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THE CONCEPT OF TIME IN PETER ACKROYD'S ENGLISH MUSIC AND FIRST LIGHT

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Abstract: *Starting from Paul Ricoeur's idea that there is a 'mimetic relation between the verb tenses and lived time' and a connection between the fictive past and the real past, the fictional present and lived time, I am going to enlarge upon the way Peter Ackroyd has applied this connection at the level of content in English Music – where the fictional past of English culture and literature, which Clement Harcombe reveals to his son, is in fact the real past. At this level, I will enlarge upon the game with and the dialogue between the real past and the fictive past. Fictive time and lived time coexist in fiction, reminding us of Auerbach's notion quoted by Ricoeur, the 'symbolic omnitemporality' of the 'remembering consciousness' (Ricoeur: vol. 2, 83). In his opinion, there is a complex relation between 'the time of fiction and the time of phenomenological experience, whether we take this on the level of prefiguration (mimesis₁) or on the level of refiguration (mimesis₃)' (Ricoeur: vol.2, 62). In my paper, I will analyse the forms of time and chronotope as reflected by Peter Ackroyd's English Music and First Light.*

Preliminary remarks

Narrativity, temporality and historicity¹ are the stakes of the postmodernist game with time. In Peter Ackroyd's fiction, we come across three types of violations of realistic temporality, three strategies of temporal reconstruction: circular, antinomic and "conflated."² Circular fiction, such as *First Light* and *English Music*, returns to its own beginning. Its circular temporality transforms the linear chronology of daily existence. Displacement in time is a recurrent technique in Peter Ackroyd's novels and enters a game with form, structure, narrative and the human being.

To enlarge upon the game with time in the novels of Peter Ackroyd, I am going to start from Paul Ricoeur's theoretical study on time. Distinguishing between historical and fictional time, Ricoeur describes the phenomenological subject's comprehension of time in such a manner that the past and the future are not associated with an absence of time or with moments of non-time. Instead, they are perceived as the times of memory and expectation, while the present moment is defined as attention (Ricoeur v.1, 8). Ricoeur provides a model of the subject's time which incorporates the temporal totality. Starting from this theory, my contention is that the characters of Peter Ackroyd's fiction are part of a temporal totality associated with an eternal present wherein the three temporal coordinates and history melt. In *First Light* and *English Music*, time is presented as a component of the human being. It serves to define the human being in the two novels. Moreover, time is an object of reflection, which the subject's consciousness mediates.

The time of the reader and the time of the narrators are constantly played with. Both times interact and mutually overlay one another. As we read, we move forward with the rhythm of the narrative and the

¹ Paul Ricoeur explains that this term does not coincide with 'within-time-ness' or with temporality. He characterizes historicity in terms of the emphasis placed on the weight of the past. History is grounded into historicity. (qtd. in *Narrative Dynamics*, pg.36)

² Brian Richardson focuses on six kinds of temporal reconstruction: circular, contradictory, antinomic, differential, conflated and dual or multiple. (*Narrative Dynamics* 48-58)

appearances of the narrating and narrated narrators. At the same time, we return to various past moments of the narrative 'I' as we comprehend the narrating 'I's appearances in relation to one another, as a series of appearances within the perpetual temporal exchange, and as the negotiation between self-reflection and the self's reflections on its external world and the time of that world. The narrator reflects back on him, recalling the movement towards the numerous moments of narration from which he is moving forward. Similarly, the reader moves forward in the time of reading while recalling and thereby re-marking previous moments in the past of the narrative, which may either have been the 'present' moment of narration or the re-marked memory of the past moment of that which has been narrated. As readers, therefore, we find ourselves involved in the tempi of the narrator's self-reflective exchanges of future and past. In my view, through the act of reading, the times of the reader and the narrators in tracing temporal movements overlap in order to displace the distinction between historical and fictional time in a way that is similar to the displacement of the human being through the temporal double act of writing the self.

Displacement in time – as it appears in *First Light* – is achieved both at the level of form and vision. Damian Fall is presented with the temporal traces of the past which he strives to understand. His narrative resembles the past narrations related to the origins of light in the universe. The beginning and the end of *First Light* achieve a temporal displacement, as form and content, structure and narrative overlap.

For Ackroyd, the present is a textual weave, a reinvented past and a projected future. The present gives way before the game with London narratives, with the multiple moments of lived experience on the stage of London. The image of London alters with each recurrence and can be associated with an unstable past that is always subject to different interpretations. In terms of Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope – wherein "spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole" (Bakhtin 84) – one can analyse Ackroyd's notion of writing as one that comprises all temporal coordinates within the all-encompassing space of London and Englishness, and all styles of fiction pertaining to these coordinates. The eternal present and the eternal remembering consciousness of the postmodernist writer are the stakes of the game with time, with the past and the present.

Time as Music

Starting from Bakhtin's definition of the chronotope as "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are intrinsically expressed in literature" (Bakhtin 84), I am going to enlarge upon the chronotopic images of music in *English Music* and of time in *First Light*.

In Peter Ackroyd's novels, English time and English culture belong to an all-encompassing space of Englishness highlighted by English Music, which seems to be the embodiment of mythical purity and of a mythical presence. Time and space merge into one entity – *English Music* – which accounts for Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope:

a literary work's artistic unity in relationship to an actual reality is defined by its chronotope. Therefore the chronotope in a work always contains within it an evaluating aspect that can be isolated from the whole artistic chronotope in abstract analysis. In literature and art itself, temporal and spatial determinations are inseparable from one another, and always coloured by emotions and values (Bakhtin 243).

English Music revolves around chronotopic motifs that are symbols of intertextuality. The plot is a pretext for enlarging upon the writer's well known critical suggestions and approach to literature. Everything is revalued, re-thought and rewritten in line with the theory of intertextuality. The novel is concerned with the relationship between the human being and time, between time and timelessness, the past and the present, and with "the desire for presence" (Allen 82), which helps to explain what Derrida means when he talks about metaphysical history. Metaphysics, for Derrida, is the metaphysics of presence, any science of

presence, so that metaphysical history is any history which sees the passage of time as a sequence of present moments. In my view, *English Music* is suggestive for the metaphysics of presence contained in music – an eternal time of English culture whose understanding is hard to grasp unless one is familiar with the great artistic works from generation to generation. Returning to the past in order to find a meaning of the present and to hear the music of one's ancestors seems to be a way of trying to put order within one's thoughts. According to the motto, "nothing can come of nothing" (Joshua Reynolds, *Discourse II* quoted in *English Music* 1). Therefore, one has to go back to the past in order to acknowledge its inheritance.

Peter Ackroyd's *English Music* focuses on the theme of music which is reflected as a complex spatio-temporal construct. It is inherited from generation to generation and bears the hallmark of English culture, spirit and character. It comes from visible and invisible sources, from inside and outside souls, from celestial spheres, from the Earth, too. When dreaming on a desert island, Timothy perceives a kind of music coming from a great distance, from 'the passed world': "the tide was far out, but he could hear the noise of distant breakers mounting from all around, and even from so great a distance the sound was much like music" (*English Music* 160).

English Music is Time associated with a cultural inheritance which lies heavily upon the main characters in the novel. The novel pays respect to writers as varied as Thomas Malory, John Bunyan, Daniel Defoe, Charles Dickens, Lewis Carroll, Arthur Conan Doyle. Chapter 16, written in the style of Blake, gives an entire survey of the history of English poetry – from Beowulf to 19th century Decadence – praising poets like Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Chatterton and Blake, whereas the Age of Reason (Dryden and Pope), as well as the 'Night School' – Young, Smart, Gray, Cowper and Collins – are played down by reason of their "weak vision" and "narrowed perception" (*English Music* 349-359). *English Music* comprises all their voices, all the voices of the past that are worth remembering. Moreover, *English Music* is like eternity, where the past, the present and the future become one.

In my view, music and intertextuality are interrelated: the same as notes and tones are combined and recombined for new melodies to emerge, texts are combined for the sake of art. It is my claim that an actual text does not come from a unified authorial consciousness but from a plurality of voices acknowledged as culturally representative, as culturally worth remembering and interpreting. We are what we have read and what we have learned. Originality consists in using the already acquired ideas and concepts in a creative way, so as to prove one's comprehension and interpretive abilities:

It is always the same, and yet it must always be renewed; it is the same, and not the same. So this island is continually being recreated in other men's words while its identity can never change. (...) Do you not recognize the very pattern of mortality there? Like language itself, which perishes not with its authors, but emerges elsewhere in a refined or polluted sort (*English Music* 172).

The realm of the living and the realm of the dead have a meaningful means of communication: *music*. It can enliven the spirits of the past, the beloved dead spirits. While listening to his mother's own record in her old room, Timothy can hear a woman sighing, a sudden distortion of music.

Details about *English Music* also come from Timothy's teachers of Music: Mr. Armitage and Mr. Byrd who suggest the same idea: nothing is lost to memory: "The music never dies. The old music is still part of us. It's always the same melody repeated through the centuries, reaching every generation" (*English Music* 196). After listening to Byrd's music played by Mr. Armitage, Timothy perceives the harmony of the universe in music, which is also the source of his happiness.

Timothy Harcombe is the ideal narratee since he just listens to the narrators' discourses, trying to grasp their truth, and finally coming to understand what *English Music* means, what English culture is: a treasure-house of traditions, of ideas, utterances, voices dialogically interrelated. But understanding comes at

the end of Timothy's narrative as, during the process of his maturity, he has gone through stages of queries and uncertainty.

In my opinion, Ackroyd assimilates all English artists to the same repetitive formula of music, which allows us to follow the pathways of what has been created before. The harmonious sounds of music resulted from a combination of the same musical notes is to be associated with Ackroyd's meaningful combination of old texts, literary genres and themes in his unique literary creation.

Time as a story

First Light focuses on the concept of eternal time and on the idea that the self has a reflection outside the self and beyond time. All of the characters are in search of their origins and return to the past in order to find a clue to their existence. They have their own story and their own interpretation of time, which becomes the subject of a story, too. The myth of origins becomes a narrative, the same as the meaning of time is revealed through different stories and interpretations. The same as "we know the past through its textualized remains" (Hutcheon 119), they understand the meaning of time based on mere stories and on what incomplete evidence they can get following thorough research into Archaeology and Astrology.

All of the characters end up agreeing that the earth reflects the sky, that the time they live in comprises the past, the present and the future. Damian Fall's interpretation of the stars – "This was the story written across the sky" (*First Light* 35) – is conducive to the idea that the sky is a reflection of the earth, that the self has its own representation beyond time. Moreover, Damian Fall implies that stories are a means of giving meaning to identity. Stories trigger other stories.

The moment when the characters watching a play at the theatre are given the chance to lapse into a time which comprises the past, the present and the future suggests the idea that one can perceive eternal time by means of stories. There is an interplay of references between the time of the narrator and the times of the characters: "Time. Past time. Future time. Imaginary time. Other times curving around them" (*First Light* 153).

It is my claim that Damian Fall is the spokesman of Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope, as he insists that "space is inconceivable outside of time, and time itself is only an aspect of space" (*First Light* 156). The sky is no longer the repository of astrological creatures and celestial spheres, but also a space that cannot be distinguished from time. Furthermore, his theories of Astronomy must be an explanation of Ackroyd's implied theory that the individual represents the world, that his inner self is reflected in the self of the universe. Damian defines himself as the space "through which the forces of the universe pass" (*First Light* 156).

Peter Ackroyd focuses upon a connection between Astronomy and the archaeological dig in the name of the star, *Aldebaran*, and *The Old Barren One* – the title given by the Mints to the prehistoric figure buried in the archaeological site. The association of *first light* with the *Old Barren One* suggests that sources are lost and irretrievable. Therefore, what we are left with is a mere story of the past. The archaeological dig is the site of analysis, as Mark Clare insists that "our goals include total recovery, objective interpretation and comprehensive explanation" (*First Light* 37).

For Mark Clare, time is the embodiment of God. It is not to be understood by the mere mortals, the same as stories are not understood by inexperienced readers. Peter Ackroyd seems to share Emmanuel Levinas's idea that "the condition of time lies in the relationship between humans, or in history" (Levinas 79). Time is understood in a relation between the past, the present and the future, which are part of the same

coordinate in Peter Ackroyd's novels. Unless one understands history and the stories pertaining to history, one cannot grasp the idea of time.

In conclusion, time is to be interpreted the same as stories. It can be understood as part of a time-space continuum or as an abstract coordinate which triggers many interpretations. The meaning of the characters' identity – which is their permanent concern in Ackroyd's novels – is lost in a time out of time, a time of the origins which becomes a time of stories.

The story as a way of coping with time

The desire for narratives and for a tradition based on narratives is the main concern of Peter Ackroyd's *First Light*, which questions the notion of *beginning* and *end* and parodies narrative closure. It is a cyclical novel which starts with a chapter entitled *The Uncertainty Principle* and ends with one entitled the same, but slightly different in terms of a few missing details. It is divided into six parts – preceded by well-chosen quotations from the authors that Ackroyd highly values – and develops five main narrative lines. The first one concerns Mark Clare's determination to explore the mystery of an ancient tumulus discovered by his archaeological team in Pilgrim Valley. The ensuing excavations carried out in Pilgrim Valley and the difficulties encountered by the team in their exploration are thoroughly presented within the novel. The second narrative line concerns Joey Hanover's search for his own identity. The third narrative line focuses on Damian Fall, the astronomer in Holblack Moor Observatory and his observation of the stars, mainly *Aldebaran*. The fourth narrative line deals with Mark Clare's marriage to Kathleen, a crippled woman utterly dissatisfied with her own condition, with her inability to give birth to a child and to adopt one due to her physical disability. The fifth narrative line focuses on Evangeline and Hermione's lesbian relationship, their interaction with the rest of the world, their interest in the tumulus, their discovery of the stolen coffin in Joey Hanover's garden and the outcome of their discovery.

There is an external omniscient narrator who alternates the narration of these plot lines, which eventually turn out to be interdependent. Moreover, there is a series of tales and visions embedded within the first narrative level, tales told by several internal narrators: the story of the flying men in Peru, told by Mark Clare (46-48); Joey Hanover's story of the children of Saint Gabriel who wanted to fly (111-114) and the story of Herbert and Samuel (167-170) told by Farmer Mint – an extradiegetic analepsis referring to an episode that took place outside the time of the diegesis. The story of Michael Hare, the woodlander, the child of the woods imbued with his spirit, can be taken for a *mise-en-abyme* of the novel as a whole. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan analyses this type of embedded stories along the coordinates first suggested by Gerard Genette:

Such narratives within narratives create a stratification of levels whereby each inner narrative is subordinate to the narrative within which it is embedded. In this hierarchical structure, the highest level is the one immediately superior to the first narrative and concerned with its narration (Genette 1972 calls this the 'extradiegetic level', his 'diegesis' being roughly analogous to my 'story'). [...] Immediately subordinate to the extradiegetic level is the diegetic level narrated by it, that is the events themselves[...]. The stories told by fictional characters [...] constitute a second degree narrative, hence a hypodiegetic level (i.e. a level 'below' another level of diegesis). Narration is always at a higher narrative level than the story it narrates. Thus the diegetic level is narrated by an extradiegetic narrator, the hypodiegetic level by a diegetic (intradiegetic) one (Rimmon-Kenan 92-93).

The notion of beginning and end is questioned by resorting to the narrative strategy of repetition at the level of form and at the level of ideas. Beginnings and ends are, on the one hand, arbitrary and, on the other hand, only narrative strategies and narrated constructions. Thus, the first and the last chapter are

entitled the same and are almost identical in terms of content. Moreover, Mark's excavation is considered "a beginning for him, but an ending for those other workmen who had preceded him" (52). Furthermore, Mark Clare refers to the arbitrary assignment of time limits when he says: "In the beginning there is an end. In the end there is a beginning" (220). In chapter 65, Alec confirms the same idea by saying "to see the beginning is also to see the end" (289). To enlarge upon repetition at the level of ideas, I will refer to all of the characters' findings which suggest that the human existence is a repetition of patterns: Joey perceives the prototype of his forebears in the old human body found in the coffin; Mark Clare comes to understand that the earth reflects the sky, that what is above is also below.

In line with Postmodernism, the importance of the story comes to the fore and is alluded to by most of the characters. They make references to reading, interpretation and storytelling:

'You're very good at telling stories' (*First Light* 46);
'It sounds (...) like the beginning of an interesting story' (*First Light* 50);
'It was a story being told in the dark' (*First Light* 93).
Everything turns into a story: 'Science is like fiction, you see' (*First Light* 159);
'And there were no stars, there were only words with which we choose to decorate the sky' (*First Light* 297).

Science and technology are no longer presented as objective, but as subjective forms, the same as narratives. The ultimate meaning is unstable and subject to multiple interpretations, the same as stories are.

In my opinion, the effect of the characters' inability to find their identity and a precise meaning of time is counterbalanced by the effect of the stories they share. They understand their past by means of stories. They also cope with time by means of stories and understand that nothing bears the hallmark of certainty. The notion of beginning and end is no longer important, as, in Peter Ackroyd's novels, time and the patterns of human existence are repeated. Thus, Ackroyd parodies the notion of narrative closure.

In conclusion, the novels of Peter Ackroyd approach time in a tight relation with the cultural space of London and Englishness. It is the eternal time of English culture, English spirit, a haunting time of stories which lies heavily upon the characters in his novels. It is my claim that in the novels I have discussed, time loses its temporality and becomes a story, a complex object of literary analysis, a symbol of intertextuality.

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