicitly or implicitly, and this corresponds to what Genette (1969: 213) selects as a characteristic of baroque narrative, i.e. the prevalence of discourse over pure narrative.

Hyperboles are numerous in the text and revolve around what might be called a baroque paraphernalia: analogies and metaphors, the representation of (inter-)textual allegories and the conception of the novel as a whole as an allegory of permanence, an obvious predilection for the use of almost (infinite) correspondences, together with a fascination with surfaces, reflections, mirrors in particular and illusion in general may be said to characterise the novel which plays on the notion of thematic, symbolical,

intertextual and also discursive saturation. All those elements give rise to a form of eloquence, and it could almost be said that *English Music* is a loud text in which everything converges to promote—through the use of saturation, ornateness and excess—a sense of dramatisation characterising things baroque.

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As may be surmised from the preceding developments, one of the defining traits of the novel is its obsession with the idea of representation, art in general, literature in particular and, in a nutshell, itself (true to what has generally been deemed the postmodern "canon"). The impression that the reader may be left with, in this respect, is that of a high degree of textual narcissism. Independently of the fact that the Narcissus figure is a baroque *topos*, this obsession is a means of introducing instances of textual representation within the novel (even-numbered chapters being devoted to the protagonist's excursions into the world of art, the reader is allowed to wander abroad to meet many of the representative figures of the English cultural tradition). In other words, the text repeatedly uses commentary and, more specifically (and more interestingly, in the context of a baroque text) *ekphrasis* to provide systematic narrative embeddings and to initiate the reader's pondering on the notion of illusion. One may find this reminiscent of the baroque *topos* of the world as a stage.

What characterises *English Music* more specifically, though, is its tendency to spatialise narrative embeddings and insertions, and to make them visual in their profusion. If *English Music* is an eloquent text, it is made to appear so by resorting to various spatial metaphors and representations, paradoxical as this may seem. Buci-Glucksmann (1986) reminds us of what she considers the main axiom of baroque aesthetics: "To Be is to See".<sup>5</sup> And in fact, through the use of *hypotyposis*, the visual organ is regularly solicited, throughout the novel. Similarly, *English Music*, in spite of this paratextual indication suggesting the prevalence of sound images, is interspersed with visual devices. As indicated above, some even-numbered chapters start with a pictogram representing some sort of a horn metonymically sounding the chords of the English music to be heard in the following intertextual passage/chapter, an instrument reproduced on the cover of the Penguin edition. Likewise, each even-numbered chapter is preceded by the reproduction of a painting, or an engraving or etching, or a frontispiece, or a map of London streets. The functions of these insertions or visual embeddings are various. Of course they refer the reader to the imaginary and legendary territory of Englishness. They also provide tonal commentaries or introductions to the atmosphere of the chapters for which they act as

preludes. More than that, they may assume the role of visual analyses of the written text itself.

This is most notably the case of the reproduction appearing on page 200, at the beginning of Chapter Ten (the William Byrd chapter). The composition belongs to the genre of still lifes and more specifically of vanities as a skull appears in the shades of its top left-hand corner. Along the lines of its diagonal layout there also appears an open book the frontispiece of which indicates that it contains a collection of emblems, and further down, in the bottom right-hand corner, musical instruments of various kinds, mostly string, partially visible, partially out of frame. Those fragments give a metonymic illustration of the novel's general theme. The represented written text, the fragmented instruments and the skull provide a visual compendium of the novel's components together with a comment on the notion of permanence and inheritance. In this composition, the passing of time metonymically evoked by the skull is but a correlate of its ability to recapture the past through art, which is evoked by the reference to the written text and the musical instruments. As may be inferred from this evocation, the painting represents an allegory of permanence and, interestingly, an embedded allegory of the novel itself. In such passages, the spatial is used as a modality of the musical, which points to the baroque predilection for things visual. This, again, is quite illustrative of its tendencies towards spatialisation, as explained by Buci-Glucksmann (1986) who demonstrates that the baroque tends to introduce a spatial dimension in the temporal continuum of writing, thus creating a "theatre of sound",<sup>6</sup> an analysis which echoes that of Benjamin (1985: 218) who speaks of a "sonorous language".

Not content with that, the relation between the written and the iconographical is also chiasmatically interrelated, since the novel provides many *ekphrastic* passages. Those appear under various guises: through the means of amplification, as is the case with the map of London streets to be found at the beginning of Chapter Four, a rewriting of *Great Expectations*. This map obviously refers to the territory of Dickens's novels which provided a great deal of inspiration for Ackroyd (see his biography of Dickens and also his layered, metaphorical, intertextual, transhistorical treatment of London space, architecture and archaeology in *Hawksmoor*),<sup>7</sup> and it is given a textual illustration and extension, ten pages later, in a pastiche of Victorian Gothic when Timothy and Pip meet in the foggy London Streets, by the Thames (Ackroyd 1992: 72, 82).

Other such passages may be found regularly, every time the protagonist is confronted with a painting. This happens for instance in the passages when Timothy enters a Hogarth engraving thus being allowed to take a hallucinated

walk through eighteenth-century Bedlam or when he moves from a classical Constable scene to a Turner seascape. In this passage, the description is dominated by the recurrence of a multitude of colours and movements —more than real shapes— and, though indirectly, the spatial once again becomes an in-built modality of the sonorous/ musical/ written (Ackroyd 1992: 317). Those *ekphrastic* moments are obviously of a specific type since they go beyond the level of mere description or commentary to introduce participation or immersion within the artefact. This particularly sensuous and synaesthaetic way of representing the world of the novel, is a way to produce, through a contamination of the textual by the visual, some sort of a *moiré* or *chiaroscuro* effect. It is also a means to introduce the notion of ontological transgression or transworld migration which is generally associated with narrative or plot embeddings, as will be underlined later. Within the context of a baroque system, however, this technique assumes a more specific meaning in that it allows for the introduction of a baroque *cliché* linked with the notions of proliferation and saturation: that of the painting overflowing the frame, because of its excessive and dynamic properties.

The convoluted overflowing of the frame generally ranked among the characteristics of baroque painting is also present in *English Music*. In fact, the even-numbered chapters may be said to provide textual metaphors of musical scores, or traditional texts, or even iconographic documents, as suggested above. At the end of Chapter Thirteen, Timothy is seen to interrupt his tour of a picture gallery so as to enter the frame of a work by Gainsborough: "Somehow I found myself getting up and walking towards the painting; or, perhaps, it was coming towards me. And then, without any surprise or hesitation on my part, I entered the frame" (Ackroyd 1992: 301). As becomes natural with the recurrence of similar episodes, chapter after chapter, the end of Chapter Fourteen allows the reader to witness the reverse movement, as Timothy steps out of the painting and frame, after a long oneiric passage of transworld migration: "Impressions. Points of light. The vortex. Squares of colour. Abstract shapes. Shadows. This is how it all began, he thought. Then he woke up, and found himself still seated in front of the Gainsborough landscape" (Ackroyd 1992: 322). The metonymic, kaleidoscopic, fragmentary vein at work in this passage, independently of the fact that it conveys a metamorphic image of a fluctuating world linked with the baroque theme of illusion, underlines the profusion of visual impressions. The feeling that the reader is left with is that of an extreme dynamism or flow of sensations ("The Vortex") which, under the strain and impetus of multitudinous ornaments (which might be termed a depravity of design) burst the constraining limits of the frame, make this aesthetic and

ontological boundary porous, so as to spatialise and dramatise once again a baroque tendency according to which there can never be more than directly meets the eye. For this baroque strategy is one which postulates that everything has to be told or, more specifically here, shown. Nothing brooks discretion or veiling in *English Music*: things, bodies, sensations must be harped on and evoked or called up (more than actually described) ostentatiously and exhaustively. This is what Benjamin (1985: 222) explains when he comments on the baroque's tendency to create the impression that space is to be filled at all costs. Buci-Glucksmann (1986: 96-97, 181) confirms this analysis when she underlines the omnipresence of the body in the baroque (hence Christian) tradition of representation or when she alludes to what she terms "baroque sensualism". Deleuze (1988: 166) also concentrates on this phenomenon when he asserts that in baroque representation, matter tends to spread, to overflow the frame, as in *trompe l'œil* motifs.<sup>8</sup> This is precisely what happens in *English Music* where the frames themselves disappear. One could even contend that they are especially used (and that the double structure of the novel is especially used) the better to be undermined, so that their frailty and porosity should emerge clearly. The structural constraints of the novel are but a means to promote the absence of constraint, the tendency to overflow, the irrepressible impetus towards freedom.

In the overall economy of *English Music*, the multiple self-reflexive references have a similar function. For instance while the novel is replete with intertextual references, the protagonist's father teaches him the word "palimpsest", one morning at breakfast, as has been mentioned above. Besides, some passages literally teem with quotations, in true echo-chamber fashion, as may be surmised from this short extract: "'For my part I will be content to recede into some larger spirit, some divine original, which is the ground of all our being. No man is an island'" (Ackroyd 1992: 172). Here, the reference to Wordsworth's Immortality Ode ("the ground of all our being") with its emphasis on the similar theme of permanence and on the possibility offered to the poet of recapturing the past vision of glory is associated with another famous extract from John Donne's "Devotions 17" (1986: 166-167). Here again, the stress is laid on the refusal of isolation, in what might be considered a vindication of connection, inheritance and permanence. Intertextual and metafictional references are concentrated not to point to the presence of extraneous fragments (thus boundaries and limits) within the text but rather to blend them into the novel as a whole. Once

and freedom characteristic of baroque aesthetics. This is in perfect conformity with what has been unearthed by various specialists of the baroque, among whom is Buci-Glucksmann (1984: 174) who underlines its permanent movement, its desire that nothing should be fixed.

The self-reflexive/ meta-textual dimension of the novel (relying essentially on its intertextual dimension and on the presence of numerous instances of self-reflexive commentaries) is also largely evocative of a central *topos* of the baroque, generally associated with baroque drama but which is at the origin of many contemporary avatars, *i.e.* the notion that all the world is a stage. From Calderón and Shakespeare to Pirandello and Borges, this metatextual ploy based on the (narrative) device known as metalepsis runs through baroque and baroque-inherited artefacts. The metaleptic strain of *English Music* is especially remarkable, in that it helps promote a reflection on determinism, both intertextual and narrative. This is particularly perceptible in the pastiche passages (even-numbered chapters), when Timothy crosses an ontological boundary and finds himself interacting with well-known fictional characters within embedded narratives. One such occurrence may be found in Chapter Six, when Timothy meets a detective figure meant to be a Sherlock Holmes double:

'All my adventures are narrated,' Austin Smallwood explained before Timothy had a chance to reach the end. 'All the time I am being invented, or created, or what you will. And do you know the worst aspect in this affair? I cannot see the conclusion. How is this particular plot going to end, for example? How are we going to solve the mystery of your father's disappearance [...]. But there is also a larger question. How will I come to the end of my adventures? I go on from day to day as if I were immortal, and yet there is someone else. Someone who is writing everything down' (Ackroyd 1992: 130).

In this extremely Pirandellian passage, everything seems to be done in order to create a reality effect. In other terms, such passages could be interpreted as designed to underline contrastively the fictionality of the parodies or pastiches. This would in turn make the story of Timothy's life (*i.e.* the *Bildungsroman* element present in the odd-numbered chapters) sound more real, since a frame looks generally more real than its contents —by definition a piece of representation not belonging to the same ontological plane as that of reality. Still, the search for verisimilitude (as regards the embedding) does

Borges-Brecht effect according to which when a reader reads a story in which another reader is her-/himself reading a text, some sort of analogy or contamination provokes metaphysical/ontological wondering in the first reader's mind: if those people who think they are real are in fact being watched/read about by me, this may mean that I too could be a character in a plot/narrative at a higher level, being read and written about. This is the device which is used in Muriel Spark's famous metafictional first novel *The Comforters* (1957).<sup>9</sup> One might argue that this is a way to emphasise the autotelic status of the artefact by underlining its narcissistic dimension, its inability to refer to the world outside the text, the failure of its representative capabilities or, from another perspective, its having reached the stage, in John Barth's famous words, when it has become a "literature of exhaustion". However, in baroque drama, this device is often used as a modality of "replenishment" to suggest a perspective, that of the divine eye (Buci-Glucksmann 1984: 72). It is thus a means to deny the autotelic, narcissistic vision of art so as to promote a link with extratextual powers that do not belong generally to representations of the phenomenal world that we apprehend through our senses.

Even if such passages are designed to generate an impression of textual determinism (the characters being obviously trapped in some script or narrative of a higher ontological level), they also point to the notion of circulation between various ontological spheres. Once again, we are presented with this characteristic functioning in which boundaries (whether they be structural, aesthetic or ontological) are erected the better to be overflowed through the irresistible baroque proliferation of matter and information. It may be said that, seen in this light, the novel as a whole is an allegory of flux, dynamism, communication and inheritance between generations, families, texts, aesthetic movements, etc. *English Music* thus appears as a baroque allegory of permanence which in itself is quite telling for, since Benjamin's groundbreaking study of baroque drama, allegory has been considered the most specifically baroque way of meaning and representing.<sup>10</sup> Most contemporary commentators select this criterion as one of the most obviously relevant in a definition of baroque texts in particular and aesthetics in general, as is the case with Buci-Glucksmann in all three books quoted in these pages, and with Deleuze. The latter reminds us that, with baroque allegory (as opposed to romantic symbol), the object/ vehicle itself swells to incredible proportions so as to overflow its frame, while the concept/ tenor is reduced to minimal proportions.<sup>11</sup> This is precisely what happens in the convoluted world of *English Music* which proliferates into a richly

ornamented and repetitive baroque postmodern object to convey the concept of permanence —and also those of openness, freedom and infinity.

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In fact, with *English Music*, everything seems to be used so as to illustrate the traditional principle of the painting/represented object exceeding/overflowing the frame. In other words, the point of the novel seems to be less the representation of a child's growing up into adulthood, less the story of an individual's evolution into old age, less the story of the initiation into the tradition of English culture than a way to explore the boundaries of the ordinary, phenomenal world so as to reach into a form of abstraction mediated through art and its manifestations.

This is suggested by the notion of openness closely associated with metaleptic devices. As suggested above, the text seems to work according to the general logic of the "both...and" type (as opposed to the traditional "either...or" model), in that it uses the metafictional vein to make its narcissistic/ autotelic and open potentialities coexist: the metaleptic narrative is characterised by an overflowing movement out of its frame, out of itself, a movement which is not aimed at the outside phenomenal world of everyday existence, but at some other undefined and undefinable sphere. In painting, this corresponds to what Deleuze (1988) has called the infinite line or fold, which could be paraphrased as "the fold reaching into infinity" (*le pli infini*), as the hallmark of the baroque. The infinite fold is designed to create the illusion that it can overflow the frame, that it can leave the surface of the painting freed of all material constraints.<sup>12</sup> In the context of *English Music*, one does not find typically baroque pictorial representations of any such infinite fold. However, the text's infinite fold appears metaphorically by means of the various structural and aesthetic boundaries present throughout the text (see the preceding analysis of the double helix), and above all thanks to the metaleptic occurrences that foreground the presence and functions of ontological boundaries throughout the text. For instance, in the above-quoted passage in which a character feels that he is trapped into someone's narrative, being written by a narrator and read by a narratee, the ontological boundary/ fold called forth by the contaminating impulse of the Borges-Brecht effect obviously bursts the seams of the text and creates the impression of a (vertical) movement towards infinity, thereby promoting a feeling akin to vertigo and triggering off metaphysical pondering.

Besides, the infinite fold that runs from the novel may be said to be of a vertical nature, as is made clear in the metaleptical example given above, in which both character and reader are led to wonder about the existence of a higher world or of an all-encompassing, different ontological plane. This is



in perfect conformity with the diegetic level, since the protagonist is endowed with supernatural powers and since his father's job, at the beginning of the story, is to heal people by making them connect with the world of spirits, by calling forth the souls of the departed. Accordingly, the novel is characterised by an obsession with things metaphysical, and with various manifestations (always of a highly hypothetical nature, of course) of transcendence. This is all the more interesting as, still according to the "both...and" logic, the novel presents the reader with both a profusion of textual matter or corporeality—an overflowing of all frames, as demonstrated above—and a hypothetical probing into its opposite, the absence of corporeality, the essence of immateriality. Once again, we are confronted with the paradox of a conjunctive opposition or coincidence between two poles: the excess of representation (what Deleuze (1988: 166) calls the law of extremum of matter, corresponding to a maximum amount of matter for a minimal textual space) and the evocation or calling forth of a mere potentiality, of an extreme abstraction. In other words, what *English Music* presents us with is an interaction, almost an equation between maximum presence and extreme absence.

This harmonious separation between *and* conflation of matter/ presence on the one hand, and immateriality/ absence on the other hand may be accounted for in the light of Deleuze's discoveries and analyses. In fact, the French philosopher conceptualises this tension through the architectural metaphor of the house with two floors. This is explained in the first chapter of his study, but also in Chapter Three, entitled "Qu'est-ce qui est baroque?" He defines the two floors of baroque architecture as an open, lit ground floor representing the body and materiality leading to a closed, dark first floor associated with the soul. For Deleuze (1988), the infinite fold moves across both floors to concentrate in the high inner chamber of the soul and fan out towards the lower external hall of corporeality and matter, thus giving the baroque a distinctly vertical orientation.<sup>13</sup> Within one and the same textual space or universe, the baroque thus introduces a flux and a tension between the low and the high, the corporeal and the material, matter and the realm of pure forces, organised along the vertical line of the infinite fold. Deleuze gives another explanation for this tension or interaction, when he emphasises the simultaneous workings of the baroque double vector. It is an aesthetics characterised by a simultaneous pressure towards the bottom and a push towards the top; within one and the same world or house, to take up the architectural metaphor introduced above (Deleuze 1988: 41). *English Music* could be said to evince the same dual baroque pattern as the paintings by Il Tintoretto or El Greco analysed by Deleuze. The structural double helix could

figure a horizontal line separating the worldly, phenomenal, material world of the realistic *Bildungsroman* situated on the lower half of the allegorical representation into which the novel may be said to develop, while the top half could be the province of the supernatural, magical, non-realistic level of the intertextual method, that of correspondences devoted to the evocation of the world of art and of spiritual/ cultural continuity. One might see an infinite fold moving between the two and eschewing all attempts at separation the better to illustrate the process of permanence, which could add yet another functional layer to the allegory of inheritance.

In this way, the baroque aesthetics of *English Music* are used to create a tension between two worlds, which is itself in many ways designed to imply that the world is made up of more than what directly meets the eye, or that it is characterised by a certain ontological plurality. In fact, even in the context of a postmodern, secularised culture, the baroque seems to retain or recapture some of its fundamental affinities with the religious or, at least, spiritual, in that by resorting to the infinite fold and its verticalising function, it tends to point to the possibility that there might be another world (which is far different from the religious certainties postulated by the baroque age, and more especially the Counter Reformation). It may be said that in the context of a secularised culture the function of the baroque impulse is to recapture some of that Benjaminian "aura" supposedly lost with the advent of the modern age. In fact, independently of the transcendent dimension of the text, at the level of representation, there are many instances of represented movements towards the spiritual or the transcendent, and one could even say that the text is saturated in such evocations. This is the case in the first chapter concerned with the description of Timothy's childhood and job as his father's assistant in the Chemical Theatre: the medium's customers fall into what look like trances, they are surrounded by a mysterious halo (Ackroyd 1992: 5). In other passages, the music referred to in the title is explicitly compared, in a tongue-in-cheek though telling way, to the music of the spheres (Ackroyd 1992: 18). Elsewhere, the existence of an "alternative world" is contemplated (Ackroyd 1992: 63). Of course, this is not specific to *English Music*. Such occurrences crop up with obsessive frequency in Muriel Spark's *The Comforters* or Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry*, the latter being based on the scheme of alternative choices, ideas and worlds. However, they are obviously associated with the openness of the baroque, with the latter's refusal to believe that there is only one world. This is expressed in terms of incompleteness (Genette 1969: 222) and in terms of openness or freedom (Deleuze 1988: 48, 166).

In other words, what the reader is invited to discover in the baroque universe of *English Music* is an aesthetic construct whose saturated and convoluted surfaces are but means to call up or even probe abyssal or celestial depths. This is what Buci-Glucksmann (1986: 50) suggests when she remarks on the baroque's ability to call forth a vacuum or a nothing through an excess of images. She recurrently voices a similar conclusion when she (1986: 17) comments on the baroque's compatibility with the evocation of a "complementary world", and with transcendence in general, which is quite in keeping with the religious origins of this aesthetic manifestation. In a secularised, postmodern context, what remains of this baroque (whose function, actually, is less to probe the depths of some other universe than blindly to probe *at* the boundaries of the phenomenal world, without any certainty as to its uniqueness, and nothing more) is to postulate/call forth/envisage the possibility of a presence without using the conventional tools of representation.

Now, this seems to be the very foundation of the baroque mechanism. In fact, the ornamental proliferation, the multiplication of figures of amplification, the various kinds of saturation, in short all the components of baroque eloquence or diction contribute to a revisiting of traditional *mimesis*, to the latter's adaptation to the purposes of our times and to an accommodation and updating of its workings. In the secularised, potentially de-sublimised postmodern world, baroque aesthetics used in *English Music* or in novels like *The Comforters*, *Midnight's Children*, *Nights at the Circus* or *Sexing the Cherry* provide a way to express what cannot be represented, what has been called "a *mimesis* of nothing" ("*une mimétique du rien*" (Buci-Glucksmann 1986: 49)). This is somewhat reminiscent of Barthes's (1982) analyses of what he called the "*sens obtus*", i.e. a meaning that comes in excess of representation, or a signifier without a signified, a profusion without a tangible/explicit referent. The convoluted representation process of *English Music* acts as a complement to its represented world of supernatural occurrences, but its baroque profusion introduces some of that *sens obtus* defined by Barthes.<sup>14</sup> It provides the means for an emotional presentation of something that cannot be represented. It relays and prolongs traditional *mimesis* when the latter has reached its limits. It lets its baroque profusion become the instrument of a suggestion (excess becoming the means of discretion, ostentation allowing for the emergence of veiling and indirection). This is associated with the prevalence of a vertical, lift-like movement, as explained before, in which both upward and downward impulses are compatible and even simultaneous. The resort to baroque aesthetics is thus a means to replace problematical, limited representation by the more daringly


emotional workings of presentation. Its probing at the boundaries of the phenomenal world is highly compatible with the prevalence of its main figure: allegory which, as we are reminded by its etymology (*allos* for other), is perfectly suited for the evocation of things foreign.

What seems to characterise the baroque dimension of *English Music* is the tension which it foregrounds between a strong emphasis on the sensitive (the convoluted proliferating aspect of the narrative) associated with the primacy of perceptions of a visual and haptic kind on the one hand, and an equally strong stress on the transcendent or, rather, on the possibilities of transcendence on the other hand. This opposition or interaction is articulated along the axis of the infinite fold analysed by Deleuze and allows for a probing at the limits of the phenomenal world and an extension of *mimesis*. This baroque artefact is governed by the conjunctive, pleonastic workings of the "both...and" type, what might be called redundancy, addition or extraneousness. Owing to this hyperbolic dimension, Peter Ackroyd's baroque narrative lays the stress on effect and affect alike, so as to produce what has been described as a "rhetoric of affects" and, we may add, of effects (Buci-Glucksmann 1984: 188). All in all, the baroque orientation of the novel contributes to the establishment of a distinct form of expressionism, which we termed "eloquence" above, and which may be seen as an avatar of the artists' fear, in the baroque period, of the levelling power of the printing process, baroque texts being meant to be said and performed, and not merely read. This expressionism which, according to Benjamin (1985: 52-53) is a distinctive trait of baroque drama in particular and of aesthetics in general, is associated with a rhetoric of unmediated emotion which leaves no room, at least in *English Music*, for that verbal *trompe l'œil*, irony. The novel is in earnest from beginning to end, and the parodies/pastiches of past texts and artefacts, though at times tinged with a certain humorous distance produced by hyperbole, are no more earnest and straightforward ways of expressing the central notion of permanence.

Furthermore, what the enlarged *mimesis* of the baroque permits is the replacement of the representation of reality by an expression or presentation of the supernatural, or by what Buci-Glucksmann (1984: 213, 229) defines as imagination. In this respect, owing to the convergent stress on effect and affect and on the powers of imagination, one might say that what the baroque ingredients of *English Music* allow for is the promotion of a romantic undercurrent. This is perceptible not only through the insistence on the pre-romantic and romantic intertext used in the novel (through references to Blake, Emily Brontë, Turner), but also through many passages in which the

protagonist experiences what may be defined as moments of purely romantic ecstasy in a novel which, in many respects, may be said to be a revisiting of or variation on Wordsworth's "Immortality Ode," with its emphasis on the child's higher vision and the possibility of recapturing it (Ackroyd 1992: 278, 282). The stress on effect and affect, on the powers of the imagination, on the primacy of emotion—whether or not recollected in tranquillity—thus seem to point to some sort of a romantic inheritance in a text very much concerned with things past, reminiscing and nostalgia.

In this respect, even if it is the product of what has been called a post- or ultra-modern, entropic, de-sublimised period, *English Music*, by instrumentalising a baroque aesthetics and programme, may be said to provide an attempt at recapturing some element of sublimity. Through its stress on affect and emotion, through its compatibility with transcendence, and through its postulation of the existence of some other world or "world beside" (to perpetrate a direct translation of Lyotard's (1988: 108) phrase "un monde à côté"), *English Music* uses baroque potentialities in a way not incompatible with manifestations of post-modern sublime, again in Lyotard's meaning of the term.

In the last analysis, what appears after this "baroque" reading of an instance of postmodern fiction in print, is some sort of a line or fold (that might be infinite) allowing us to envisage postmodern fiction (or at least some of its most acclaimed representatives) as yet another stage or hypostasis in a transhistorical current of excess, effect and affect running through modernism, to romanticism, and the baroque. Now, the characteristic of the above-mentioned cultural, artistic and aesthetic movements is to provide (in some degree at least) an opposition or reaction to—or at least a contrast with—what is known as classicism. In the light of this conclusion, one might be tempted to propose a synthetic, hypothetical contribution to the debate as to the nature of post-modernism by suggesting that it can be apprehended negatively, by means of a contradistinction, in that it seems to be what classicism is not. 

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>. This text was originally meant for publication in *Lettres en ligne*, an e-publication of the Universities of Lille 3 and Louvain.

<sup>2</sup>. In this respect one might read the pages that Catherine Bernard (1995: 27-44) devotes to *English Music* and to the nostalgic ventriloquism at work in the novel which she interprets as a deploration of the loss of the English tradition, as an elegiac evocation of things past, while we tend to stress the euphoric dimension of the representation of permanence, in this study.

<sup>3</sup>. Interestingly, the same type of structural anadiplosis playing an atmospheric function as part of a deliberate aesthetics of redundancy is to be found in *Hawksmoor*, in which the chapters alternate between life in twentieth-century and eighteenth-century London, providing the reader with a series of correspondences which are emphasised through a resort to obvious transitions, what might be called a taste for metaphorical overkill, the resort to *hypotyposis*, but also proliferations of all kinds, etc.

<sup>4</sup>. One may remember that this distinction is taken from Roman Jakobson's (1956) groundbreaking article on aphasia, and that David Lodge elaborated a theory of the literary history of modern literature based on this distinction. In *The Modes of Modern Writing* (1977), Lodge argues that the history of modern literature is a constant movement between a metonymic/ syntagmatic/ realistic pole of writing and a metaphorical/ paradigmatic/ modernist or experimentalist pole. The two tendencies are present here, but they are not commingled, they are merely juxtaposed, being linked only through the means of transitions, as developed above. The two components thus eschew integration, and it might be argued that this hesitation or undecidability constitutes the hallmark of the postmodern aesthetics of this text. Of course, it is a brand of postmodernism which does not reject the cultural past and acknowledges its link with the modernist canon, among others (Bernard 1995). In that respect the baroque postmodernism of Peter Ackroyd fits within the framework of continuity (as opposed to break) theories of the postmodern.

<sup>5</sup>. About Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, she (1986: 29) makes the following comment: "Si bien que l'opéra énonce d'emblée le grand axiome du baroque: Etre, c'est Voir", before moving on to a commentary on pictorial representation and making an analysis of the functions and values of the eye in the baroque economy: she considers it as a divine organ, the central organ of the baroque system as is attested by the allegories of vision that people sixteenth- and seventeenth-century paintings.

<sup>6</sup>. "Aussi, s'il est vrai que le baroque tend toujours à introduire une dimension spatiale et figurale dans le continuum temporel et dans l'écriture, la musique serait la "pointe" paradoxale de la folie du voir: mettre le son en espace, créer un devenir spatial—un théâtre du son—, fût-il, comme chez Bach, le plus intérieur, le plus formalisé, le plus architectonique possible" (Buci-Glucksmann 1986: 62).

of the function of the London references, one might find Fredric Jameson's (1991) analyses of *English Music* as a "Cockney visionary novel" useful

Deleuze (1988: 166) even quotes Wölfflin's contrasted Gothic and Baroque styles: "le construction, cadres fermes, remplissage léger, ou bien le cadre disparaît totalement, ou bien il est vide, n'est pas suffisant pour contenir la masse qui

about the uses and values of the metalepsis, see

Jameson's study entitled "Allégorie et *Trauerspiel*" might find Fredric Jameson's (1991) analyses of the connection which Jameson (1991) defines between the allegorical and the sublime by defining the essence of Kant's definition of sublime negative as the awareness of incommensurable distances

est élargi suivant tout un réseau de relations de cadre pour entrer dans un cycle ou une série, et plus en plus resserré, rendu intérieur, enveloppé "personnelle" à la limite: tel est le monde en toujours en extension ne se rapporte plus à un sommet" (Deleuze 1988: 171).

ans le Baroque un affranchissement sans limites possibles. Les plis semblent quitter leurs supports, dans un concours infini [...]. Ce sont les mêmes vivent rendre compte de l'extrême spécificité du s'étendre hors de ses limites historiques, sans du Baroque à l'art en général, l'apport du Deleuze 1988: 48).

sion, ou la résolution de la tension se fait par la ux étages étant d'un seul et même monde (la va en bas, tandis que l'âme-chambre monte. Le ges. Mais, se différenciant, il essaime des deux qui s'insinuent à l'intérieur et qui débordent à

l'extérieur, s'articulant ainsi comme le haut et le bas" (Deleuze 1988: 49). For more information on the vertical doubleness/ double-storied dimensions of Ackroyd's novels, see Jean-Pierre Audigier (1994: 143).

<sup>14</sup> "Si l'on ne peut décrire le sens obtus, c'est que, contrairement au sens obvie, il ne copie rien: comment décrire ce qui ne représente rien? [...]. Cela veut dire que le sens obtus est en dehors du langage (articulé), mais cependant à l'intérieur de l'interlocution". Roland Barthes (1982:55).

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