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D'un début de siècle à l'autre : les littératures du début des XX<sup>e</sup> et XXI<sup>e</sup> siècles dans leur rapport au siècle précédent

# “A book persisted as a coloured shadow at the edge of sight”: Englishness and Influence in Alan Hollinghurst’s *The Stranger’s Child*

« Un livre persistait comme une ombre colorée à la limite de la vue » : l'Anglais et l'influence dans *L'Enfant de l'étranger* d'Alan Hollinghurst

Article publié le 01 décembre 2012.

**Elsa Cavalié**

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# “A book persisted as a coloured shadow at the edge of sight”: Englishness and Influence in Alan Hollinghurst’s *The Stranger’s Child*

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1. Officer, Poet and Gentleman: a portrait of Cecil Valance
  2. A tale of two country houses
  3. A genealogy of influence and literary Englishness
- Conclusion

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1 *The Stranger’s Child*, Alan Hollinghurst’s fifth novel, starts with the description of a long, hot summer weekend, emblematic of the “deceitful calm”<sup>1</sup> (to paraphrase Blunden) that preceded WWI, and which has since become a common literary *topos* (it has also been recreated in Pat Barker’s *Life Class* for instance). During that weekend, George Sawle brings his lover, Cecil Valance, back to his Middlesex home – “Two Acres” – without foreseeing the impact it will have on the Valance family (especially George’s sixteen-year-old sister Daphne) or more unexpectedly, on English literature, for one of Cecil’s most momentous poems will be written as a homage to the house. Although the first section of the novel takes place in 1913, it has the ideal and dreamlike quality of the summer of 1914, about which “all agree that [it] was the most idyllic for many years. It was warm and sunny, emin-

ently pastoral. One lolled outside on a folding canvas chaise, or swam, or walked the countryside.” (Fussell 1975: 23-4). Very early on, the choice of setting points to the fact that *The Stranger’s Child* deals with literary archetypes of Englishness, and how they are recycled and transformed in popular culture. While the scene really takes place in 1913, Cecil Valance later adds two lines to his poem, that make it sound as if it was written in the summer of 1914, thus acquiring a fake emblematic quality evocative one of the most famous poems in English literature. Indeed, the lines “The greyhound in its courses, / The hawk above the hill [...] Move not more surely to their end / Than England to the kill” (163) cannot but recall Auden’s “In the nightmare of the dark / All the dogs of Europe bark, / And the living nations wait, / Each sequestered in its hate” (“In memory of W.B. Yeats”, Auden 2007: 247) and signal one of the first pastiches of twentieth-century literature in the novel.

- 2 *The Stranger’s Child* is indeed replete with literary references: one may incidentally note that Hollinghurst wrote an MLitt on gay writers (among whom E.M Forster and L.P. Hartley) and that there is more than a hint of Forsterian influence in the novel, as acknowledged by the quote from *The Longest Journey* at the beginning of section four (“Something of a Poet” 367). As for Paul Bryant, the working-class fledgling writer purposing to write Valance’s biography, he may remind the reader of a modern Leonard Bast whose solitude, bitter-sweet diary and wish for greatness make him both very much human and constantly slightly ridiculous. For the mode of the novel is irony, rather than sarcasm, as it acknowledges the nostalgia that still dwells around Edwardian gentlemen and country houses imbued with a sense of “power departed” (Mandler 1997: 348), as well as the longing that causes contemporary literature to go back over and again to the early twentieth century, what critic Krishan Kumar described as England’s “moment of Englishness” (2003: 210).
- 3 The novel opens with the portrait of Cecil Valance, a character who seems to figure the perfect gentleman. Yet, all is not what it seems, and the very notion of gentlemanliness, as well as its literary origins, are soon destabilized. Cecil’s first subject, his family estate named Corley Court, is also crucial because, like the poet himself, it has an ambiguous presence, deeply rooted in the numerous intertextual references its portrait conjures up. Indeed, intertextuality and the rela-

tionship between contemporary society and such ‘familiar’ figures as the War Poets are very much at the core of the novel. One may wonder then, whether the recycling of Edwardian and Georgian literature constitutes another avatar of postmodernism, or whether *The Stranger’s Child* differs from other contemporary novels in the handling of the literary past.

## 1. Officer, Poet and Gentleman: a portrait of Cecil Valance

- 4 The back cover of the novel’s first edition presents *The Stranger’s Child* as “the story of Daphne, from innocent girlhood to wary old age”, thus making it appear closer to McEwan’s *Atonement* (in which the narrator, Briony Tallis, also tells the story of her family) than it really is. Despite the fact that Daphne is the focus of the first and the second sections of the book, her character tends to fade into the background in the third one and it could be argued that what is crucial about Daphne, and makes Paul Bryant fascinated with her, really is her relationship to the character on which the novel hinges: Cecil Valance. Although the poet is only ‘physically’ present in the first section (“Two Acres”), Cecil is the core of the novel, for his personality, love affairs and literary production are endlessly discussed and re-appraised in an attempt at putting the mythical figure of the English War Poet into perspective while also shedding light on society’s contemporary obsession with it.
- 5 From the very beginning of the novel, as she is sitting in her garden waiting for her brother and Cecil to arrive, Daphne feels the fascination the young poet exerts on people: “She wanted to get a look at Cecil, to drink him in for a minute before he saw her, and was introduced, and asked her what she was reading.”(3) Burdened with such high expectations, Cecil can only disappoint the reader, which, to a certain extent, he does. First because Daphne obviously expects to be dazzled and to fall in love with him, as she does not know that he is visiting her house as her brother’s boyfriend. Then because Cecil’s personality is built upon ambiguities and secrets: Hollinghurst constructs a character that constantly unsettles the reader’s judgement about the fledgling upper-class poet. Just like the nostalgic albeit ironic Englishness the novel is suffused with, Cecil’s physique and be-

haviour are simultaneously attractive and annoying, fascinating and snobbishly outdated. For instance, the narrator often insists on one striking element of Cecil’s face – his bulbous eyes – (“Cecil’s splendid profile, the autocratic nose and slightly bulbous eye, seemed poised for judgement” 45) which seems to signal that the fascination Cecil exerts relies more on the recognition of his aristocratic demeanour than on sheer handsomeness. Indeed, his appearance is later reassessed as proof of his impending obsolescence:

Little evidence in the clothes – dark striped suit, wing-collar, soft silk tie with a gemmed tie-pin. He was in half-profile, looking down to the left. Dark wavy hair oiled back but springing up at the brow in a temperamental crest. Eyes of uncertain colour, large and slightly bulbous. [...] If you thought of Rupert Brooke, say, then Valance looked beady and hawkish; if you thought of Sean Connery or Elvis, he looked inbred, antique, a glinting specimen of a breed you rarely saw today. (291)

- 6 The comparison with Brooke (the blatant model for Cecil’s character) only enhances the contrast between the ‘real’ poet – known for his good looks<sup>2</sup>, fair skin and blond hair – and Cecil (seemingly closer to Siegfried Sassoon<sup>3</sup>) maybe hinting at the fact that Valance represents the ‘dark side’ of the War Poet myth. As for the second part of the comparison, it brings into strange collision two 1960s pop-culture stars with the now iconic War Poets: the terms “inbred”, “antique”, “specimen” make it clear that Cecil almost belongs to a different race, a dinosaur of sorts towards whom fascination comes from the fact that it is now extinct.
- 7 Cecil indeed represents the perfect specimen of a lost species: that of gentlemen, whose staple characteristics are recycled and derided, from the gentleman’s obsession with hunting, to his supposedly high-standard moral values. Cecil’s passion for hunting is transparently presented as a mere taste for killing, providing the reader with a cold demystification of one gentlemanliness’s most flamboyant rituals: “He’d told them already how much he liked killing, and clearly Germans would represent an exciting advance on mere foxes, pheasants and ducks.” (53) One might add that the meaningless slaughter of the Somme seems to be sarcastically prefigured by the fact that Germans

are only considered as a more elaborate game for the upper classes’ traditional hunting parties.

- 8 Going even further in the indictment of the figure of the gentleman, the novel sarcastically answers a central question to nineteenth and early twentieth-century English society: what is the basis of gentlemanliness? Rather than Ruskin’s flattering assumption that “a true gentleman has no need of self command; he simply feels rightly on all occasions” (1863: 281), Hollinghurst suggests that the essence of English manliness is, at least for Cecil, what he emphatically calls his “*membrum virile*”:

‘Well, perhaps you’re right. We can’t have your sister exposed to my *membrum virile*.’

‘I feel a gentleman would have put that the other way round,’ said George

‘What can you mean?’ said Cecil. ‘I’m a gentleman to the tip of my . . . toes’ – and he pulled on his trousers crouchingly, peering across the undergrowth. (83)

- 9 Instead of the traditional asexual version of gentlemanliness taught in public schools, where an ideal of purity was pursued and “sex only [accepted] as an accompaniment to love and marriage” (Girouard 1981:198) Cecil ironically suggests that his (gentle)manliness is to be taken in the literal sense, and that his seductive ways are as much part of his inheritance as his title. The young poet is indeed far from ‘pure’, as illustrated in the first section of the novel by the fact that he seduces Daphne while entertaining a sexual relationship with her brother. For carelessness, rather than an impeccable code of conduct, seems to be the mark of the gentleman in the novel, rather contradicting Cardinal Newman’s famous assertion that “it is almost a definition of a gentleman to say he is one who never inflicts pain” (1854: 257). Indeed, when she reflects on Cecil’s place in her children’s life, Freda Sawle is struck by how destructive a force he was, for social origins and education amounted, ethically speaking, to nothing: “They were letters written by a gentleman – that surely in itself meant little or nothing.” (186) Keeping in with the trend prevalent in contemporary literary literature, the figure of the gentleman is ironically used in order to criticize the very notion of model:

The figure of the gentleman is one of the most salient elements in the representation of Englishness. Its omnipresence seems to haunt contemporary literature and drive it to capture this elusive figure’s fleeting image in order to deflect it better. The conceptual blur<sup>4</sup> ‘gentlemanliness’ is imbued with then makes it a unique material, calling for endless reworkings and rewritings of the myth. In the gentleman, the myth of Englishness is presented with a face: this ego-ideal gone astray crystallises the representation of masculinity in the contemporary novel and casts doubt on the very notion of ‘model’. (Cavalié 2009: 258-9)<sup>5</sup>

- 10 The critique of Cecil, gentleman, officer and poet, as a desirable model and influence is further undermined by the mocking of his literary talents: it is obvious from the first that Cecil’s poetical endeavours are of little value. His egotistical disparagement of fellow literary Cambridge Apostles like Brooke (55) or Strachey (“that poor Strachey has the most unfortunate speaking voice” 56) only brings into focus the inanity of his own poems, entirely devoted to his childhood home. During a dinner party, his insistence on reading them before Tennyson’s in a stentorian voice tinges his portrait with grotesque:

‘The lights of home! the lights of home! / Clear through a mile of glimmering park, / The glooming woods, the scented loam, / Scarce seen beneath the horse’s feet / As through the Corley woods I beat / My happy pathway through the dark.’ The effect was so far from modest, Cecil chanting the words like a priest, and with so little suggestion of their meaning, that Freda found herself completely at a loss as to what he was talking about. (65)

- 11 Still, it is strange to notice that, even though Cecil’s snobbishness and egotism are often emphasized, he is nevertheless presented as the life of the party during his short stay at Two Acres, for there is a magnetism about him that cannot be avoided. Acknowledging that subsiding aura of seductive Englishness allows Hollinghurst to trick the reader into falling in love with Cecil while simultaneously analysing the mechanism of his attraction before his eyes.

## 2. A tale of two country houses

- 12 Yet, the gentleman and his ancestral home, the poet and his favourite subject, cannot be dissociated. Evoking the phenomena of transmission and influence at work within literary Englishness call for an exploration of the country house – Englishness’s “house of being”. According to Malcolm Kelsall:

The great country house, it is claimed, is a natural excrescence. It has not been built so much as grown by organic process from the English soil. It is not a social phenomenon, but gives the impression of being out of time, ‘as if it had always been there’. Thus, it is as much part of England as the rocks and stones and trees. (Kelsall 1993: 6)

- 13 The feeling that the country house is, like the figure of the gentleman, at the heart of Englishness, has often led writers to use it as a metaphor for the English identity. As Kalliney explains: “E.M. Forster’s *Howards End* (1910) and Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited* (1944) systematically expose the fragility of the pastoral conceit, instead using the country-house form to rethink English cultural geography in the absence of an extrinsic colonial.” (Kalliney 2006: 29) English country houses indeed seem to haunt contemporary literature: a crumbling monument to bygone times, they have always been one of the pillars on which representations of Englishness rested. *The Stranger’s Child* is no exception: the novel recycles this famous literary topos in order to shed light on the model as well as the modern obsession with it<sup>6</sup>.
- 14 As it has been mentioned, Cecil Valance finds fame, after his death, when one of his poems, “Two Acres”, becomes the symbol of a soon-to-disappear idyllic England on the brink of a war. The novel repeatedly emphasizes the latent irony of a poet entirely devoted to his ancestral country seat, who nevertheless finds fame in an ode to a suburban country house. As Dudley Valance wryly puts it in his memoirs: “It amused me somewhat that Cecil, heir to three thousand acres, should have been best-known for his ode to a mere two.” (503) Indeed, one of the key points in *The Stranger’s Child*’s first two sections is the recreation of the dichotomy between the grand estate –



Corley Court – and the more modest country house – Two Acres – located in Middlesex, at the heart of what E.M. Forster scathingly dubbed “Suburbia”, a house not unlike Forster’s own Windy Corner. As critic Peter Parker explains: “The whimsically named Two Acres nods to *A Room with a View*’s Windy Corner (looking out across “the great vale of north Middlesex” rather than the Sussex Weald), and Cecil shares his first name and initials with Lucy Honeychurch’s unsatisfactory suitor.” (Parker 2011)

- 15 Corley Court, although not the setting of the first section, is nevertheless quite present as a grand, intimidating counterpoint to the suburban country house where the Sawles live. Hollinghurst’s treatment of Corley plays with the reader’s expectations and the house first seems to represent the epitome of the literary country house in the tradition of Ben Johnson’s seminal poem “To Penshurst”<sup>7</sup>:

Thou art not, Penshurst, built to envious show  
Of touch or marble; nor canst boast a row  
Of polished pillars, or a roof of gold;  
Thou hast no lantern, whereof tales are told  
Or stair, or courts; but stand’st an ancient pile.” (1843: 680)

- 16 The mentions of Cecil’s numerous poems about the estate “‘Corley’, ‘Dawn at Corley’ and ‘Corley: Dusk’” (although slightly ridiculous in their monomaniac, quasi Monetesque recreation of the same subject) tend to suggest that Corley Court is a country house whose beauty makes it a worthwhile subject for poetry, a *Brideshead* of sorts whose influence equals its magnificence. Hollinghurst uses such apparently insignificant details as the presence of “jelly-mould domes” in the ceiling to pique the reader’s curiosity and mimic the fascination the Sawle family feel towards the house and his master-to-be, Cecil:

‘Do you have jelly-mould domes?’ [Daphne] wanted to know.  
‘At Corley?’ said Cecil. ‘As a matter of fact, we do.’ He said the word ‘Corley’ as other men said ‘England’ or ‘The King’, with reverent briskness and simple confidence in his cause. [...]  
‘What are they,’ Daphne said, ‘exactly?’  
‘Well, they’re perfectly extraordinary,’ said Cecil, unfolding his lily, ‘though not I suppose strictly domes.’ (20)

- 17 Cecil’s pretence of carelessness when faced with Daphne’s inquisitiveness sheds light on the dissymmetry that informs the relationship between classes. In Cecil’s evocation of it, Corley and its jelly-mould domes truly seem to belong to a Fordian “heart of England”<sup>8</sup> and to convey a quintessential, enigmatic Englishness. However, they also metaphorically express the difficulty in defining what Englishness is, and the part that the upper classes play in maintaining the power of the symbol. Cecil has no idea what jelly-mould domes are but he knows that they are “extraordinary”, even though the description that the reader is given (“little compartments in the ceiling” 21) does not really seem to warrant that term. As Barthes explains, “the very principle of myth is that it transforms history into nature” (1957: 128). The opening section of the novel therefore operates a preliminary distancing from the accepted image of the grand, literary country house, for it subtly demonstrates that its influence stems from the upper-class discourse about it.
- 18 However, as the second section of the book opens and the action moves to Corley itself, it becomes obvious that the country house is not the aesthetic masterpiece the reader imagined it to be. Freda Sawle, as she visits her daughter, cannot but feel stifled by the incapable materiality and thickness of Corley Court:

Corley Court was a forbidding place – even in the sanctuary of her room the dark panelling and the Gothic fireplace induced a feeling of entrapment, a fear that something impossible was about to be asked of her.” (185)

- 19 Two details that will often be repeated throughout the novel, the panelling and the Gothic atmosphere that surrounds the house, are first introduced here. The insistence on the thick, dark panelling, almost likens the house to a prison, or a madhouse, both images seeming quite at odds with the poetic odes Cecil devoted to it. The archetypal country house as a metaphorical prison is a common theme in contemporary literature: it can be found in *The Remains of the Day* (1989), where Stevens, the butler of the estate, gives his life to serve a master who betrays his ideals, or in Sarah Water’s *The Little Stranger*, where the mortiferous influence of Hundreds Hall gradually drives its inhabitants to despair and/or suicide. As far as Corley is concerned, it is the heaviness of the building and of its furniture that are re-

peatedly stressed, for instance the huge oak table in the centre of the hall which functions as a metonymy of the house itself:

Functionless, unwieldy, an obstacle to anyone who crossed the room, the table had a firm place in Daphne’s happiness, from which she feared it was about to be prised by force. She saw again how imposing the hall was, with its gloomy panelling and Gothic windows, in which the Valance coat of arms was repeated insistently. Would those perhaps be allowed to stay? (113)

- 20 Although Daphne perceives the very feeling of entrapment that will later seize her mother, her perception of the table and the house itself is not entirely negative. Because her husband, Sir Dudley, has enlisted the services of a seductive interior designer who dutifully tears down one room after another in a frenzy of ‘modernity’ reminiscent of a similar designer in Evelyn Waugh’s *A Handful of Dust* (1934), she is gripped with a feeling of loss and nostalgia quite at odds with the actual beauty of the building. In his memoirs, Dudley defends his decision to refurbish Corley Court and emphasizes his wife’s vulnerability to this paradoxical nostalgia:

To her Corley Court was less a matter for the social historian than a vision out of some old romance. Its inhuman aspects were part of its charm. The stained glass windows that kept out the light, the high ceilings that baffled all attempts at heating, the barely penetrable thickets of overladen tables, chairs and potted palms that filled the rooms, were invested with a kind of magic. ‘I should like very much to live in a house like this,’ she said, on the occasion of that first visit. (504)

- 21 A feeling of stifling overpopulation, conveyed by the terms “over-”, “thickets”, “fill” and the parataxis connecting the different pieces of furniture, dominates the extract. Still, Daphne seems to see the house through rose-tinted glasses and to perceive only its dated charm. According to critic John Su, evoking the very same theme in *The Remains of the Day*:

Each of the novels [...] makes it abundantly clear to readers that the lost homelands for which characters nostalgically long are deeply flawed or never even existed. Yet the novels nonetheless assert the

ethical value of articulating disappointment and frustration with the present by imagining a more satisfying past. (2005: 12)

- 22 Hollinghurst does not dismiss nostalgia as the symptom of a flawed ethical value system. The uncanny power of the house, the ineffable *je-ne-sais-quoi* that makes it attractive in spite of its ugliness is repeatedly acknowledged, and never ridiculed. However, it is also systematically confronted with its lack of legitimacy. Accepting the unwarranted yet real nostalgic power of the (literary) country house then allows Hollinghurst to sketch the evolution of its undisputed influence until contemporary times.
- 23 Despite Daphne’s tenderly ambiguous feelings towards Corley, the house eventually experiences a fate similar to many of its peers, and is requisitioned during World War Two before being transformed into a public school in the 1960s, signalling a shift in its status: no longer reserved to the upper-classes, the house is now attended by middle-class pupils, who have little interest in its history (or the presence of Cecil Valance’s tomb in the chapel) a metaphor of the dwindling influence of the traditional symbols of Englishness in the 1960s and 70s.
- 24 Corley’s end is, predictably enough, pathetic. In the third section, the descriptions becomes less and less flattering: “a Victorian monstrosity’ was the smug routine phrase” (268), a harsh judgment which might remind the reader of Tallis House in Ian McEwan’s *Atonement* (2001), also requisitioned during WWII and later transformed into a hotel<sup>9</sup>. The general consensus about the ugliness of Victorian houses seems to figure a third phase in the appraisal of the country house mirrored in contemporary literature, in which it stood for the cultural errors of the past, and whose demise<sup>10</sup> was then celebrated as the hypothetical coming of a new era.
- 25 Corley Court indeed functions as a metonymic signifier of Englishness: its evolution, from a dreamed, faraway ideal to an ugly and costly monstrosity and finally a useful place of education has to be linked with the development of the concept of Englishness, first based on pastoral ideals celebrated in the literature (for instance by Housman in his *Shropshire Lad*) before being harshly criticized and reappraised after the Great War (when its pointlessness on the bat-

tlefield was bitterly experienced) and dwindling into oblivion in the 1960s and 1970s.

- 26 Nevertheless, the material end of the country house, its progressive decay, do not signal the end of its potentiality as a literary place of memory. When, because of water damage in the ceiling of the house, Paul eventually gets a glimpse of the strange jelly-mould domes, the feeling of overlapping timeframes strangely unsettles him: “The vision of the lost decoration, a glimpse of an uncharted further dimension of the house he was living in, was so stirring to him that it hardly mattered.” (345) Corley fits with the definition of what Michel Foucault calls a heterotopia, a space “capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” and “often linked to slices in time - which is to say that they open onto what might be termed, for the sake of symmetry, hetero-chronies.” (1967). The country house indeed represents a mutable space, where different versions of Englishness, whether they be literary or not, can be superposed, confronted and ultimately measured against their legacy in modern culture.
- 27 Furthermore, Hollinghurst does not limit his reassessment of the literary country-house to what one might call anti-nostalgia<sup>11</sup> in the manner of *The Remains of the Day*, leaving the reader to ponder about the deceitful charms of Englishness. Because “there is no fixity in mythical concepts: they can come into being, alter, disintegrate, disappear completely” (Barthes 1957: 119), its material disappearance does not signal the end of its influence. In the fourth and fifth sections, Corley no longer functions as a setting for the action: the country house is not a ‘viable’ place, in its most literal meaning, any longer, but rather a symbolic place of memory, that people go back to in order to evoke a bygone past, often through the means of literature. The cultural representation of the country house remains, while the actual object disappears. Paradoxically enough, it then begins to acquire for the general public the capacity of figuring a slice of the past that was glimpsed by Daphne when she was mistress of the house and ironically envisaged by Sir Dudley in his memoirs: “Sometimes, it is true, I wondered if in later years its ugliness might recommend itself as a quaint kind of charm to generations yet unborn.” (437). The literary country house has all but replaced its brick and mortar equivalent in a shift that seems to signal the progressive dis-

integration of the historical referent before its cultural representation. Even though that transformation seems to recall Baudrillard’s “precession of simulacra” (1981: 5), it is somewhat different, insofar as the literary country house<sup>12</sup> living in memories is not a “hyperreal” but rather, to coin a term, a “hyporeal” whose muted and blurry quality makes it an ideal locus for the discussion of fluctuating identities.

### 3. A genealogy of influence and literary Englishness

- 28 Although putting the myth of gentlemanliness in perspective and recycling the country house motif were very much part of a late twentieth-century trend towards the reassessment of early twentieth-century narratives of Englishness and of their influence on popular culture (in *The Remains of the Day*, or Barker’s *Regeneration Trilogy*), Hollinghurst’s novel is quite different insofar as it points to some of the literature of the period as being responsible for the deceitful cultural clichés. Brooke of course, but also to a certain extent Forster and Waugh, the former for his love of the homely country house in *Howards End*, the latter for the elegy to grandiose stately homes in *Brideshead Revisited*, are criticized for laying the foundations of a pervasive and somewhat dangerous myth, luring people like Paul Bryant in the pursuit of splendour and mysteries that they will never find: in *The Stranger’s Child* the past ultimately remains a closed book.
- 29 Like many contemporary writers before him, Hollinghurst implies that the late twentieth-century versions of Englishness are rooted in the nostalgia towards the apparently idyllic existence of the upper classes whose demise was found in the battlefields of the Somme. Yet, the novel is no *Regeneration Trilogy*, and Hollinghurst has little interest in recreating the trauma of the Great War as Barker did by trans-contextualizing, as Linda Hutcheon would put it (1984: 12-14), their poems. Although the catchphrase “he had a bad war” is often mentioned, and Dudley’s limp regularly evoked, his sadistic personality, and the fear he inspires in his children do not appear to stem from the traumatic experience of the front, but are rather linked with the fact that he resented Cecil’s overbearing personality during his

brother’s lifetime and even more so after his death, when the War Poet had become something of an icon.

- 30 The very figure of the War Poet, and its cultural recuperation in the post-war years are then at the centre of the novel. Even though Owen and Sassoon are mentioned, it is Rupert Brooke that seems to be the primary ‘target’, insofar as he was both a War Poet, albeit a minor one, and a writer whose poems are central to the definition of literary Englishness. The readers are even teasingly provided with a judgment on the distance between Brooke and Cecil, “a less neurotic – and less talented – epigone of Brooke” (439). Moreover, Hollinghurst plays with the reader’s sense of recognition in the first section of the novel, by deliberately mentioning Brooke, as a discreet shadow in Cecil’s background:

Harry, who seemed to see all the new books, had a number of questions for him about Cambridge figures. ‘I wonder if you know young Rupert Brooke?’ he asked. ‘Oh, Rupert Brooke,’ said Freda, ‘what an Adonis!’ Cecil gave a snuffly smile as if at some rather basic misapprehension. ‘Oh, yes, I know Brooke,’ he said. ‘We used to see a lot of him in College, but now of course rather less.’ (55)

- 31 Mentioning the famous poet is not only a mischievous way to defeat the reader’s expectations, it also blurs the boundaries between ‘reality’ and the literary invention that Cecil is. Similarly, linking Cecil (and the Valance family in general) to existing literary figures such as Evelyn Waugh – supposedly evoking the brothers in his *Complete Letters* (“Two mentions of Dudley, one of Cecil” 433) – tends to blend Cecil (and Dudley) into the commonly accepted representation of literary England in the first half of the twentieth century. The clever intertwining of historic literary figures and made-up ones consequently raises the issue of ‘authenticity’, a conundrum that has haunted postmodernist literature since the 1960s (one of the most vivid examples of it being Julian Barnes’s *Flaubert Parrot*). Just like George Sawle, having a look at Cecil’s statue in Corley Court’s chapel and failing to recognize Cecil’s hands (“They were not the hands of Cecil Valance, mountaineer, oarsman and seducer. If the Captain’s neat head was a well-meant approximation, his hands were an imposture.” 157), the reader constantly questions the value of Cecil’s fictive literary endeavours, and their relationship to ‘real’ poets such as

Brooke or Owen. One may consequently wonder whether Hollinghurst strives for verisimilitude in his creation of a fictive poet and whether the parody of Brooke’s poems represents a sarcastic attempt at ridiculing them, or whether it represents parody as Hutcheon defines it: “Quotation or borrowing like this is not meant to signal only similarity (cf. Altmann 1977). [...] not a matter of nostalgic imitation of past models; it is a stylistic confrontation, a modern re-coding which establishes difference at the heart of similarity.” (Hutcheon 1984: 8)

- 32 It is quite obvious that the parodies of Brooke’s style need to be decoded by the reader: “When you were there, and I away / But scenting in the Alpine air the roses of an English May” (393) clearly reminds one of “Here tulips bloom as they are told/ Unkempt about those hedges blows /An English unofficial rose” (Brooke 1915: 162) in “The Old Vicarage, Grantchester”<sup>13</sup>. The reference is indeed acknowledged by Hollinghurst himself: “I think “Two Acres” is very much like Rupert Brooke’s “Old Vicarage, Grantchester,” that poem idealizing a certain view of England written before the war, which after the war takes on a dimension of ideality, as does its writer.” (Interview with the *Varsity* 2011) It should then be noted that the novel’s rendering of Cecil’s poems is deliberately fragmentary and frequently focuses on a very few words: the central lines of “Two Acres”. These pastoral and elegiac two lines, “Two blessed acres of English ground”, are distinctly reminiscent of Brooke’s “If I should die, think only this of me:/ That there’s some corner of a foreign field /That is forever England.” (“The Soldier”, Brooke 1915: 115). Like a leitmotiv, the poem regularly appears in the novel, for instance in the mouth of Sebastian Stokes – Cecil Valance’s biographer (“Two Acres”, indeed, lighter but of course so charming . . . will be read for as long as there are readers with an ear for English music<sup>14</sup>, and an eye for English things.” 162), or at Peter Rowe’s funeral, when Nigel Dupont – Peter’s former student and the editor of Cecil’s poems – evokes the famous Georgian: “He was a first-rate example of the second-rate poet who enters into common consciousness more deeply than many greater masters.” (527) Rather than a cultural legacy, those two lines seem to figure a shared literary *trace*, “not a presence but [...] rather the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself. The trace has, properly speaking, no place, for effacement belongs to the very



structure of the trace.” (Derrida 1979: 156) Not unlike the “hyporeal” nature of Hollinghurst’s literary country house, it is because “Two Acres” survives as a literary trace that it can disseminate throughout contemporary culture. Still, the literary trace is no Ariadne’s thread but rather a line of flight that allows the novelist to evoke the process of literary influence.

33 Hollinghurst indeed makes it clear that people, along with their books, cannot be trusted to provide a stable version of history: Paul Bryant’s various endeavours at writing Cecil’s biography in the fourth section (“Something of a Poet”) are met with suspicion and mistrust by Daphne and her ex-husband Dudley, who steadily and sternly reiterate that they said everything they had to say in their memoirs. The only revelations that Paul unearths are obtained from a semi-senile George Sawle, who declares that two of Daphne’s three children were illegitimate (Corinna, in particular, is claimed to be Cecil’s daughter). Yet, the revelation is strangely anti-climactic, for George’s hazy state of mind casts doubts on his recollections, and even Paul understands that conjecture will never be transformed back into facts (“the flow of secrets had been so disinhibited as to be almost unusable” 477). Maybe because the last twenty years (1990-2010) have been an in-between time when the direct memory of the first half of the century has been slowly disappearing, it is striking that the two surviving characters holding first-hand accounts of the events – Daphne and George Sawle – are pictured as going senile or blind. Those ‘real’ events are progressively being replaced by what literature and popular culture has turned those times into. Hollinghurst’s novel seems to suggest that the War Poets, Forster, and Waugh, are so much part of the English unconscious that they are no longer recognized as ‘representations’: the memory of Cecil fades, but “Two Acres” remains.

34 What the reader is ultimately presented with is a distinctly postmodernist mosaic of non-congruent portraits and texts, which simultaneously denounces the quest for an irrecoverable and fictitious past while enhancing his fascination for it. The novel therefore seem to hover between Jameson’s critique of postmodernist historical novels, which “can no longer set out to represent the historical past; [they] can only ‘represent’ our ideas and stereotypes about that past” (Jameson 1991: 25) and Hutcheon’s more positive assessment that “historiographic metafiction self-consciously reminds us that, while

events did occur in the real empirical past, we name and constitute those events as historical facts by selection and narrative positioning.” (Hutcheon 1985: 97)

- 35 Like McEwan’s *Atonement* or Barnes’s *Arthur and George*, the novel seems to belong to what can be considered as a second phase of post-modernism, sometimes referred to as “post-postmodernism”<sup>15</sup> differing from the previous one in particular because of its ethical claims in its approach to the past. However, the label “post-postmodernism” only situates this distinct evolution of postmodernism in chronological relation to the preceding one and lacks definitory quality. One might evoke another concept, “metamodernism”<sup>16</sup>, based on a-locality and the oscillation between “modern enthusiasm and postmodern irony” (Vermeulen & van den Akker 2010: 1), two notions which powerfully underlie *The Stranger’s Child*, although one might argue that the oscillation between seductive recreation of literary *topoi* and parodic recontextualisation, was already present in post-modernism as it was described by Linda Hutcheon: “Irony does indeed mark the difference from the past, but the intertextual echoing simultaneously works to affirm – textually and hermeneutically – the connection with the past.” (Hutcheon 125)
- 36 If the notion of “metamodernism” is particularly relevant to the novel, it is because it also sheds light onto the fact that Hollinghurst’s work not only recycles and parodies the primary literature of Edwardian and Georgian England, but also incorporates the postmodernist cultural discourse about it<sup>17</sup>. *The Stranger’s Child* is indeed quite unique insofar as the narrative does not stop in or about World War Two, making it a “shard of the past” (Nora 1989: 12) isolated from the present, but rather goes on until contemporary times in order to sketch the genealogy of literary influence and to bridge the two periods while incorporating the various metadiscourses about Englishness, from the Edwardian sense of a crystalline countryside on the verge of destruction to the analysis of the pre-war period as a source for myths of an ideal England. ‘Real’ figures of the literary historiography of WWI, such as John Stallworthy<sup>18</sup>, or Paul Fussell are even represented interacting with fictional characters and historical figures, thus mingling history, fiction, and the discourse about fiction:

She confirmed that the broad-faced, genially pugnacious-looking man talking to the Master was Paul Fussell, whose book on the Great War had moved and enlightened Paul more than anything he’d read on the subject – though sadly, like Evelyn Waugh’s *Letters*, it had only mentioned Cecil in a footnote (‘a less neurotic – and less talented – epigone of Brooke’). (439)

- 37 The mention of Paul Fussell, whose *Great War and Modern Memory* (1975) still remains the reference book on the relationship between literary testimonies of the War and the experience of it, signals a change in the links between contemporary literature and such works: for writers like Sebastian Faulks (*Birdsong*) or Pat Barker, Fussell was an acknowledged source of information. In *The Stranger’s Child*, he becomes part of the literary canon. Then it seems that the literature of the period (whether it be War Poets or country house novels) and the discourse about it are ultimately blended, making it impossible to distinguish first-hand experience from ‘second-hand’ comment. Peter Rowe, Corley Court’s schoolmaster turned TV presenter in the 1970s exemplifies that trend, as his former pupil Nigel Dupont explains:

“We can see now that Corley Court was as seminal to Peter’s work, as it was to be to my own. His two ground-breaking series, *Writers at War*, for Granada, and *The Victorian Dream*, for BBC2, were in a way incubated in that extraordinary place, cut off from the outside world and yet’ – here he smiled persuasively at the beauty of his own thought – ‘bearing witness to it . . . in so many ways.’”

- 38 One can naturally perceive the ironic parodying of famous BBC shows in the evocation of “*Writers at War*” or “*The Victorian Dream*”, but it also provides, in the person of Peter Rowe, a missing link between direct experience and its recuperation, or meta-representation (for these shows do not only give access to the stately homes, or the battle fields of the Somme, they also purpose to explain and interpret them for the viewers). The fascinating point lays, of course, in the fact that Peter Rowe has just died. The cultural commentator has become another object that biographers and friends comment upon, hinting at the endless recession of the ‘real’ before the shared cultural unconscious.

- 39 Like all the previous contemporary novels addressing Englishness and its related cultural *clichés*, whether they be country houses, gentlemen, or the heroic War Poets, *The Stranger’s Child* is caught in the tension usually arising from the fact that it criticizes the excessive influence of those well-known images while devoting five hundred pages to their recreation. But, more than Ishiguro or McEwan, Hollinghurst points at literature, in particular that of the War Poets, as a source for the cultural dissemination of *clichés*. In the novel, the literary influence of the early twentieth century is presented as an ambiguous “trace”, in the Derridean sense, whose elusiveness allows it to haunt 21<sup>st</sup> century psyches. While ironically re-affirming the power of literature, it also hints at a symbolic depletion of meaning, a “waning of affect” (Jameson 1991: 10) arising, not from the hyperreality of the real, but rather the gradual subsiding of memory before cultural *clichés* and literary catchphrases. When representing the figures that have first analysed the influence of the early twentieth century literature (such as Fussell) Hollinghurst seems to denounce the endless encasement of literary discourses about Englishness (in the manner of matryoshka dolls) which has diluted the raw force of the original ones.
- 40 Whether *The Stranger’s Child* is an ironic elegy to early twentieth century literature or an optimistic call for a rediscovery of it is difficult to ascertain. What one can be sure of, however, is that it demonstrates that the theoretical conundrum literary Englishness represents is far from being resolved.

## Conclusion

- 41 Although *The Stranger’s Child* is apparently very similar to other novels revisiting the first half of the century, half-way between Barker’s *Regeneration Trilogy*, and McEwan’s *Atonement*, it adopts a very different stance in its handling of the literature of the period. Even if gentlemanliness is criticized as a deceitful myth, the novel does not call for a re-examination of ‘real’ suffering based on literary sources like Sassoon or Owen, but rather creates a pseudo War Poet influenced by Rupert Brooke, whose literary legacy has nothing to do with war. The focus is thus on the country house which has inspired Cecil Valance to write poems that are remembered because of misplaced

cultural nostalgia rather than literary worth. Then, putting the literary and cultural history of the estate into perspective by inscribing it into the grand narrative of the twentieth century, allows Hollinghurst to evoke the genealogy of Englishness, from tradition, to architecture, literature, and finally popular culture.

- 42 Early twentieth century literature in *The Stranger’s Child* remains a trace, an elusive echo of an echo which parasites culture and give the illusion of knowledge. Yet, one might hope that playing with the reader’s expectations, showing him literature like a Chinese shadow puppet show, will ultimately provoke a rekindling of the affect in the reader.

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- 1 “Gouzeaucourt: the Deceitful Calm” (1918) (Blunden: 78)
- 2 Yeats once described him as the handsomest young man in England.
- 3 Portraits of Sassoon can be seen here: <<http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/wwwlitt/>> Last consulted 13/04/2012.
- 4 Also see Berberich : “While nineteenth-century writing used the trope of the *gentleman* mainly as a tool for the moral edification of its readers, twentieth-century writing is much more likely to contrast the ideal to other notions of masculinity, or to problematize its values. Crucially, it also depicts the literary *gentleman* as a much more subjectivized tool, in order to portray the personal beliefs of the author.” (Berberich 2007: 42)
- 5 “La figure du *gentleman* est un des éléments les plus saillants du concept d’anglicité, son omniprésence semble hanter la littérature contemporaine et la pousser inlassablement à vouloir en capter l’indéfinissable reflet pour mieux le contrer. Le flou conceptuel entourant la notion de *gentleman* en fait en effet un matériau unique qui incite sans cesse à retravailler le mythe. [...] C’est ici dans l’humain que s’incarne le mythe : [...] cet « idéal du moi » dévoyé cristallise la mise en crise de la masculinité dans le roman contemporain et met en doute la notion même de modèle.” (Cavalié 2009: 258-9)
- 6 The National Trust, whose membership was very small before World War II, gained more and more supporters after it. See Mandler 2005: 300-390.
- 7 Devoted to the magnificence of Sir Philip Sidney’s rural estate in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.
- 8 “Each man of us has his own particular heart”, Ford Madox Ford (2003), “Heart of the Country”, in *England and the English*. Manchester: Carcanet Press, 115.
- 9 “Morning sunlight, or any light, could not conceal the ugliness of the Tallis home—barely forty years old, bright orange brick, squat, lead-paned baronial Gothic.” (McEwan 2001: 19)
- 10 One should also notice that its suburban counterpart is not saved either: the ‘other’ house, Two Acres, is the one that significantly reappears in the last section, albeit in a regretful, ironic way, for the reader learns that it has been transformed into a real estate project: “Old Acres – Six Executive Homes, Two Remaining” (384).

11 For an evocation of contemporary Englishness as anti-nostalgia, see Cavalié 2009: 20, 82.

12 The same might not be said of actual country houses belonging to the National Trust, whose perfection in displaying all the necessary markers of Englishness may very well render them “more real than real”, and thus simulacra in the Baudrillardian sense.

13 The reference to the arch-famous poem is playfully acknowledged when George, visiting Daphne Sawle, drives past a house called “the Old Vicarage” in a taxi (“A handsome stone house, the Old Vicarage, came by” 469)

14 The mention of an “English music” may be a thinly veiled reference to one of the most famous analysts of Englishness: Peter Ackroyd.

15 See Barry Lewis (2005), “Postmodernism and Fiction”, *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, ed. Stuart Sim. London : Routledge, 113.

16 “However, in metamodernism this pluralism and irony are utilized to counter the modern aspiration, while in postmodernism they are employed to cancel it out. That is to say, metamodern irony is intrinsically bound to desire, whereas postmodern irony is inherently tied to apathy.” (Vermeulen & van den Akker 2010: 10)

17 Although it might stretch Vermeulen and Van den Akker’s definition of the concept further than they intended it.

18 “He realized the man standing near him was Professor Stallworthy, whose life of Wilfred Owen had fought rather shy of Owen’s feelings for other men. Paul suddenly felt shy of them too.” (439)



## English

Alan Hollinghurst’s fifth novel, *The Stranger’s Child* (2011) has repeatedly been praised for the connection it established with early twentieth-century writers. The novel is indeed centred on the character of Cecil Valance – gentleman and poet – a fascinating albeit sometimes shallow character, whose tragic death on the French front in 1916 allows his poems, often themed around the notion of Englishness, to acquire an emblematic quality. The subsequent recuperation and transformation of his personality and works are thoroughly dissected while the twentieth century unfolds before the reader’s eyes. Cecil’s primary subject, his family estate, Corley Court, is also a crucial element in the novel. The emblematic country house is thus critically portrayed in order to partially retrace the history of literary Englishness throughout the twentieth century. The novel thus endeavours to explain and criticize how the War Poets came to have such a widespread yet superficial influence on contemporary popular culture.

## Français

Le cinquième roman de Alan Hollinghurst, *The Stranger’s Child* (2011) a fréquemment été loué en raison du lien qu’il établissait avec les auteurs de la première moitié du vingtième siècle britannique. Le roman est en effet tout d’abord centré sur Cecil Valance, gentleman et poète, un personnage à la fois fascinant et superficiel, dont la mort tragique dans les tranchées de la Grande Guerre assurera la postérité de ses poèmes. La récupération et le recyclage dont le poète et son œuvre feront ensuite l’objet tout au long du xx<sup>e</sup> siècle sont ainsi analysés par Hollinghurst. La principale inspiration de Cecil, le manoir de famille dénommé Corley Court, est également un élément prégnant. La *country house* emblématique est évoquée de façon critique, afin de retracer, en partie, l’histoire de l’anglicité littéraire au cours du vingtième siècle. Le roman tente ainsi d’expliquer et critiquer l’influence réelle quoique superficielle que les Poètes de la Guerre exercent sur la culture populaire contemporaine.

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