

**POSTWAR ENGLISHNESS IN THE FICTION OF
PAT BARKER, GRAHAM SWIFT AND ADAM THORPE**

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*The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate
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For my father, and the father he never knew.

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ABSTRACT

The widely-recognised crisis of Englishness in the 1980s and 1990s has generally been explained as a response to the end of empire. If the place of memories of the First and Second World Wars in this crisis has been considered at all, these have generally been assumed to support a nostalgic version of English or British national identity. Taking three contemporary British novelists—Graham Swift, Pat Barker and Adam Thorpe—as examples, however, this thesis argues that the late-twentieth-century memory of these conflicts is strikingly ambivalent, and that the contemporary crisis of Englishness must be understood not only as postcolonial, but also, in a strong sense, as postwar.

The Introduction sets out the parameters of critical discussion of late-twentieth-century Englishness to date and explains my use of the term ‘postwar’, as marking the continuing cultural legacy of the world wars, and the process of interrogative re-reading of that legacy undertaken in the contemporary fiction I discuss. It also challenges the assumption that ‘nostalgia’ and a ‘healthy’ attitude to the past can necessarily be easily distinguished, through a discussion of post-Freudian psychoanalytic approaches to mourning and melancholia. Chapter One considers three writers of the early to mid-twentieth century, Siegfried Sassoon, J. B. Priestley, and Elizabeth Bowen, in order to suggest the nature of the questions about Englishness, war and violence which re-emerge with the breakdown of Britain’s postwar social and political consensus from the mid-1970s onward. Chapter Two then discusses Graham Swift’s early novels, *The Sweet Shop Owner*, *Shuttlecock* and *Waterland*, arguing that critical attention to his metafictional concerns in *Waterland* has meant that his interest in suburban English life as encrypting memories of war has been overlooked. Chapter Three proceeds to Pat Barker’s *The Regeneration Trilogy*, charting a two-way process of haunting through which contemporary concerns with violence are read back into the historical and literary record of the First World War, and simultaneously seem to re-emerge in the present as the return of the violence underpinning a melancholic cultural attachment to the very English narrative of ‘doomed youth’. My discussion in Chapter Four of Adam Thorpe’s novels *Ulverton*, *Still* and *Pieces of Light* emphasises their exploration of the violence at the heart of the ‘deep England’ evoked in heritage representations of Englishness. I suggest, however, that Thorpe’s attempts to find appropriate fictional forms for ambivalence and melancholia are at times closer to paralysed repetitions than to interrogations of Englishness. My argument concludes with a reading of Swift’s *Last Orders*, which I contend enacts the beginnings of a movement beyond the wartime end of a certain England and Englishness. Its misreading by critics as parochial and nostalgic, I suggest, indicates the extent of critical misunderstanding of the troubled memory of the world wars in contemporary Britain. It also testifies to the difficulty and the necessity of the creative and critical work on postwar Englishness undertaken by the writers considered in this study.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	i
Abstract	ii
Contents	iii
Introduction Paths Around Absence	1
Chapter One Unfinished Business: The Loss and Renewal of 'England' in Narratives of War	26
Chapter Two 'Something Left Over from the War': The Early Novels of Graham Swift	77
Chapter Three 'We Are Your Ghosts': <i>The Regeneration Trilogy</i> and the Uses of Gothic	130
Chapter Four 'Dying of England': The Novels of Adam Thorpe	178
Chapter Five Last Orders?	230
Conclusion	247
Bibliography	251

INTRODUCTION

PATHS AROUND ABSENCE

‘To be English’, writes Ian Baucom in his recent study of Englishness during and after empire, ‘is, often, to be a member of a cult of the dead, or, at the very least, a member of a cult of ruin’.¹ Baucom’s was only one among many voices, in the popular media as well as the academic presses, charting the travails of Englishness as the twentieth century closed and the twenty-first opened. For many of these observers, noting laments for ‘England gone’ from Philip Larkin’s ‘Going, Going’ through V. S. Naipaul’s *The Enigma of Arrival* to Roger Scruton’s recent, and unapologetically-named, *England: An Elegy*, the key characteristic of contemporary Englishness is nostalgia.² For the English, Baucom writes, nostalgia is no mere ‘sentimental attitude’, but ‘an injunctive politics of return’ to the true nation. Indeed, David Gervais has asked whether, without nostalgia, there would be any versions of England at all.³ Diagnoses of the cause of this national malaise have tended to

¹ *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire, and the Locations of Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 175.

² Larkin, ‘Going, Going’, in *Collected Poems*, ed. by Anthony Thwaite (London: Marvell and Faber, 1988), p. 190, Naipaul, *The Enigma of Arrival* (London: Penguin, 1987), Scruton, *England: An Elegy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2000).

³ Baucom, p. 176, Gervais, *Literary Englands: Versions of ‘Englishness’ in Modern Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 4. For further representative examples of this view of Englishness, see Antony Easthope, *Englishness and National Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999), Robert Hewison, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* (London: Methuen, 1987), Roy Porter, ‘Introduction’, in *Myths of the English*, ed. by Roy Porter (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), pp. 1-11 (p. 2), Martin J. Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), and Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (London: Verso, 1985). Although Wright and Hewison’s

concentrate on the impact on Britain of the end of empire, devolution, and European integration: as the meaning of Britishness shifts, albeit unevenly and with extreme reluctance, to accommodate the loss of Britain's empire, postwar immigration and increased Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish autonomy, so—the argument goes—Englishness's complicated embrace of and differentiation from Britishness has been exposed. The casual equation of England with Britain that was common fifty, or even thirty, years ago can no longer be made so easily. But the relationship between the two terms is still not a clear one. 'English' can specifically denote an identity separate from, even opposed to, Britishness.⁴ 'British' can mean a composite identity shared by the English, Scots, Welsh and (more complexly and problematically) the Irish. But 'British' can also refer to 'the dominant particularism within Britain, that of "Britain" itself, often referred to as "England"'.⁵

In a classic analysis of the English problem, first published in 1977, Tom Nairn argues that the lack of a viable English national identity is a consequence of the end of empire—of which the 'break-up of Britain' is the final phase.⁶ Having

titles refer to Britain, it is really the *English* 'national past' with which they are concerned: Neal Ascherson's assertion that heritage is a manifestation of 'vulgar English nationalism' only makes this more than usually explicit (in Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London: Verso, 1994), p. 262).

⁴ John Fowles makes such a distinction in his essay 'On Being English But Not British' (1964), in *Wormholes: Essays and Occasional Writings*, ed. by Jan Relf (London: Cape, 1998), pp. 79-88, as does Jeremy Paxman in *The English: A Portrait of a People* (London: Penguin, 1999), pp. 265-66.

⁵ Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* (London: Pimlico, 1992), p. 1. See also Robert Colls, *Identity of England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 377-78 and Bernard Crick, 'The English and the British', in *National Identities: The Constitution of the United Kingdom*, ed. by Bernard Crick (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 90-104.

⁶ *The Break-up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism*, (London: NLB, 1977). In his recent *After Britain: New Labour and the Return of Scotland* (London: Granta, 2001), Nairn writes that with regard to 'the question of England [...] all too little has altered since 1977' (p. 15; see also pp. 39-42 and 177-78).

thrown in their lot with a 'Great-British chauvinism' based on territorial and economic expansion, he writes, the English have found that 'the retreating tide of imperialism' has left them only 'the battered cliché-ridden hulk' of an identity (78, 259). Contemporary attempts to define and assert an English identity are only 'so many paths around an absence' (294). An awareness of this absence has, moreover, haunted Englishness throughout the imperial period, '[sounding] through the English imperialist mind in a thousand forms: in Rider Haggard's necrophilia, in Kipling's moments of gloomy doubt, in the self-pitying pessimism of Housman, in the sadness of Elgar, or in the gloomy cosmic truth of Forster's Marabar caves' (265). What is troubling Englishness in the late twentieth century could therefore be construed, Nairn's argument suggests, as the uncanny return of the 'something persistently missing, something absent from English national identity itself' that has hitherto been masked by the confusion of Englishness and Britishness (262).

Nairn points to this lack within Englishness through literary examples, although ostensibly his primary concern is political culture and, by extension, people's subjective sense of national identity. It may be worth stating at the outset that my own study is concerned with literary constructions of Englishness, rather than with the sociological or psychological study of national identity. This is not by any means to discount the connections between the subjective meaning and experience of Englishness and literary Englishness, or, to frame the issue differently, between the variety of ways in which Englishness, and English subjects, are discursively produced: it is simply to recognise the necessary limits of a thesis concerned with literary texts.

More recent studies echo Nairn in explaining the contemporary trials of Englishness by reference to imperialism and the end of empire. In the spirit of

Whisky Sisodia's observation in *The Satanic Verses* that 'the trouble with the Engenglish is that their hiss hiss history happened overseas, so they dodo don't know what it means', Baucom, for example, argues that English nostalgia and melancholy are a response to the dissemination and dispersal of Englishness across the globe.⁷ But whereas Nairn's designation of 'something absent from English national identity' suggests that it should be possible to find a true, coherent identity at the heart of the nation—for him, this is 'an idea of the people' and their 'forceful entry [...] into history' (295)—other critics argue that the very search for a missing or lost presence that would guarantee identity signals a refusal to recognise England's—though of course not just England's—postmodern, postcolonial condition, a nostalgic longing for the 'transcendental ground' of meaning and identity which 'doubtless never existed'.⁸ Immigrants' experiences of the 'border and frontier conditions' of migrancy and colonisation have been made to stand for a pervasive, postmodern and postcolonial, sense of displacement, and for an awareness that *all* attempts to formulate a stable identity are 'paths around an absence', or around the other that is constitutive of the self.⁹ In the context of discussions of Englishness, Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* is perhaps the paradigmatic example to which critics

⁷ Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (1988; New York: Henry Holt, 1997), p. 353, Baucom, *Out of Place*. On Englishness as formed in colonial encounters, see Simon Gikandi, *Maps of Englishness: Writing Identity in the Culture of Colonialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), and Baucom; for an analysis that partly endorses, partly criticises such a reading, see Colls, *Identity of England*.

⁸ Ned Lukacher, *Primal Scenes: Literature, Philosophy, Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 11.

⁹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 12. As Bhabha himself observes, this manoeuvre '[gives] poststructuralism a specifically postcolonial provenance' in order to suggest what a poststructuralist *politics* might look like: postcolonial hybridity, he writes, 'initiates the project of political thinking by continually facing it with the strategic and the contingent, with the countervailing thought of its own "unthought"' (p. 64).

turn in trying to sketch the possible, desired, postcolonial and postmodern transformation of Englishness. As Michael Gorra puts it in his 'notes towards a redefinition of Englishness' (highlighting, in the process, the aforementioned confusion of 'English' and 'British'):

Britain's illusory belief in its own historical homogeneity means that it will probably never become a fully multiracial society. Even if nonwhites can insert themselves into the continuity of English life, the terms of that life will change only in degree. Nevertheless their presence will have important consequences. After his transformation into a human goat, Rushdie's Saladin Chamcha finds himself in a hospital full of other foreign beasts: a manticore from Bombay, 'businessmen from Nigeria who have grown sturdy tails ... holiday makers from Senegal who ... were turned into slippery snakes.' And when Saladin asks what has happened, the manticore tells him that white British society has 'the power of description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct'. But the map isn't pink anymore, and in describing themselves, in changing the face in England's mirror, such figures as Saladin may one day help loosen the coils of that island nation's seemingly endless past.¹⁰

Englishness may not, in fact, be as nostalgic, or as uniquely nostalgic, as its critics often suggest.¹¹ Indeed, one of the arguments of this thesis is that it is not always as easy as those critics seem to assume to distinguish nostalgia from a productive working-through of the traces of the past, in literature and in culture more generally. The point I wish to make here, however, is that analysts of the contemporary crisis of Englishness who, with greater or lesser degrees of hope, anticipate a regeneration of Britain (or England), tend to see both crisis and hope for renewal in postcolonial terms. The examination of Englishness that has taken place over the past two decades is far less frequently connected to the legacy of the two

¹⁰ Michael Gorra, *After Empire: Scott, Naipaul, Rushdie* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp. 174-75. Compare Baucom, pp. 200-18, and Gikandi, pp. 205-24.

world wars, except in so far as they are associated with the end of empire, or are assumed to function in the public mind as fetishes through which a conservative Englishness denies its present. The intense contemporary popular interest in the First and Second World Wars, manifested in literature, film, television, academic history, and the heritage industries, tends to be read not so much as ‘active historicity’ but as unhealthy atavism.¹² Kate Flint asserts, in a critique of Graham Swift’s *Last Orders* to which I will return later, that commemoration of the Second World War ‘[helps] to generate and consolidate memories that provide powerful nationalistic integrative forces even in peacetime’, Lucy Noakes sees the memory of the Second World War as underpinning traditional and restrictive notions of gender, and Angus Calder laments that it blocks a true commitment to political and cultural modernisation in Britain.¹³ Tom Nairn is once again typical when he argues that Black and Asian immigration was the only ‘new’ experience in twentieth-century England—that is, the only experience with the potential to transform Englishness—and that the First and Second World Wars simply reinforced the ‘modern English conservatism’ that

¹¹ For critiques of ‘heritage-baiting’ in Britain and more widely, see Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present*, especially pp. 259-312, and David Lowenthal, *Possessed by the Past: The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

¹² The phrase is from Wright, *On Living in an Old Country*, p. 70.

¹³ Flint, ‘Looking Backward? The Relevance of Britishness’, in *Unity in Diversity Revisited? British Literature and Culture in the 1990s*, ed. by Barbara Korte and Klaus Peter Müller (Tübingen: Narr, 1998), pp. 35-50 (p. 41), Noakes, *War and the British: Gender, Memory and National Identity* (London: Tauris, 1998), and Calder, *Myth of the Blitz*, pp. 267-72. The reputation of war remembrance was not enhanced by the use of the Second World War by politicians, the media, combatants and the public in ‘making sense of the [Falklands War] and [...] reinventing themselves through it’ (Kevin Foster, *Fighting Fictions: War, Narrative and National Identity* (London: Pluto Press, 1999), p.14; see also Calder, *Myth of the Blitz*, pp. 269-71, and Noakes, pp. 103-33).

first emerged in the ‘patriotic war of counter-revolution’ against the French (1792-74), the Englishness whose first prophet was Edmund Burke.¹⁴

The ‘myths’ of the two world wars are, of course, quite different from each other. The First World War, as Paul Fussell, Samuel Hynes and others have argued, stands in popular memory for meaningless, futile destruction, and for bitter divisions between soldiers and those at home, between the staff and front-line troops, and between the generation who fought and the ‘old men’ who sent them to their deaths.¹⁵ The Second World War, on the other hand, conjures memories of national unity, of ‘when we were good’, as Ian McEwan has put it, and also of when ‘Britain’ was great: ‘the last time in living memory when the English had a clear and positive sense of themselves’, and when ‘we could say with any confidence that the impression of England matched the reality’.¹⁶ As we shall see, the work of both mid-century and contemporary writers suggests that these myths obscure much more complicated relationships between Englishness, war and violence, and between fears of national loss and hopes of regeneration. At this point, however, I would like simply to challenge the assumption that the First and Second World Wars continue to fascinate because memories of these wars work unequivocally to shore up a threatened sense of British, or more precisely English, national identity, and to

¹⁴ The key text is Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, ed. by Paul Langford and others (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981-), VIII: *The French Revolution, 1790-1794*, ed. by L. G. Mitchell (1989), pp. 53-293.

¹⁵ See Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, rev. edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London: Bodley Head, 1990), and Fran Brearton, *The Great War in Irish Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹⁶ McEwan in Mark Rawlinson, *British Writing of the Second World War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), p. 209, and Paxman, *The English*, pp. 2 and 232.

suggest that the legacies of war have more to do with the late-twentieth-century crisis of Englishness than has generally been allowed.

The very insistence of the memories of the world wars in contemporary Britain, in fact, suggests that their legacy remains enigmatic, troubling, unresolved. As the eightieth anniversary of the Armistice approached in November 1998, Robin Stummer observed that although we feel enjoined to remember the Great War, it is not clear exactly what ‘we are called on to remember, and why’.¹⁷ The same, I would suggest, could be said of World War Two remembrance. The unresolved business of these conflicts has many layers. On a very personal level, it includes mourning for family and friends—although few now remain who have immediate connections to those killed in the First World War—and for the losses occasioned by the Second World War’s ‘violent dismantling of ordinary ideas of home and private life’.¹⁸ In the case of the Second World War, these losses have been, perhaps, all the more difficult to work through because they have been ‘marginalised in favour of memories that [stressed] instead unity and cohesion’, not to mention memories of the war as bringing about a national rebirth.¹⁹ Mechanised, total war, and the experience of war ‘at home’ for the first time in over two centuries, were also profoundly disruptive to a national imaginary that, at least since the late eighteenth century, had stressed peace and domesticity, and to which ‘the distancing of war and the evil thereof was [...] absolutely fundamental’.²⁰ The impact of the First World War on

¹⁷ ‘The War We Can’t Let Go’, *Guardian*, 7 November 1998, ‘Weekend’, pp. 12-21 (p. 12).

¹⁸ Adam Piette, *Imagination at War: British Fiction and Poetry 1939-1945* (London: Papermac, 1995), p. 7.

¹⁹ Noakes, p. 42.

²⁰ Colls, *Identity of England*, p. 133. On the development of ideas of the English character, see Paul Langford, *Englishness Identified: Manners and Character 1650-1850* (Oxford:

Englishness, and its relationship to related traumas, principally the encounter with modernity and (the beginning of) the end of empire, have been subjects of critical interest for almost three decades now.²¹ But the impact of the Second World War has remained largely unexplored. The ‘history of the [Second World War’s] remembrance’ in Britain is, as Mark Rawlinson has observed, ‘yet to be written’, and so is the story of its impact on understandings and representations of Englishness.²² This study will, I hope, contribute to that work.

Although people’s sense of being part of a collective national subject is intensified during wartime, this does not mean that the nation at war offers a stable point of identification. As Robert Colls has noted, ‘Englishness has had to be constantly reproduced, and the phases of its most intense reproduction—borne as its finest moments [even, one might say, its ‘finest hours’]—have simultaneously been phases of threat to its existence from within and without’.²³ In its impact on national identity as well as in more general terms, war figures as both entropic engine of

Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 65-73 and 137-57, and Colls, *Identity of England*, pp. 69-86.

²¹ See, for example, Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (New York: Anchor, 1990), Fussell, *Modern Memory*, Martin Green, *Children of the Sun: A Narrative of ‘Decadence’ in England after 1918* (London: Constable, 1977), Hynes, *A War Imagined*, and Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991).

²² Rawlinson, p. 209. Robert Hewison and Patrick Wright are amongst the few to have given sustained attention to the legacy of the Second World War, but their focus is on cultural history rather than literature: see Hewison, *Under Siege: Literary Life in London 1939-45*, rev. edn (London: Methuen, 1988), *In Anger: Culture in the Cold War 1945-60* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981), *Too Much: Art and Society in the Sixties 1960-75* (London: Methuen, 1986), and *Culture and Consensus: England, Art and Politics since 1940* (London: Methuen, 1995), and Wright, *On Living in an Old Country*, and *A Journey Through Ruins: A Keyhole Portrait of British Postwar Life and Culture*, rev. edn (London: Flamingo, 1993).

²³ ‘Englishness and the Political Culture’, in *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880-1920*, ed. by Robert Colls and Philip Dodd (Beckenham: Croom Helm, 1986), pp. 29-61 (p. 29).

destruction and agent of regeneration.²⁴ It sees the elaboration and reinforcement, and the revelation of the profound instability, of the boundaries between self and other, inside and outside, both of the individual and of the nation. ‘War [...] is necessary to the constitution of the nation’, writes Daniel Pick:

To put it in another way, violent recognition of the imagined ‘non-community’ is essential to collective identity. [...] Whatever the complexity of relationships and the depth of exploitation within a particular nation, it is always ‘imagined’ as ‘a deep, horizontal comradeship’. Equally, of course, it is always constituted in relation to other states beyond its own frontiers.²⁵

But as Jacqueline Rose has argued, war also tests the stability of these frontiers:

the distinction between fantasy and reality [...] is revealed in its most difficult relation under [...] the impact of war. We can never finally be sure whether we are projecting or not, if what we legitimately fear may be in part the effect of our own projection.²⁶

War troubles not only the boundary between the inside and the outside of the nation, but also the nation’s internal coherence, bringing about the traumatic, and often uncanny, return of its repressed others.²⁷ In Chapter One, I will suggest that such confusion contributed to what has been called, variously, a ‘moral fatigue’, an

²⁴ See Daniel Pick, *War Machine: The Rationalisation of Slaughter in the Modern Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

²⁵ *War Machine*, p. 158, quoting Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), p. 6. For an historical version of this argument in relation to Britishness, see Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (London: Vintage, 1996).

²⁶ *Why War?—Psychoanalysis, Politics, and the Return to Melanie Klein* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 29.

²⁷ See Sigmund Freud, ‘The “Uncanny”’ (1919), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey, 24 vols (London: Hogarth and Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1953-74), XVII (1955), pp. 217-56. References to the *Standard Edition* will be given hereafter as *SE*.

‘imaginative agoraphobia’, and a spiritual exhaustion that pervaded English culture at the end of the Second World War, after almost three decades in which the relations between Englishness and its others, and between Englishness and violence, were almost continually at issue.²⁸ Subsequent chapters will then consider how, in the work of three contemporary writers, exploring the late-twentieth-century condition of England has entailed an examination of the imaginative legacy of the First and Second World Wars, and a return to the place of violence in an Englishness customarily defined in terms of domesticity, moderation and ‘modest pleasures’.²⁹ In the fiction of Graham Swift, Pat Barker and Adam Thorpe, remembering the world wars may sometimes appear to be a nostalgic search for ‘England gone’, but more often it threatens a return of the very terror and violence that Burke sought to exclude from his familial, domestic Englishness. This sublimity returns, moreover, not as an intrusion from ‘outside’, but as something that has been internal to Englishness all along. To borrow from the language of Swift’s *Waterland*, which in its representation of the Fens attempts to figure precisely this terror and violence, these novels often suggest that Englishness has the ‘wide world’ at its heart.³⁰

These concerns are, I argue, *postwar* concerns in more than simply a temporal sense. Just as the term ‘postmodern’ arguably does not mean what comes, temporally, after modernity, and ‘postcolonial’ what comes after colonialism (where, and for whom, have modernity and the colonial age really ended?) ‘postwar’ is a term that potentially offers more critical purchase than confining it to meaning

²⁸ Scruton, p. 249, Bryan Appleyard, *The Pleasures of Peace: Art and Imagination in Post-War Britain* (London: Faber, 1989), p. 10, Piette, p. 2.

²⁹ Colls, *Identity of England*, p. 81.

simply ‘post-1945’ would suggest (and indeed, for many the ‘Second World War’ did not end in 1945). In all three instances, the ‘post’ might be understood to signify instead an interrogative re-reading—of modernity, of colonialism, of war. In the contemporary texts I have considered in this study, this re-reading involves an engagement with the doubleness of war: its mobilisation and dissolution of constructs of Englishness, and the crises it brings about in the imaginary relations between the individual, the nation, and their others.³¹ They suggest, moreover, that these crises are still with us, and thus that postwar writing is, like other ‘postal’ conditions, a learning to live with ghosts that ‘disjoin or dis-adjust the identity to itself of the living present’.³²

My studies of Swift, Barker and Thorpe emphasise ways in which their work re-reads the memory of the First and Second World Wars, and thus reinterprets the relationship between Englishness and violence. It seems helpful, however, to explain at the outset the approach to memory, narrative and identity that underlies this thesis, with a particular focus on the importance of narratives of memory in the constitution of identities, individual and collective, and on the role of mourning in the ongoing production of new narratives of self.

³⁰ Graham Swift, *Waterland*, rev. edn (London: Picador, 1992), p. 1 and elsewhere. Further references will be given in parentheses.

³¹ I use ‘imaginary’ here in the sense developed by Lacan, to designate ‘the order of mirror-images, identifications and reciprocities’ through which the individual ‘[attempts] to be and to remain “what [he or she] is”’ (Malcolm Bowie, *Lacan* (London: Fontana, 1991), p. 92). As Bowie observes, ‘the Imaginary is not the same thing as the illusory in that the phantasmatic constructions comprising the Imaginary order are highly durable and can have effects in the Real’ (p. 99): never more clearly, one might say, than in war.

³² Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), p.xx. On

The classic text on the subject of mourning is, of course, Freud's 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917), in which he describes the differences between 'normal' mourning and the pathological condition of melancholia, and speculates on the factors that would lead to a person developing one rather than the other. In mourning, he writes, someone who has suffered the loss of a loved person, or 'of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on', gradually comes to accept that loss, and to withdraw from his or her libidinal attachments to the lost object so that, when mourning is completed, he or she is free to form new attachments.³³ In melancholia, however, the object loss is unconscious, and the path of mourning is blocked: because of ambivalence—feelings of hate as well as love—for the lost object, or because traumatic experiences associated with it activate other repressed material.³⁴ Instead of gradually withdrawing his or her attachment to the object, the melancholic establishes a narcissistic identification with it. His or her ego is therefore split between the part which identifies with the lost object and a 'special agency' which judges the object, and ambivalence about the lost object is translated into a 'self-tormenting [...] which is without doubt enjoyable, [...] a satisfaction of trends of sadism and hate which relate to an object, and which have been turned round upon the subject's own self'.³⁵ Hence, Freud argues, the loss of self-esteem, the violent 'self-reproaches and self-revilings', and the tendency to suicide, that distinguish the symptoms of melancholia from those of mourning: these are really reproaches against and expressions of

postcolonialism as a way of reading, see John McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 32-33.

³³ 'Mourning and Melancholia', in *SE XIV* (1957), pp. 237-60 (p. 243).

³⁴ 'Mourning and Melancholia', p. 257.

hostility towards the loved, and lost, object—or, we might say, paths around an absence the melancholic refuses to acknowledge.³⁶

Later psychoanalysts and other psychological theorists of every conceivable stripe have developed and modified Freud's observations on mourning. Two approaches in particular have been useful to me in my readings of the texts considered in this study. The first is the Gothic topography of cryptic mourning developed by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok in *The Wolf Man's Magic Word* and in the essays collected in *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*.³⁷ For Abraham and Torok, psychic life involves 'a constant process of acquisition and assimilation, the active expansion of our potential to accommodate our own emerging desires and feelings as well as the events and influences of the external world'.³⁸ When this process of 'introjection' is disturbed, however, cryptic 'incorporation' takes its place. Incorporation is the refusal to introject loss—that is, to mourn and to be transformed by mourning.³⁹ Instead, the unacknowledged loss, the 'open wound', is entombed or walled-off in an inaccessible region of the psyche that Abraham and Torok call a 'crypt'. It is consigned to silence, but makes its presence felt in melancholia, manic depression, fetishism, and neuroses of failure. All 'rest on some "gaping wound"',

³⁵ 'Mourning and Melancholia', pp. 249 and 251.

³⁶ 'Mourning and Melancholia', p. 244.

³⁷ *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy*, trans. by Nicholas Rand, *Theory and History of Literature*, 37 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), and *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, ed. and trans. by Nicholas T. Rand (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

³⁸ Rand in *Shell and the Kernel*, p. 9.

³⁹ *Shell and the Kernel*, p. 127.

opened long ago within the ego and disguised by a fantasmatic and secret construction in place of the very thing from which, through the loss, the ego was severed. In all cases, the goal of this type of construction is to disguise the wound because it is unspeakable, because to state it openly would prove fatal to the entire topography. Individual cases differ only as to the shape of the wound and the particular form of the arrangement invented so as to reveal nothing.⁴⁰

More recently, Jean Laplanche and Thomas Ogden have turned their attention to the relationship between mourning and creativity, and thus, in the broadest sense, between mourning and living.⁴¹ Laplanche argues that the work of mourning involves addressing the enigmatic message left behind in us by the lost person or object, which demands our attention or response. In mourning, we ‘go back over’ this something that remains in us by creating something new.⁴² As Thomas Ogden puts it:

successful mourning centrally involves a demand that we make on ourselves to create something—whether it be a memory, a dream, a story, a poem, a response to a poem—that begins to meet, to be equal to, the full complexity of our relationship to what has been lost and to the experience of loss itself.⁴³

What we bring into being through mourning is not just a memory, dream or story, but a new self. Contemporary psychoanalysis understands selfhood as depending on a

⁴⁰ *Shell and the Kernel*, pp. 142-43.

⁴¹ I am indebted to Tom Davey for drawing my attention to the work of Laplanche and Ogden on mourning and creativity (‘Mourning, Melancholia and Being Staunch’, *Forum, the Journal of the New Zealand Association of Psychotherapists*, 6 (July 2000), 57-66). For an extended discussion of the significance of mourning, as the path to meaning and individuation, in psychoanalysis, see Peter Homans, *The Ability to Mourn: Disillusionment and the Social Origins of Psychoanalysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

⁴² Jean Laplanche, ‘Time and the Other’, trans. by Luke Thurston, in Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 234-259 (p. 258).

⁴³ Thomas H. Ogden, ‘Borges and the Art of Mourning’, *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 10.1 (2000), 65-88 (p. 65).

continuous inner narrative; when the ability to maintain such a narrative is disrupted, either through amnesia or trauma, so too is the individual's ability to maintain a sense of identity or self. As Jeremy Holmes argues, however, 'psychological health [...] depends on a dialectic between story-making and story-breaking, between the capacity to form narrative, and to disperse it in the light of new experience'. Psychological ill-health might therefore be understood as a '[pathology] of narrative capacity', such as 'clinging to rigid stories; being overwhelmed by unstoried experience; or being unable to find a narrative strong enough to contain traumatic pain'.⁴⁴ In such circumstances, mourning or introjection has failed, and the project of analysis is to restore the individual's ability to form new and flexible narratives and thus to be transformed. Christopher Bollas describes this process as follows:

Historical thinking is a psychic function. Reviewing the past, retrieving finite details from it and giving them new, indeed contemporary, meanings, detraumatizes the subject who suffers from the ailments of many a thing done. By making past events meaningful, the historian [or the patient] exercises an important psychic capacity, that of reflection: this does not confer retrospective truth on the past—indeed, almost the contrary—but creates a new meaning that did not exist before, one that could not exist were it not based on past events and did it not transform them into a tapestry holding them in a new place. [...] This 'revision' of the past [...] does not, as some would have it, invalidate the idea of reconstruction: it is simply the ordinary work of any historical activity. The past is inert. The dumb facts of an existence still lie in their chronological place [...]. Doing history, however—reviewing this past and thereby transforming it—is a psychic function always alive to changed ways of seeing the world. [...]

Historical construction collects in order to retrieve the self from its many meaningless deaths—the amnesial 'gone'—and then it generatively destroys these details and saturates them with new meaning created through the very act of retrieval.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ 'Defensive and Creative Uses of Narrative in Psychotherapy: An Attachment Perspective', in *Healing Stories: Narrative in Psychiatry and Psychotherapy*, ed. by Glenn Roberts and Jeremy Holmes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 49-66 (p. 59).

As Bollas makes clear, the act of remembering does not retrieve a ‘true’, originary memory or self from the past: memory is no *guarantee* of identity.⁴⁶

Nor is ‘successful’ mourning a complete break with the past. As Bollas’s metaphor of the tapestry holding past events in a new place suggests, what we have lost remains, becoming part of the new identity woven out of its loss. Thus, more recent work on mourning departs from Freud to emphasise the difficulty of distinguishing mourning from melancholia. Freud seeks clearly to separate the two: in his ideal scheme, the melancholic has lost connection with the lost object, and incorporated it instead, while in mourning ‘there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious’, and the subject continues to relate to the object until his or her emotional ties to it are cut, one by one.⁴⁷ But Freud is repeatedly forced to acknowledge their proximity, for as Laplanche asks, ‘Where are we to find mourning which would be only conscious, with no infantile reverberation, no ambivalence and no narcissistic consequences?’ In other words, where are we to find mourning without melancholia? Indeed, what is there to mourn, if there is ‘no narcissistic

⁴⁵ *Cracking Up: The Work of Unconscious Experience* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 143-45.

⁴⁶ Jeffrey Prager observes that memory is often given precisely this role in contemporary culture. ‘As features of our past have become identified as ever more critical in understanding our present, the *process* of remembering has become overshadowed by *what* is remembered’, and memory is assumed to be ‘merely an unproblematic vehicle for reclaiming the past’. Both psychoanalysis and contemporary research on how memory works suggest, however, that far from offering transparent access to the past, memory is ‘forged in response to the contemporary needs, desires, and understandings of the remembering self’: it is a space where ‘past, present and future converge’ (*Presenting the Past: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Misremembering* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 68, 82 and 87. See also Nicola King, *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), Peter Middleton and Tim Woods, *Literatures of Memory: History, Time and Space in Postwar Writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), and, on the cultural dimensions of the contemporary ‘memory boom’, Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

wound, no breaching of the ego’?⁴⁸ And, moreover, can the end-point of mourning really be the cutting of all ties to what we have lost? Instead of the cutting of threads to the lost object, Laplanche proposes as a prototype of mourning Penelope’s weaving, and nightly unpicking and reweaving, of the shroud for Laertes in *The Odyssey*:

This, then, is Penelope’s work; but what is it exactly? Is it weaving or unweaving? The analogy between ‘analysing’ and ‘undoing’ the fabric [the Greek word used in *The Odyssey* means both] invites us to attempt to turn the whole process around. [...] We are told in the manifest tale: a faithful and wise spouse, she wishes to get rid of the suitors, and she weaves with the sole aim of unweaving, in other words to gain time until her Ulysses returns [i.e., in Freud’s terms her unweaving is melancholic]. One can equally well suppose, however, the reverse: that perhaps she only unweaves *in order* to weave, to be able to weave a new tapestry. It would thus be a case of *mourning*, of mourning for Ulysses. But Penelope does not cut the threads, as in the Freudian theory of mourning; she patiently unpicks them, to be able to compose them again in a different way. Moreover, this work is nocturnal, far from the conscious lucidity with which, Freud claims, the threads are broken one by one. This work requires time, it is repetitive [...]. There is, however, a possible end. One can imagine that one evening the new cloth, for a while at least, will not be unwoven.⁴⁹

What emerges in this re-reading of mourning is an understanding of it not only as mysterious and repetitive, but also as essential to the process of ‘doing history’ and, in a larger sense, to identity-formation. How valid is it, however, to use these approaches to the mechanisms of individuals’ mourning and memory in the

⁴⁷ ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, p. 245.

⁴⁸ ‘Time and the Other’, p. 249. Other psychoanalysts to challenge Freud’s distinction between mourning and melancholia include Karl Abraham, Melanie Klein, John Bowlby and Julia Kristeva: for a summary of their views, see Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 28-30. See also David Farrell Krell’s discussion of Derrida’s scepticism about ‘successful mourning’, in *The Purest of Bastards: Works of Mourning, Art, and Affirmation in the Thought of Jacques Derrida* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), especially pp. 14-17, and Eric L. Santner, *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 3.

analysis of literary texts' engagement with cultural memory? I will deal with the latter part of the question first: the relationship between the processes of individual and of cultural memory. Dominick LaCapra argues that because 'the fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis (such as transference, resistance, denial, repression, acting-out, and working-through) undercut the binary opposition between the individual and society' there is no reason to assume they apply to collectives only by analogy.⁵⁰ Similarly, as Jacqueline Rose suggests in her discussion of the role of fantasy in the modern state—indeed, of the modern state *as* a fantasy, in the sense that 'it relies on fantasy for an authority it can ultimately neither secure nor justify'—fantasies are often 'forms of remembrance [...] which hover in the space between social and psychic history'. Our 'inner landscapes', she writes, 'are peopled with the burdens of history'—echoing not only Abraham and Torok's description of the crypt, but Gramsci's argument that the individual is 'a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in [him or her] an infinity of traces without leaving an inventory'.⁵¹

Literary texts, then, might be considered both as testimony to this 'infinity of traces', and as attempts to re-weave, history. They bear witness to '*what we do not yet know of our lived historical relation to events of our times*', but they may also attempt to bring that knowledge to consciousness and to *transform* our relationship to these events.⁵² A text—as the Latin *textum*, something woven, suggests—is

⁴⁹ 'Time and the Other', pp. 251-52.

⁵⁰ *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 43.

⁵¹ *States of Fantasy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 10 and 5-6. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (1929-35), cited in Rose, *States of Fantasy*, p. 11.

⁵² Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. xx (emphasis in original). On

always to some extent a reweaving of the threads of the past, and from this perspective, all art is in some sense a work of mourning, in which the work itself is the ‘consolation’, the ‘tissue of substitutions’ that takes the place of what we have lost.⁵³ The texts considered in this study, however, are works of mourning in a stronger sense, because in their different ways they all mourn the wars in which ‘England’ was both lost and strenuously (re)asserted. Or, it might be said, they fail to mourn them, for they also demonstrate the modern failure of, or resistance to, ‘normal’ mourning and the ‘orthodox consolations’ of ‘the rebirth of the dead in nature, in God, [...] in [literature] itself’, or in the nation.⁵⁴ In this refusal may, perhaps, lie their significance and their effectiveness as contemporary elegies.⁵⁵

In the works I consider, the reweaving of the threads of the past is a complex, ambivalent process, which, like Penelope’s at her loom, is often difficult to place on one side or other of any (false) dichotomy between nostalgia and progress, looking back and looking forward. Instead, these texts move between melancholic attachment to or encrypted preservation of ideas of England, a desire to destroy or forget them, and an attitude that looks more like Freud’s notion of ‘normal’ mourning. The shifts between and combinations of these modes, moreover, are sometimes surprising. For example, Sassoon’s *The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston*, which many have read as elegising a self and an England lost during the

art as ‘at once testimony and representation’ see also Geoffrey H. Hartman, ‘On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies’, *New Literary History*, 26 (1995), 537-63 (p. 545).

⁵³ Peter M. Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), pp. 18-19.

⁵⁴ Ramazani, p. 4.

⁵⁵ As Ramazani argues, modern elegy’s melancholia does not constitute a complete break with pre-modern elegy, but rather embraces ‘tendencies long embedded in the form’. It is a question of emphasis rather than one of opposition (p. 9).

Great War, covertly work to deny that anything real was lost. Swift's *Last Orders*, on the other hand, condemned by some as parochial and nostalgic Little Englandism after it won the Booker Prize in 1996, is closer than it might at first appear to an attempt to work through such attitudes, weaving and unweaving them so as to leave England in a new place. And in *Ulverton*, Thorpe chooses a form of textual melancholia as the most appropriate response to a violent history that is not yet over. In none of the texts considered here, however, is there anything approaching the complete 'cutting of the threads' to the past that Freud envisaged as the end-point of successful mourning. Rather, they are at best enactments of a process that, like Penelope's work, must be ongoing. As much as one might hope that the 'ailments of many a thing done' would be relieved, and that Englishness would be able to work itself free of the conservative or limiting effects of 'the unspoken or even violent histories out of which it was made', it is surely not possible even to imagine—let alone live in—a society that has completely cut its ties to the past.⁵⁶ To mourn the past as lost in the hope of '[guaranteeing] ourselves an unencumbered future' is to pursue an illusion.⁵⁷

I have chosen Swift, Barker and Thorpe from among the many contemporary writers who might have been the subjects of this thesis because it seems to me that their fiction offers a particularly rich range of ways, political and formal, of engaging with postwar Englishness. Graham Swift, whose early novels are discussed in

⁵⁶ Bollas, p. 143, Rose, *States of Fantasy*, p. 60. Rose is referring to the way that the canon of English literature disavows its own constitutive history; the fact that her comments refer equally to the construction of Englishness highlight how intertwined the two—English literature and Englishness—have been: see Brian Doyle, *English and Englishness* (London: Routledge, 1989).

⁵⁷ Geoffrey Hartman on Paul de Man's critique of nostalgia, in Santner, p. 16.

Chapter Two and to whom I return in Chapter Five, has been read both as a postmodern metafictionalist and a parochial Little Englander. I read him, however, as an historical novelist interested particularly in the legacies of the First and Second World Wars in late-twentieth-century England. Over the four novels considered here, Swift moves from the evocation of an England in which World Wars One and Two are melancholically preserved in the forms and spaces of postwar suburban life (*The Sweet Shop Owner* and *Shuttlecock*), to an exploration of English imaginative engagement with war and especially with the disturbance of Englishness during the Second World War (*Waterland*), to an explicit mourning for an England shaped and constrained by the memory of that war (*Last Orders*). By contrast, Pat Barker's *The Regeneration Trilogy*, the subject of Chapter Three, has generally been read, in formal terms at least, as fairly standard historical fiction. Beneath the surface of these apparently realist novels, with their seemingly straightforward project of bringing to public awareness a damaged and damaging history so as to 'keep the past clear', however, is a much stranger, even an uncanny, relationship between present and past, in which contemporary violence and social division expresses itself in the melancholic English narrative of 'doomed youth'.⁵⁸ Adam Thorpe, whose work is discussed in Chapter Four, is more overtly concerned than Barker with the theoretical issues raised by the imaginative recovery of a past which seems powerfully to shape the English present. This hyper-consciousness about our always-already mediated and implicated access to historical events, can, I argue, be read as a form of (melancholic) paralysis, preventing the transformation or reworking of the history to which his painstaking imitation of past voices testifies. As I will also argue,

⁵⁸ Suzie Mackenzie, 'Out of the Past', *Guardian*, 24 October 1998, 'Weekend', pp. 31-33 (p.

however, Thorpe's novels raise the question of whether melancholia might, under some circumstances, be an inevitable or even an appropriate response to England's violent history.

It will be obvious already that there is more than one dimension to the mourning work in which Thorpe, Barker and Swift's texts engage. It is important to recognise the existence in their work of what Eric Santner, in his study of postwar German film, calls 'sedimented' mourning tasks. Referring to the relationship between Paul de Man's wartime complicity with the German occupation of Belgium and his later radical refusal of all forms of nostalgia for lost presence or wholeness (as represented in the narcissistic identifications of fascism, for example), Santner writes:

The error of Paul de Man [...] was [...] that he sought to *displace* and *disperse* the particular, historical tasks of mourning which for him, as is now known, were substantial and complex, with what might be called structural mourning, that is, mourning for those 'catastrophes' that are inseparable from being-in-language. [...] The more difficult labor would have been, of course, openly and explicitly to *sediment* these tasks of mourning, to explore the ways in which they might, in the long run, mutually enlighten one another.⁵⁹

Similarly, Dominick LaCapra expresses doubts about the tendency of some recent studies of trauma and representation—themselves influenced by de Manian deconstruction—to privilege an unknowing bearing of witness to trauma over attempts to understand it, and in the process to universalise 'trauma', turning it into a version of the sublime. 'All thought', he writes, 'should not be a matter of endlessly returning to irreducible alterity, unoblatably negativity, or [...] trauma whereby

processes of working-through are stymied and specific cases become mere illustrations of an encounter with the uncanny other, the real, the undecidable, and so forth'. We must distinguish, LaCapra argues, between 'structural' and 'historical' trauma and resist collapsing the latter into the former, even in extreme cases such as the Holocaust.⁶⁰ My own contribution to the understanding of how these mourning tasks are 'sedimented', while recognising the significance, for example, of postmodern mourning for defunct grand narratives in Swift's work, concentrates on more specific and local losses. This is not because I think these are more important, but because they have, to date, received less attention.

Before turning to the readings of postwar Englishness in the novels of Swift, Barker and Thorpe that make up Chapters Two to Five of this thesis, however, I will spend some time on representations of the relationship between Englishness and war in the earlier twentieth century. The readings of mid-century texts by Siegfried Sassoon, J. B. Priestley and Elizabeth Bowen offered in Chapter One enhance our understanding of the relations between war and Englishness in later-twentieth-century writing by demonstrating the variety of ways in which the imagining and reimagining of Englishness and war have been intertwined, and so indicating the kinds of losses that might still be being mourned, melancholically or otherwise, in late-twentieth-century Britain. They also provide an introduction to the ways in which war has been written in British literature, including in texts that, although not 'war writing' in a strict sense, can still be considered narratives of war. For the work

⁵⁹ Santner, p. 29.

⁶⁰ LaCapra, pp. 194-95. He has in mind studies such as Felman and Laub's, and to a lesser extent Cathy Caruth's work on trauma ('Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History', *Yale French Studies*, 79 (1991), 181-92, and *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995)).

of re-reading and re-weaving undertaken in contemporary novels, as I hope will become apparent, is work not just on ‘cultural memory’ in a general sense, but on how war and Englishness have been *represented*. As Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan have pointed out, ‘collective memory’ is a ‘phrase without purchase’ if it is understood only as ‘a vague wave of associations which supposedly come over an entire population when a set of past events is mentioned’. It must therefore be studied in actual practices of remembrance, ‘in ceremony, in ritual, in stone, in film, in verse, in art; in effect in a composite of narratives’—including, of course, prose fiction, fictionalised autobiography, and travel narratives.⁶¹

⁶¹ ‘Setting the Framework’, in *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 6-39 (p. 9).

CHAPTER ONE

UNFINISHED BUSINESS:

THE LOSS AND RENEWAL OF ‘ENGLAND’

IN NARRATIVES OF WAR

When the history of English civilization is looked back upon as one of the strange and glorious manifestations of the human spirit—and may that day be rather more distant than it sometimes seems now—London in the Blitz will have, I feel sure, its own very important place in the chronicle. More important than the war of which it was but a part, more important than all the passing social and political vagaries of the post-war years. It will be there with the trenches of the First World War as an extraordinary revelation of English behaviour and feeling.

So begins Angus Wilson’s introduction to *The Collected Stories of Elizabeth Bowen*, published in 1980. Wilson, who as the author of *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* took more than a passing interest in ‘English behaviour and feeling’, does not specify precisely what was characteristically English about either life in the trenches or Londoners’ response to the Blitz: perhaps we are intended to infer it from his discussion of Bowen’s virtues as a woman and a writer, which paints her as a model of upper-class English womanhood.¹ But his comments point to the significance of memories of the First and Second World Wars in the imagining of Englishness during the twentieth century, and, more specifically, to the way that the meaning of those

¹ Angus Wilson, introduction to *The Collected Stories of Elizabeth Bowen* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1980), p. 7. Bowen was, of course, Anglo-Irish, but as any list of the prominent exemplars and analysts of Englishness would suggest, some degree of outsiderdom or marginality seems to be necessary in order to write seriously about Englishness: consider, for example, Edmund Burke, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, Nikolaus

conflicts has been encapsulated in key iconic memory-sites.² It would be a mistake, however, to think that Englishness was simply ‘revealed’ in the trenches or in London during the Blitz, and that writers dealing with these conflicts simply ‘convey’ this ‘English behaviour and feeling’—as Wilson writes of Bowen.³ As the loci of British national remembrance of the two World Wars, the trenches of the Western Front and blitzed London have been, rather, sites of the ongoing production and revision of Englishness, a process that continues to the present day.

At stake in this process is the relationship of Englishness to violence. Ever since Burke defined England, by contrast to revolutionary France, as domestic and domesticated, a family held together by a pact between ‘those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born’, a dominant strand of Englishness has asserted the essential gentleness of the English.⁴ At the same time, however, Englishness has been mobilised in the support of wars in which Britain was to be regenerated. The writing of the First and Second World Wars, as this chapter will show, testifies to a much more complex relationship between Englishness and war than the myths either of Englishness or of those wars would suggest. Writing about the Great War, which is often assumed to enact the violent fragmentation and loss of

Pevsner, T. S. Eliot, and V. S. Naipaul, but also figures such as J. B. Priestley or indeed Wilson himself.

² On memory-sites, see Pierre Nora, ‘Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*’, *Representations*, 26 (1989), 7-25.

³ In Bowen, *Collected Stories*, p. 7.

⁴ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 147. Langford dates the decisive shift in judgements of the relative civility of European peoples to the French Revolution (*Englishness Identified*, pp. 147-48). For examples of assertions of English gentleness, see George Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius* (1941), in *The Complete Works of George Orwell*, ed. by Peter Davison (London: Secker & Warburg, 1998), XII: *A Patriot After All, 1940-1941*, pp. 391-434 (pp. 395-96), and *The English People* (1947), in *The Complete Works of George Orwell*, XVI: *I Have Tried to Tell the Truth, 1943-1944*, pp. 199-228 (pp. 201 and 222), and Scruton, pp. 65-66.

an ideal of Englishness, can also entail a reassertion of Englishness. And accounts of blitzed London are often at odds with triumphal accounts of democracy repossessed by the people, giving voice to anxieties about the fragility of personal identity, and about a terrifying sublimity or absence at the heart of the nation, that have been revealed but not caused by the war.

There are many writers whose work could be cited in illustration of this argument. I have, for reasons of space and necessarily somewhat arbitrarily, chosen three. The first is Siegfried Sassoon, whose war poems chart the loss of an ideal of chivalric, pastoral Englishness in the face of realities at home and on the Western Front, but who, in his postwar prose works, seeks to close the ‘vertiginous emotional drain’ opened up by the war, rewriting himself as an unexceptional Englishman and rewriting Englishness as political disengagement.⁵ The second is J. B. Priestley, another veteran of the Great War, in whose *English Journey* (1934) war, remembered and anticipated, pervades an England in crisis, and mourning for what war has destroyed is mixed with the imagining of war as a model for national renewal. This idea of renewal would reach its apotheosis in representations of the Second World War as the People’s War: a representation which Priestley was significantly involved in shaping. But the chapter closes with the wartime work of another writer, Elizabeth Bowen, as an instance of the doubts and demurrals that must be acknowledged if we are to form a fuller picture of the national mood in the 1940s. Bowen—Anglo-Irish, upper-class, and female—was uncomfortable with the idea of the People’s War, although she was also caught up in it to some extent, especially at the height of the Blitz in 1940. Her fiction expresses the ambivalence that many

writers felt about the loss of a private self to the nation at war, and an unease about the possibility that war was exposing an Englishness already violently disturbed and displaced.

The outbreak of war in August 1914 was greeted with mingled consternation and enthusiasm in Britain. If, to the likes of Bertrand Russell, the war promised the ‘flaming death of our civilization and our hopes’, to others it promised the renewal of England.⁶ Britain was entering the war, claimed Herbert Asquith, to ‘[fight] not for aggression nor the advancement of its own interests, but for principles whose maintenance is vital to the civilised world’.⁷ David Lloyd George was more fulsome in a speech on 19 September, in which he declared that

we have been living in a sheltered valley for generations. We have been too comfortable, too indulgent, many perhaps too selfish. And the stern hand of fate has scourged us to an elevation where we can see the great everlasting things that matter for a nation; the great peaks of honour we had forgotten—duty and patriotism, clad in glittering white, the great pinnacle of sacrifice pointing like a rugged finger to heaven.⁸

Lloyd George’s rhetoric was echoed by Edmund Gosse in an essay for the *Edinburgh Review* on ‘War and Literature’ in October 1914, which made the case for war’s rejuvenating effect explicit. ‘War’, Gosse asserted, ‘is the Condy’s Fluid that cleans out the stagnant pools and clotted channels of the intellect’:

⁵ See Eric J. Leed, *No Man’s Land: Combat & Identity in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 210.

⁶ Letter published in the *Nation* on 15 August 1914, in Peter Vansittart, *Voices from the Great War* (London: Pimlico, 1998), p. 29.

⁷ Herbert Asquith to the House of Commons, 5 August 1914, in Vansittart, p. 22.

⁸ In Vansittart, p. 41.

I suppose that hardly any Englishman who is capable of a renovation of the mind has failed to feel during the last few weeks a certain solemn refreshment of the spirit, a humble and mournful consciousness that his ideals, his aims, his hopes during our late past years of luxury and peace have been founded on a misconception of our aims as a nation, of our right to possess a leading place in the sunlit spaces of the world. We have awakened from an opium-dream of comfort, of ease, of that miserable poltroonery of 'the sheltered life'. Our wish for indulgence of every sort, our laxity of manners, our wretched sensitiveness to personal inconvenience, these are suddenly lifted before us in their true guise as the spectres of national decay; and we have risen from the lethargy of our dilettantism to lay them, before it is too late, by the flashing of the unsheathed sword.⁹

Such celebrations of a martial Englishness might appear to sit oddly alongside what many have seen as a dominant construction of Englishness from at least the late nineteenth century onwards: what Alun Howkins has termed the 'discovery of rural England' as the symbolic heart of the nation.¹⁰ The 1880s to the 1920s have been identified as a key period in the development of modern constructions of Englishness. This was a period which saw the invention of 'English' as an academic discipline, the 'discovery' of pre-eighteenth-century English music as the basis for a revived 'national' music, and innumerable books on the subject of England, from hymns to the countryside, to horrified accounts of urban slums, to 'Condition of England' novels such as Wells's *Tono-Bungay* (1909) and Forster's *Howards End* (1910). Many national cultural institutions were established, including the National Trust (1895), the National Portrait Gallery (1896) and the National Gallery of Modern Art (1897), and key reference works published: the *Dictionary of National Biography* (1885-1900), the *Cambridge History of English*

⁹ In Hynes, *A War Imagined*, p. 12.

¹⁰ Alun Howkins, 'The Discovery of Rural England', in Colls and Dodd, pp. 62-88.

Literature (1907-1916) and the *New* (later the *Oxford*) *English Dictionary* (1884-1928).¹¹ A significant strand of this elaboration of Englishness was a ‘new wave of rural writing’ that ‘claimed to reveal the “true” England’ in the countryside, and more specifically in the ‘South Country’.¹² Although the political inflection of this vision varied—Tories could place the squire and his manor house at the heart of England; those with more democratic views the peasant and his cottage, or the village community as a whole—what they had in common was their stress on the beauty of the English countryside, on historical continuity, stability and tranquillity (including the absence of class conflict), and on the inherent Englishness of this imagined world.¹³ The symbolic and literal violence excluded from this pastoral Englishness might, however, return to trouble the ‘English settlement’ it symbolised, as, for example, in the death of Leonard Bast in *Howards End*.¹⁴

Another ‘true’ Englishness was simultaneously being articulated, however, to which violence was not inimical. This was an assertive imperialist patriotism, which saw England’s destiny as awaiting her on the imperial frontier. On the frontier, as the former Viceroy of India Lord Curzon put it in 1907, ‘the machine is relatively

¹¹ See the essays in Colls and Dodd, and Doyle, *English and Englishness*, pp. 21-23. As Raphael Samuel comments, however, constructions of Englishness developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries draw on ‘the residues of ancient beliefs, whose origins [...] are necessarily a matter of speculation’. Samuel cautions against too tight a delimitation of the periods in which national traditions are ‘invented’: see Samuel’s introduction to *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity*, ed. by Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge, 1989), III: *National Fictions*, pp. xi-xxxvi (p. xxix).

¹² Wiener, p. 50. For a fuller discussion of the South Country, see below, pp. 178-80.

¹³ On the politics of English ruralism in the period, see Howkins, ‘Discovery of Rural England’, Jonathan Rutherford, *Forever England: Reflections on Masculinity and Empire* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1997), pp. 50-59, Paul Ward, *Red Flag and Union Jack: Englishness, Patriotism and the British Left, 1881-1924* (Woodbridge: Royal Historical Society and Boydell Press, 1998), pp. 26-29 and 173-76, and Wiener, pp. 50-51 and 55-64.

¹⁴ E. M. Forster, *Howards End* (1910; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), pp. 315-16.

impotent and the individual is strong': it therefore offers an 'ennobling and invigorating stimulus for our youth, saving them alike from the corroding ease and the morbid excitements of Western civilization'.¹⁵ Robert Colls has observed that these two 'true spirits' of Englishness have often been reconciled by distinguishing between England on the 'outside' and England on the 'inside': in Gilbert Murray's words, 'At home, England is Greek. In the Empire, she is Roman.'¹⁶ Both versions of England were reflections of intense and pervasive anxieties about national degeneration, stimulated by a 'sustained and growing pessimism' in Britain by the 1870s 'about the ramifications of evolution, the efficacy of liberalism, the life in and of the metropolis, [and] the future of society in a perceived world of mass democracy and socialism'.¹⁷ As Peter Brooker and Peter Widdowson put it: 'Those abashed at aggressive imperialism may have felt more comfortable with a contemplative Englishness and the "true empire" within; but as forms of nationalistic patriotism these positions and tones were not incompatible, as popular anthologies, poets and poems show.'¹⁸

Nowhere is the complicity between pastoral and imperial Englishness clearer than in the patriotic effusions that followed the declaration of war in 1914. Rupert

¹⁵ In David Trotter, *The English Novel in History 1895-1920* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 146. Edwardian 'frontier tales' such as John Buchan's *The Half-Hearted* (1900) and Maud Diver's best-selling *The Great Amulet* (1908), argues Trotter, dramatize this 'process of renewal: the creation of strength out of weakness' (p. 150).

¹⁶ Colls, *Identity of England*, p. 203.

¹⁷ Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c.1848-c.1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 180. The pastoral Englishness and the 'new imperialism' of the late nineteenth century often conceived regeneration in similar terms: the open-air life in Britain's settler colonies was frequently imagined as a return to the virtues of a 'traditional' rural English life, and both stood in instructive contrast to the degenerate life of modern city-dwellers (Howkins, 'Discovery of Rural England', p. 71).

¹⁸ 'A Literature for England', in Colls and Dodd, pp. 116-63 (p. 122).

Brooke's '1914' sonnets are the most frequently cited example of the regenerative pastoral militarism that bids farewell to 'a world grown old and cold and weary', anticipating a chivalrous war in which 'Nobleness' will '[walk] in our ways again', and the English will 'come into our heritage'.¹⁹ 'The Soldier's' imagined burial in 'some corner of a foreign field' is itself a form of colonisation that makes it 'for ever England', but it is a pacific Englishness—implicitly contrasted with German or Prussian aggression and militarism—that he will spread beyond England's shores. Formed by England's 'flowers', 'her ways', her 'air', 'rivers' and 'suns', in death he will

[give] somewhere back the thoughts by England given;
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.²⁰

The distaste for modernity that informs Brooke's eagerness to surrender himself to the 'cleanness' of war ('Peace') is made clear in a letter to a fellow-Georgian, John Drinkwater, in which Brooke writes that he sees the war as an opportunity for England to 'slough the things I loathe—capitalism and feminism and hermaphroditism and the rest'.²¹ Brooke did not live long enough for his view of the war to be modified by experience. But the career of a writer who did shows how

¹⁹ I. 'Peace', and III. 'The Dead', in *1914 and Other Poems* (1915; London: Penguin, 1999), pp. 3 and 5.

²⁰ V. 'The Soldier', *1914*, p. 7. For British representations of the German or Prussian character in relation to the Great War, see Pick, *War Machine*, pp. 136-64.

²¹ In Rutherford, p. 63. Rutherford adds that the war was also an opportunity for Brooke to 'slough' the problematic aspects of his own self. The 'half-men, and their dirty songs and dreary' of 'Peace', he argues, are Brooke's former friends 'the Stracheys, the Jews and decadents and desexed hermaphrodites—Brooke's own lost [or disavowed] half of himself' (p. 65).

Englishness might be lost and then recovered in the writing and re-writing of the Great War.

Siegfried Sassoon began the war in very much the same mood as Brooke. Like him, and influenced by him, he welcomed the war as an opportunity to escape feelings of confusion and indirection. Twenty-eight years old in 1914, he had been unable to find a way of living that could reconcile the different aspects of himself: gentleman sportsman, poet, and homosexual.²² Enlistment offered 'absolution' in England's cause.²³ Because of a riding accident, Sassoon did not see the Western Front for himself until November 1915. In the first year of the war, therefore, his poetic output consisted of a few poems in a 'happy warrior' vein, and the 'war-oblivious' continuation of his earlier, highly 'romantic and floral', pastoral lyrics.²⁴ The first realistic trench details, and concern for ordinary soldiers' suffering rather than the poet's own chivalric heroism, begin to appear from November 1915, with the first draft of 'The Redeemer'. Thereafter, according to the collective memory, Sassoon became a bitter critic of the war. The story is not quite that simple. The

²² For discussions of Sassoon's pre-war life, see Adrian Caesar, *Taking It Like a Man: Suffering, Sexuality and the War Poets* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 62-67, Jean Moorcroft Wilson, *Siegfried Sassoon: The Making of a War Poet* (London: Duckworth, 1998), pp. 129-78, and John Stuart Roberts, *Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967)* (London: Cohen, 2000), pp. 36-56.

²³ 'Absolution' is the title of Sassoon's first Great War poem, written, in the style of Brooke's '1914' sonnets, between April and September 1915: see Siegfried Sassoon, *The War Poems* (London: Faber, 1999), p. 3.

²⁴ Wordsworth's 'happy Warrior' ('Character of the Happy Warrior' (1806), in *Wordsworth's Poems of 1807*, ed. by Alun R. Jones (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987), pp. 19-21) was the subject of Herbert Read's revisionist treatment in the poem of that name (in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 1966), p. 35). Robert Graves later wrote of Sassoon that while at the Front he varied between 'happy warrior and bitter pacifist' (*Goodbye to All That* (1929; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), p. 226). Sassoon describes the lyrics as 'war-oblivious' in *Siegfried's Journey 1916-1920* ((London: Faber, 1945), p. 17). The description of Sassoon's early style is Edmund Blunden's, in Fussell, *Modern Memory*, p. 91.

poems written in 1916 show that Sassoon's attitude to the war was volatile, including elements of 'happy warriorism' in the chivalric pastoral of 'To Victory' and 'France', sustained pastoral elegy in 'The Last Meeting', and examples of the trench realism and the satires on which Sassoon's reputation as a war poet largely rests ('A Working Party', 'A Night Attack', 'They', 'Decorated', 'Arms and the Man'). But it is nonetheless accurate to see Sassoon's wartime writing as charting the gradual breakdown of the ideal of chivalric war and of the English identity grounded in this sanctified violence, particularly after the Battle of the Somme in July-September 1916.

Eric Leed argues that the collapse of a sense of meaningful, let alone mutual, sacrifice during the Great War left many soldiers feeling homeless or stateless, estranged from the nation for which they were meant to be sacrificing themselves, and identifying instead with the community of the trenches as the true nation or home. Leed adds that this identification meant that the soldier experienced his comrades' deaths as a wound to his own ego: they opened up a 'large, vertiginous emotional drain', 'a seemingly endless process of mourning', until his own death seemed desirable.²⁵ Sassoon's wartime diaries and poetry certainly seem to testify to such a process. In his diary entry for 3 December 1915, Sassoon reflects on his brother Hamo's recent death and anticipates his own death, but in heroic, nationalistic mode: 'I want freedom, not comfort. [...] I have lived well and truly since the war began, and have made my sacrifices; now I ask that the price be required of me.'²⁶ The following April, after his friend David Thomas's death, his

²⁵ Leed, pp. 32-33, 49, 204-13.

²⁶ Siegfried Sassoon, *Siegfried Sassoon Diaries 1915-1918*, ed. by Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Faber, 1983), p. 22.

mood has darkened: ‘I used to say I couldn’t kill anyone in this war; but since they shot Tommy I would gladly stick a bayonet into a German by daylight. [...] I want to smash someone’s skull; I want to have a scrap and get out of the war for a bit or for ever.’²⁷ And on 14 June 1918, having returned to the Front after his protest against the conduct of the war, and a period in Ireland, he writes that he oscillates between wanting ‘to go up to the Line and *fight!*’, and ‘scribbling notes on the monstrous cruelty of war and the horrors of the front line’, when his ‘feet move among the graves of dead youth’.²⁸ Violence has been stripped of its patriotic sanctification, and now expresses itself in ambivalent, melancholic hostility towards the enemy, British civilians—whom he indicts in his journal as ‘dictators’ and ‘ghouls’, and whom he fantasises seeing crushed by tanks, bayoneted or blown up by a Mills bomb—and Sassoon’s own self. His fantasies of slaughter at home, in “‘Blighters’” and ‘Fight to a Finish’, signal the loss of an ideal of England, and of his sense of his place in it, which he cannot explicitly acknowledge.²⁹

Sassoon’s increasing sense of alienation from England, and eventually even from his substitute affiliation with ‘the patient men who fight’, can be traced in the gradual failure of elegy, and thus of the movement from grief to consolation, in his war poems: in particular, the undermining of the regenerative function of pastoral, and the destabilisation of the poetic voice.³⁰ ‘The Last Meeting’, written in May 1916 after David Thomas’s death, shows traditional elegy still operative: the poet

²⁷ 1 and 4 April 1915, *Sassoon Diaries 1915-1918*, pp. 52-53.

²⁸ *Sassoon Diaries 1914-1918*, p. 269. The related poems ‘Reward’ and ‘I Stood with the Dead’ were composed on 5 and 18 June respectively.

²⁹ 19 June 1917, *Sassoon Diaries 1914-1918*, pp. 175-76. ‘Blighters’ and ‘Fight to a Finish’, in *War Poems*, pp. 57 and 85.

³⁰ ‘Banishment’, in *War Poems*, p. 97. On traditional elegy, see Sacks, pp. 2 and 18-37.

finds consolation in his friend's transfiguration after death, hearing his voice in nature, and ultimately transforming his death into song.³¹ But as the war goes on, Sassoon is less and less able to imagine any form of consolation. In poems such as 'The Effect' and 'Counter-Attack', death becomes simply a gross physical fact. Pastoral loses its restorative power, being either deliberately refused or travestied ('The Effect', 'Attack'), or deployed ironically in 'outdoor views of a different sort', to point up the desolation and disorder of the trench world ('The Distant Song', 'Break of Day').³² Sassoon's physical exile from the Kentish Weald in the Armageddon landscape of the trenches, his alienation from those at home and his increasing sense of isolation even from other soldiers, are matched by the collapse of the literary patrimony through which he might have mourned these losses. Stuart Sillars has described this statelessness as an 'implosion of language and idea' so severe that it amounts to an 'exile [...] from language itself'.³³ The processes of symbolisation through which the work of mourning proceeds, the gradual testing and confirmation of loss through dialogue with other mourning voices, degenerate, in poems such as 'Lamentations' and 'Counter-Attack', into a series of dislocated voices and indeterminate perspectives. In their relation to traditional elegy, these poems are Sassoon's version of the 'radical emptiness', the 'chasm' or 'abyss', that

³¹ In *War Poems*, pp. 19-23.

³² Paul Fussell, *Sassoon's Long Journey: An Illustrated Selection from Siegfried Sassoon's 'The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston'* (London: Faber; New York: Giniger, 1983), p. xii. Middleton Murry observed something of this change when he complained that the poems in *Counter-Attack* could not convey horror because they did not include the harmony that would provide a point of reference ('Mr Sassoon's War Verses', *Nation*, 13 July 1918, in *Poetry of the First World War: A Casebook*, ed. by Dominic Hibberd (London: Macmillan, 1981), pp. 47-51).

³³ *Structure and Dissolution in English Writing, 1910-1920* (Basingstoke: Macmillan; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), pp. 126, 130.

many writers saw the war as opening up, and what is more they make clear that this abyss opened up in Englishness itself.³⁴

John Lucas argues that Sassoon's war poetry is fatally 'implicated in a dream of England—of being a fox-hunting man', and thus ultimately amounts to no more than 'that very English feeling of outraged decency'.³⁵ But Lucas makes the mistake of reading the war poems through spectacles provided by the postwar 'memoirs' of 'George Sherston'.³⁶ This approach is not entirely illegitimate, in so far as 'Sherston' becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish from Sassoon as the *Memoirs* progress; in places they reproduce almost verbatim long passages from Sassoon's war diaries.³⁷ I would suggest, however, that the *Memoirs* are unreliable guides to Sassoon's war experience precisely to the extent that they rewrite his war in an attempt to reconsolidate his Englishness. They need to be understood as attempts to do what the war poems were unable to do: to mourn the many losses Sassoon experienced during the war, and therefore to close the gap that has opened up within

³⁴ Hynes, *A War Imagined*, p. xi. Ford Madox Ford, for example, wrote of it as 'a crack across the table of History', and Virginia Woolf as 'a chasm in a smooth road' (Randall Stevenson, *The British Novel since the Thirties* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), p. 22). See also below, pp. 52-53.

³⁵ Lucas, *Modern English Poetry: From Hardy to Hughes: A Critical Survey* (London: Batsford, 1986), pp. 79-81. See also Lucas's 'For Ever England: The Case of Siegfried Sassoon', in *Moderns & Contemporaries: Novelists, Poets, Critics* (Brighton: Harvester; New Jersey: Barnes & Noble, 1985), pp. 134-43, where he appears to recognise a greater degree of radicalism in the war poems.

³⁶ Siegfried Sassoon, *The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston* (1937; London: Faber, 1972), comprising *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* (1928), *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930), and *Sherston's Progress* (1936). Hereafter referred to as *Memoirs*; references will be given in parentheses.

³⁷ The most obvious example is Part Three of *Sherston's Progress*, 'Sherston's Diary: Four Months', which is strikingly close to the corresponding diary entries for February to June 1918.

him, and between him and England, by restaging a ‘progress’ away from and then back towards a (reconstructed) Englishness.

Sherston’s ‘progress’ takes him from the hunting and cricket fields, the woods and gardens, of the Kentish Weald, through the ‘Armageddon’ of the trenches, and back again to England: we last see him recovering in a ‘perfect hospital’ with windows overlooking Hyde Park (653). Many critics have observed that the *Memoirs* establish a clear contrast between Sherston’s innocent pre-war rural English life and the world of the Western Front.³⁸ Although Sherston’s early experiences in France seem to be a continuation of his life at home—stationed fifty kilometres behind the line, he goes riding, enjoying ‘the serenities of [the] winter landscape’ or playing at foxhunting for the benefit of his friend, Dick Tiltwood (David Thomas) (255-56)—once he reaches the Front he encounters modern industrial warfare in all its horror. His habituation to what, by June 1918, he sees as the ‘deadly conventional Armageddon’ landscape is a marker of his ‘progress’—that is, of what he has lost:

Low green-grey ridges fringed with a few isolated trees, half-smashed; a broken wall here and there—straggling, dull-grey silhouettes which were once French villages. Then there are open spaces broken only by ruined wire-tangles, old trenches, and the dismal remains of an occasional rest camp of huts. The June grass waves, poppies flame, shrapnel bursts in black puffs, an aeroplane drones, larks sing, and someone comes along the trench clinking a petrol tin (now used for water). And this is about all one sees as one stumps along the communication-trenches, dry and crumbling and chalky, with a dead mole lying about here and there. (624)³⁹

³⁸ See, for example, Fussell, *Modern Memory*, pp. 90-105, Paul Moeyes, *Siegfried Sassoon Scorched Glory: A Critical Study* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), pp. 164-67, and Michael Thorpe, *Siegfried Sassoon: A Critical Study* (Leiden: Universitaire Pers; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 110-15.

³⁹ Compare 8 June 1918, *Sassoon Diaries 1915-1918*, p. 264.

In this landscape despoiled by war, the pastoral world of grass, poppies and larks struggles to hold its own against the encroachment of industrial, mechanical warfare in the form of old barbed wire, derelict huts, aeroplanes and petrol tins, and even the colours have become dulled: with the significant exception of the flaming poppies, with their connotations of death and remembrance, this world is ‘green-grey’, ‘dull-grey’, ‘chalky’.⁴⁰

The *Memoirs* undercut any straightforward contrast between verdant England and debased France, however, and in the process call into question the ideals for which Sherston enlisted. When, in the winter of 1916, he is posted to Clitherland Camp on the outskirts of Liverpool, where ‘Flintshire Fusiliers’ are ‘manufactured’, Sherston is confronted with the fact that England is not all the ‘good woodland’ of the Weald, where he had been hunting only the previous day, feeling ‘that the War was worth while if it was being carried on to safeguard this sort of thing’ (380-81). Rather than being ‘a cavalry war, a springtime of opportunity to test sporting and individual skills’ and to (re)discover a heroic, chivalric Englishness, the war has ‘turned out to be a machine-war and [...] a confirmation of modernity’.⁴¹ The equivalent of the despoiled pastoral world of the Front already exists in England itself. Clitherland is only a few hundred yards from an explosives factory, and its ‘systematized noises and clatterings and bugle-blowings’ combine with ‘factory-hooters and ships’ fog-horns out on the Mersey; it is all ‘one with the smoke-drifted munition works, the rubble of industrial suburbs, and the canal that crawled squalidly

⁴⁰ On the symbolism of poppies, see Fussell, *Modern Memory*, pp. 246-54.

⁴¹ Lucas, ‘For Ever England’, p. 142.

out into blighted and forbidding farmlands which were only waiting to be built over' (381).

If 'England wasn't what it used to be' (269), this is because Sherston has been forced to confront the fact that his prewar England was only a part of the whole, and thus, his prewar ideal of Englishness has 'fizzled out' (655). But so too has the 'knight-errantry' of his anti-war protest (655). Any kind of idealism, either patriotic or anti-patriotic, seems impossible:

I couldn't go back to being the same as I was before it started. The 'good old days' had been pleasant enough in their way, but what could a repetition of them possibly lead to?

How could I begin my life all over again when I had no conviction about anything except that the War was a dirty trick which had been played on me and my generation? (655)

Sherston can find no 'conviction' anywhere, it would seem, that would console him for being brought face to face not only with modernity, but also with the violence at the heart of the social order: the lack of a Burkean pact between the generations. His state—or statelessness—is such that he is even contemplating the possibility that Englishness must give way to 'the Prussian system', before he is rescued from his 'wrong-headedness' by his psychiatrist, W. H. R. Rivers:

my mind was in a muddle; and it seemed that I had learned but one thing from being a soldier—that if we continue to accept war as a social institution we must also recognize that the Prussian system is the best, and Prussian militarism must be taught to children in schools. They must be taught to offer their finest instincts for exploitation by the unpitying machinery of scientific warfare. And they must not be allowed to ask why they are doing it.

And then, unexpected and unannounced, Rivers came in and closed the door behind him. Quiet and alert, purposeful and unhesitating, he seemed to empty the room of everything that had needed exorcising.

My futile demons fled him—for his presence was a refutation of wrong-headedness. I knew then that I had been very lonely while I was at

the War; I knew that I had a lot to learn, and that he was the only man who could help me. (655)

Sassoon resolves the problem of Sherston's 'state(lessness)' through a strategic redefinition of Englishness, drawing on elements of pre-war articulations of Englishness to paper over the abyss of personal and national disintegration. Like others who turned away from the 'Roman' version of Englishness in the wake of the Great War, Sassoon constructs a resolutely little Englishness of moderation and apolitical quietism. The older Sherston affirms the virtues of 'rumination' over 'trying to crowd the whole of life into [one's] daily existence', and over a 'busybody' interest in 'the contemporary situation' (563). In the process, Sassoon sidesteps not only the rising crisis of the 1930s, but his own potentially radicalising wartime realisation that 'life, for the majority of the population, is an unlovely struggle against unfair odds, culminating in a cheap funeral' (425). Both his own *and* Rivers's postwar socialism are disavowed in favour of a contemplative attention to 'the inmost silences of the heart' (656). Sassoon also comes dangerously close to representing the war as the painful but necessary catalyst for his own 'matured humanity'.⁴²

The *Memoirs'* *bildungsroman* structure and their characteristic narrative voice prepare the reader for Sherston's embrace of a reformulated Englishness. As almost every critic who has considered the *Memoirs* has observed, the older Sherston

⁴² On Sassoon's and Rivers's political views, see Roberts, pp. 133-57 and 167, and Richard Slobodin, *Rivers* (Stroud: Sutton, 1997), pp. 68-69 and 79-81. Late in his life, Sassoon himself expressed frustration at being remembered primarily for his war poems. Writing to Michael Thorpe, he stated: 'I am a firm believer in the *Memoirs*; and am inclined to think that the war poems (the significant and successful ones) will end up as mere appendices to the matured humanity of the *Memoirs*' (cited in Patrick Campbell, *Siegfried Sassoon: A Study of the War Poetry* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1999), p. 2).

represents events, and his younger self's reaction to them, with a considerable degree of detachment. Most importantly, the older Sherston quite deliberately attempts to neutralise his public protest against the conduct of the war in July 1917. He tells us that he is 'no believer in wild denunciations of the War' (425), and even as he recounts his defence of the protest to 'David Cromlech' (Robert Graves), Sherston makes clear that 'the verdict of posterity' is against him. Neither of them, he writes, had sufficient knowledge of politicians' motives and manoeuvres to judge fairly the conduct of the war, or 'the patient selfless stoicism through which men of maturer age were acquiring anonymous glory' (510-11). Sherston's protest emerges, therefore, as an understandable but immature and even hysterical response to sufferings that 'men of maturer age' bore with a much more appropriate quiet stoicism.

Sherston has, it might seem, re-established the affiliative links between the generations and between soldiers and civilians that can be seen breaking down in Sassoon's war poetry. But in places the *Memoirs* undermine their own efforts to achieve symbolic closure of the war. In the following passage, for example, Sherston is in charge of a fatigue party carrying boxes to an ammunition dump for seven hours in 'vile' conditions amongst the ruins of the Hindenburg Outpost Trench:

Concrete strong-posts were smashed and tilted sideways; everywhere the chalky soil was pocked and pitted with huge shell-holes; and wherever we looked the mangled effigies of the dead were our *memento mori*. Shell-twisted and dismembered, the Germans maintained the violent attitudes in which they had died. The British had mostly been killed by bullets or bombs, so they looked more resigned. But I can remember a pair of hands (nationality unknown) which protruded from the soaked ashen soil like the roots of a tree turned upside down; one hand seemed to be pointing at the sky with an accusing gesture. Each time I passed that place the protest of those fingers became more expressive of an appeal to God in defiance of those who made the War. Who made the War? I laughed hysterically as the thought passed through my mud-stained mind. But I only laughed

mentally, for my box of Stokes gun ammunition left me no breath to spare for an angry guffaw. And the dead were the dead; this was no time to be pitying them or asking silly questions about their outraged lives. Such sights must be taken for granted, I thought, as I gasped and slithered and stumbled with my disconsolate crew. Floating on the surface of the flooded trench was the mask of a human face which had detached itself from the skull. (435)

Although the passage is preceded by the narrator's observation that 'what we were doing was quite unexceptional; millions of soldiers endured the same sort of thing and got badly shelled into the bargain' (434), the text does not manage to suppress the disintegrative forces that emerge here. The hellish landscape and Sisyphean sufferings of the soldiers are described with enough violence to provoke in the reader precisely the 'questions about their outraged lives', the sense of the unjustifiable destruction of *individual* lives, that the narrator wants to foreclose. The 'mangled effigies' of the German dead, moreover, testify to violence committed in the name of 'Britain' that cannot be simply overlooked in a postwar embrace of 'Englishness'; indeed, the 'violent attitudes' of the Germans, which might seem to confirm British stereotypes of German militarism, are actually the result of the greater degree of violence visited upon them (in this sector, at this time, of course) by the British. Furthermore, in its final image of 'the *mask* of a human face which had *detached* itself from the skull', floating in the flooded trench, the passage suggests, perhaps, that the older Sherston's 'detached' view is less human than his younger self's pity, rage, and 'hysteria'.

The Memoirs of George Sherston, I would suggest, are in many ways closer to a melancholic denial of the losses attested to in Sassoon's wartime writing than to an attempt to mourn them. The collapse of identity to which poems such as 'Lamentations' and 'Counter-Attack' testify is transformed into the much less

threatening error of an immature idealist, and rather than the connections between chivalric English patriotism and violence being examined, Englishness is reformulated as inward-looking maturity. The melancholic nature of this response to the war is further confirmed by the fact that, having completed *Sherston's Progress*, Sassoon almost immediately embarked on a strikingly 'nostalgic' series of autobiographies, *The Old Century and Seven More Years* (1938), *The Weald of Youth* (1942), and *Siegfried's Journey* (1945): remembering the war, as Paul Fussell writes, 'became something like a life work'.⁴³

Sassoon was not alone in his attempt to reformulate Englishness during the interwar years. One response to postwar England was, of course, outright rejection, but the Great War also gave added impetus to the tendency already discussed to see Englishness as essentially inward-looking and domestic: no less an establishment figure than Arthur Quiller-Couch asserted in 1918 that, while 'other nations extend, or would extend, their patriotism over large spaces superficially', Englishness 'ever cuts down through the strata for its well-springs, intensifies itself upon that which, untranslatable to the foreigner, is comprised for us in a single easy word—Home'.⁴⁴ Indeed, in her study of interwar women writers, Alison Light argues that the war prompted just such a reformulation of Englishness: a turning away from the older 'heroic and officially masculine public rhetorics of national destiny and from a dynamic and missionary view of the Victorian and Edwardian middle classes in "Great Britain" to an Englishness at once less imperial and more inward-looking,

⁴³ Sillars, p. 125, Fussell, *Modern Memory*, p. 92.

⁴⁴ For the rejection of England by British writers in the 1920s and 30s, see Paul Fussell, *Abroad: British Literary Traveling between the Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 15-23; Quiller-Couch in Brooker and Widdowson, p. 117.

more domestic and more private—and, in terms of pre-war standards, more “feminine”⁴⁵.

This interwar Englishness was not inherently or entirely conservative. Light characterises it as a ‘conservative modernity’, articulated around the suburban middle classes, ‘a private and retiring people, pipe-smoking “little men” with their quietly competent partners, a nation of gardeners and housewives’.⁴⁶ In a paradoxically related development, rural England was more than ever seen as the location of the true nation, but despite the prominent voices of those, such as Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, for whom ‘England [was] the country, and the country [was] England’, this too cannot be classified as simple conservatism.⁴⁷ Socialist politicians were just as likely as Tories to invoke the countryside as a repository of Englishness during the interwar period, and as David Matless has shown, the movement to preserve rural England that emerged in the 1920s and 1930s was generally neither nostalgic nor anti-modern, but rather ‘sought to ally preservation and progress, tradition and

⁴⁵ Light, p. 8. As Graham Dawson has shown, however, heroic narratives of ‘British imperial masculinity’ lived on in popular culture, especially in cinema and boys’ fiction (*Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 170-72). It could also be argued that adventure lived on in the heroics of the ‘Auden generation’.

⁴⁶ Light, p. 211. The “Little Man”, a modest garden-concerned and common-sensical suburban male’, was the invention of the *Daily Express*’s cartoonist Sidney Strube (David Matless, *Landscape and Englishness* (London: Reaktion, 1998), p. 36).

⁴⁷ Stanley Baldwin, *On England* (London: Allan, 1926), p. 6. On attitudes to the English countryside in the 1920s and 30s, see Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, Alex Potts, “‘Constable Country’ between the Wars”, in *Patriotism*, III, pp. 160-86, and John Taylor, *A Dream of England: Landscape, Photography and the Tourist’s Imagination* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), pp. 120-51. Potts argues that the interwar obsession with ‘discovering’ rural England was in large part a product of the aspirations of ‘the large sectors of the middle classes who were not that well off and certainly had no cause to feel in a relation of ownership to the country’, but for whom ‘discovering the beauties of the English countryside’ expressed a desire ‘to possess a true inner identity more valuable than [their] external social persona’ (p. 164).

modernity, city and country in order to define Englishness as orderly and modern'.⁴⁸ As the example of Sassoon's *Memoirs* suggests, this Englishness of order, domesticity and reconciliation can be understood as a compensatory and to some extent perhaps a healing response to the trauma of the war, but it could also, as Light observes, harden into an essentially melancholic 'fixation' on home and family and a 'wilful denial' of 'any notion of wider social involvements or place': a denial that such notions had ever existed or that their loss had been painful.⁴⁹ Writers too young to have fought, moreover, reacted to this postwar England and Englishness in ways that were equally 'programmed' by the war. Sassoon's *Memoirs* were amongst the 'blocked-up dam of bad memories, nightmares, trauma' that, bursting in the late 1920s and early 1930s, reinforced in younger writers' minds the imagery of death, of violence, of crisis—of modern life as a war, in which it was necessary to 'take sides'. As a result, the imagery of the battlefield, the 'atmosphere of danger, adventure, conflict, and violence', was everywhere.⁵⁰

Both responses to the war shaped one of the characteristic literary forms of the period: the 'internal [voyage] of national exploration'.⁵¹ Old soldiers like H. V. Morton, Henry Williamson and Edmund Blunden 'returned from the First War determined to preserve the rural England they'd known', by writing about it in works such as Morton's pioneering work of 'motoring pastoral', *In Search of England*

⁴⁸ Ward, pp. 172-78, Matless, p. 14.

⁴⁹ Light, p. 46.

⁵⁰ Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 44 and 51; see also Fussell, *Modern Memory*, and Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (London: Bodley Head, 1976), p. 41. Besides the work of former soldiers such as Sassoon, the major influence on the 1930s imaginary was T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (Hynes, *Auden Generation*, pp. 25-33, Cunningham, pp. 52-53).

(1927), Williamson's *The Village Book* (1930), and Blunden's *English Villages* (1931) and *The Face of England* (1932).⁵² But young left-wingers, too, showed 'a more than sneaking sympathy with the back-to-the-village movement': 'the village', writes Cunningham, 'often stands for the "real" England that English Leftists are imaginatively drawn to and want to preserve or restore'.⁵³ Left-wing writers, moreover, undertook their own journeys in search of England. But although 'motoring pastoral' tended to construct an authentic England apart from 'the rabies of modern mechanized warfare' and the economic and political crises that grew as the 1930s progressed, the literary journey into the heart of England could be a journey into a nation already at war.⁵⁴

J. B. Priestley's *English Journey* (1934) is in many ways an exemplary thirties voyage: a confrontation with loss and division, and with hopes for national regeneration, thought through the memories and the language of war.⁵⁵ Commissioned to undertake his journey by the publishers Heinemann and Gollancz in 1933, Priestley attempts 'to move across and grasp the social and cultural landscape of a whole nation'.⁵⁶ He is confronted with divisions, between rich and

⁵¹ Cunningham, p. 225.

⁵² Cunningham, p. 229, Matless, p. 63.

⁵³ Cunningham, pp. 234-39. Cunningham cites Auden and Isherwood's *The Dog Beneath the Skin*, Day Lewis's 'Letter to a Young Revolutionary', and many moments in Orwell's fiction and non-fiction.

⁵⁴ Cunningham, p. 39. See also James Gindin, *British Fiction in the 1930s: The Dispiriting Decade* (Basingstoke: Macmillan; New York: St Martin's Press, 1992), pp. 14-15.

⁵⁵ J. B. Priestley, *English Journey: Being a Rambling but Truthful Account of What One Man Saw and Heard and Felt and Thought during a Journey through England during the Autumn of the Year 1933* (London: Folio Society, 1997). References will be given in parentheses.

⁵⁶ Philip Dodd, 'The Views of Travellers: Travel Writing in the 1930s', in *The Art of Travel: Essays on Travel Writing*, ed. by Philip Dodd (London: Cass, 1982), pp. 127-38 (p. 128).

poor, past and present, North and South, that confound his attempts to represent a single England. The sense of crisis that pervades the text is expressed, as so often in the 1930s, in the language of war. So too is his exhortation to his fellow Englishmen and women to transform their nation. Just as in the rhetoric of the more self-consciously radical writers of the time, remembering the First World War and anticipating the Second are, in *English Journey*, ways of imagining both the loss and the hoped-for transformation of England.

Many recent critics have seen *English Journey* as simply a manifestation of English nostalgia, a longing for a true, essential England. Iain Chambers, for example, lumps Priestley together with William Morris, the Leavises and Evelyn Waugh, all of whom, he argues, reject ‘industry, urbanization and the modern world’ in favour of ‘a national, and prevalently nostalgic, myth of “Englishness”, usually located in the countryside, but everywhere tied to the stable logic of tradition and community’. Both Waugh and Priestley, he writes, ‘[discover] in antique stones, lanes, hills and country houses the true source of England’s culture’.⁵⁷ Priestley sees much more than ‘antique stones, lanes, hills and country houses’, however. His journey takes him from Southampton through Bristol and the Cotswolds to the industrial towns and cities of the Midlands, West Yorkshire, Lancashire and the North-East, to the coalfields of East Durham, and back to London via Hull, Lincoln and Norfolk. He sees not only ‘a lot of Englands’ (321), but profound divisions within England. Modifying the older separation of England into North and South, he famously divides the country into ‘the Old, the Nineteenth-Century and the New’

⁵⁷ Iain Chambers, *Border Dialogues: Journeys in Postmodernity* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 33. John Baxendale lists a number of similar readings of Priestley (“I Had Seen a

(328). First, there is ‘Old England, the country of the cathedrals and minsters and manor houses and inns, of parson and squire; guidebook and quaint highways and byways England’ (321). Secondly, there is ‘nineteenth-century England, the industrial England of coal, iron, steel, cotton, wool, railways’, which ‘makes up the larger part of the Midlands and the North and exists everywhere’ (322). Thirdly, there is the ‘England of arterial and bypass roads, of filling stations and factories that look like exhibition buildings, of giant cinemas and dance-halls and cafés, bungalows with tiny garages, cocktail bars, Woolworths, motor coaches, wireless, hiking, factory girls looking like actresses, greyhound racing and dirt tracks, swimming pools, and everything given away for cigarette coupons’, that ‘[belongs] far more to the age itself than to this particular island’ (325).

Priestley’s sympathies for these three Englands are mixed. He does say that Old England ‘at its best cannot be improved upon in this world’ (321), and that the despoilation brought about by industrialisation is somehow more appalling because ‘we have ravished for unjustly distributed profit the most enchanting countryside in the world, out of which lyrics and lovely water-colours have come flowering like the hawthorn’ (335). But what must be recognised is that Priestley is at least as angry about the ‘unjustly distributed profit’, ‘the poor devils toiling in the muck’ (322), as about the natural cost of industrialisation. He is also considerably clearer-eyed than Waugh (for example) about the realities of pre-industrial England, observing that ‘you do not hurry out of Arcadia to work in a factory twelve hours a day for about eighteen pence. Moreover, why did the population increase so rapidly after the Industrial Revolution? What was it about Merrie England that kept the numbers

down?’ (323). Old England, he argues, is a fine country for a tourist ‘to lounge about in’, but the real purpose of ‘preserving the most enchanting bits of it, such as the cathedrals and the colleges and the Cotswolds’, is ‘to have an occasional peep at them, thus to steel your determination that sooner or later the rest of English life, even where the muck is now, shall have as good a quality as those things’ (321-22). Hence his sympathy for ‘New England’, which, for all that it is ‘cheap’ and somewhat ‘standardised’, is also ‘essentially democratic’ and ‘as near to a classless society as we have got yet’ (325-26).

The divisions between the three different Englands, and particularly that between the impoverished and despoiled industrial north and the wealthy south, are experienced as a violent rupture in the fabric of the nation, and figured in the language of the Great War—so insistently that it is amazing to find any critic who would assert that Priestley’s work was ‘untouched’ by his experiences on the Western Front.⁵⁸ The men of Blackburn, Jarrow, Hebburn and the East Durham coalfields remind him of soldiers or, worse, of prisoners of war, sharing the ‘drawn masks’, the ‘strained, greyish, faintly decomposed look’, of a group of German POWs Priestley was detailed to guard at the end of the war (259, 330). These communities, like the soldiers in Sassoon’s war poetry, have been ‘exiled’ from the rest of England (332), despite being only a day’s journey away, and the landscapes they inhabit are unmistakably the landscapes of war. Jarrow and Hebburn look ‘much worse [...] than some of the French towns I saw at the end of the war, towns that had been occupied by the enemy for four years’ (332). In Hebburn, Priestley

51 (2001), 87-111 (p. 88)).

⁵⁸ Harry Blamires, *Twentieth-Century English Literature*, 2nd edn (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986), p. 67.

visits a social centre with ‘places for carpentering and cobbling, a tattered library, and a newly finished hut for [...] twopenny whist drives and dances’, and has ‘an odd feeling all the time that I was looking at a camp just behind the front line in some strange new war’ (261).⁵⁹ The derelict shipyard he has crossed to reach it resembles nothing so much as Sassoon’s description of the landscape of the Front: it is ‘a fantastic wilderness of decaying sheds, strange mounds and pits, rusted iron, old concrete and new grass’ (261), a ‘parody of either rural or urban life’ in which, as in many modernist responses to the Great War, time seems to be flowing forwards and backwards at the same time (263).⁶⁰ Industrial modernity has reduced its ‘skilled children’ to ‘starting all over again, far away from the great machine, at the very beginning’ (but also, of course, not far away from the machine at all): fishing the polluted estuary in a patched-up liner’s boat (262).

But if Priestley is ‘haunted by First-War scapes as he makes his *English Journey*’, does he also represent the war, as Baxendale suggests, as a major *cause* of the spatial and temporal fragmentation of England?⁶¹ Priestley’s description, in his autobiography *Margin Released* (1962), of the war as a ‘canyon smoking’ between his postwar self and the nineteen-year-old who enlisted in 1914 certainly implies that

⁵⁹ As Priestley is aware, this analogy raises uncomfortable questions about his own role. When he returns from a visit to families on the dole in Blackburn—a visit he records in note form, thus providing Orwell with an important (and unacknowledged) model for equivalent parts of *The Road to Wigan Pier*—he ‘[feels] like comfortable newspaper proprietor who has just inspected front-line trench (in safe sector) and is now leaving the brave boys to it, thank God!’ (232). Given the ‘brave boys’ hostility to pressmen (see, for example, Sassoon’s ‘Editorial Impressions’ and ‘Fight to a Finish’ (*War Poems*, pp. 78 and 85)) this is hardly a complacent attitude, either towards Priestley’s position as observer of the Englands he encounters, or towards the difficulty of reconciling them.

⁶⁰ See Trudi Tate, *Modernism, History and the First World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 125.

⁶¹ Cunningham, p. 53, Baxendale, p. 99.

this is so.⁶² In *English Journey*, however, the picture is more complicated. Priestley knows that the war is not the sole or even the primary cause of England's current crisis, and yet it still operates as something more than a purely personal hiatus and disjunction. I would suggest that the war is crucial to Priestley not because it spelled the physical end of an Edwardian arcadia, but because, as Kevin Davey has argued, it brought home to him 'the gulf that existed between [provincial but cosmopolitan] Bradford and Britannia', placing him 'outside the national imaginary', and leading him to spend the rest of his writing life trying to articulate a new form of Englishness.⁶³ Priestley's description of his war experience in *Margin Released* is telling, suggesting precisely this sort of disruption of imaginary identifications through its image of the broken mirror. 'If you were born in 1894, as I was,' he writes,

you suddenly saw a great jagged crack in the looking-glass. After that your mind could not escape from the idea of a world that ended in 1914 and another one that began about 1919, with a wilderness of smoke and fury, outside sensible time, lying between them. [...] I left one world to spend an exile in limbo, came out of it to find myself in another world.⁶⁴

A reading of a central episode in *English Journey*, Priestley's visit to his home city of Bradford, will show the nature of his estrangement, and of the Englishness that Priestley attempts to develop as a response to this 'deep unhealing wound'.⁶⁵

⁶² *Margin Released: A Writer's Reminiscences and Reflections* (London: Heinemann, 1962), p. 79.

⁶³ *English Imaginaries: Six Studies in Anglo-British Modernity* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1999), p. 59.

⁶⁴ *Margin Released*, p. 88.

⁶⁵ *Margin Released*, p. 139.

Priestley is not supposed to visit Bradford at all. He goes there, when he 'ought to have been continuing [his] journey elsewhere' (143), to attend a reunion dinner for his regiment: the Great War, 'a queer bend in the road' that took Priestley from his home in 1914, once again disturbs his proper itinerary.⁶⁶ His visit is not a homecoming, however, because Priestley is now 'neither a citizen nor a complete stranger' in Bradford (137): both he and the city have changed irrevocably.⁶⁷ His account of his detour is therefore an opportunity to take the measure of 'two Englands, two worlds' (137). Gone is the prosperous, 'fiercely democratic' (140), deeply provincial and surprisingly cosmopolitan town, with substantial links to Germany and a sizable German-Jewish community, that Priestley remembers.⁶⁸ But Priestley stops well short of blaming the war for all he, and the city, have lost. He recognizes that Bradford's economic decline began long before 1914, and that the war was 'a brief golden age of profits' before decline began again in the early 1920s. The problem is that, seduced by the notion that the slump was merely temporary and that things would soon return to 'normal', Bradford's wool merchants did nothing to adjust to the new trading conditions. 'I am no economist,' Priestley comments, 'but it is obvious even to me that this notion of there being a normal standard of trade is fallacious and dangerous. The situation is not merely changing temporarily all the time; it is also changing for ever.' (142) This comment signals the limit of Priestley's willingness to idealise the lost world of 1914, and also signals his attempt,

⁶⁶ *Margin Released*, pp. 87-88.

⁶⁷ See also *Margin Released*, where Priestley writes that 'I belong at heart to the pre-1914 North Country. Part of me is still in Bradford, can never leave it, though when I return there now I wander about half-lost, a melancholy stranger' (pp. 31-32).

⁶⁸ For another perspective on the cosmopolitanism of early-twentieth-century Bradford, see Michael Saler, 'Making It New: Visual Modernism and the "Myth of the North" in Interwar England', *Journal of British Studies*, 37 (1998), 419-40, especially pp. 425-26.

in effect, to 'sediment' the mourning tasks brought up by his visit to Bradford. The war must be mourned, but so too must the Slump, the end of childhood, the passing of the specific culture of Edwardian Bradford, and the ceaseless change characteristic not only of modernity, but of all human life.

Priestley's regimental dinner is, therefore, an occasion for mourning not only his dead comrades and the world of his youth, but a lost identity. The notes of elegy and of anger, on behalf of the dead and the living, sound most clearly in this section. Priestley recalls his closest friends, from during and before the war, almost all of whom are dead, and is appalled to discover that several surviving members of his platoon have not attended the dinner, despite being provided with free tickets, because they have no decent clothes to wear. Mingled with the elegy and the anger in Priestley's accounts of Bradford, however, are those of commonsense, 'compensation' (149) and even comedy. The pathos and potential bitterness of his account of the reunion are salved when the old soldiers are forced to toast their dead comrades to the tune of an 'atrocious polka' that turns out to be the regimental march, very badly played, and Priestley concludes that this is 'just like life' (147).⁶⁹ And his reflections on the 'tragicomedy of the living, who had fought for a world that did not want them, who had come back to exchange their uniforms for rags', are immediately followed by the statement that 'there are nearly always compensations' (149). Just as his own generation took a Wordsworthian pleasure in exploring the

⁶⁹ In *Margin Released*, Priestley explains his failure to take the First World War as 'a grand theme' as due, fundamentally, to 'opposed attitudes that I [...] did not know how to reconcile. Unlike most of my contemporaries who wrote so well about the war, I was deeply divided between the tragedy and comedy of it. [...] To a man of my temperament it was almost slapstick, so much gigantically solemn, dressed-up, bemedalled custard-pie work, but with tragedy, death, the deep unhealing wound, there in the middle of it' (pp. 138-39).

Dales, so Bradfordians today can spend their Sundays in rejuvenating rambles, hikes and cycle rides. A specific version of Englishness that unites the classes and generations is invoked here in order to mend the potentially catastrophic rents in the space-time of the nation. But despite being grounded in a vision of the countryside, and making more than a nod to Romanticism and the amateur ethos, Priestley's is not a conservative Englishness. Rather, his account of bucolic *and* urban pleasures in the Dales is an imagined reconciliation of all classes, town and country, past and present, tradition and modernity. He sees both good and bad in the changing modes of work and leisure that are constantly reshaping the Dales along with the rest of England, and his vision of a nation in which planning would bring the best of 'Old England' to all is in accord with the 'preservationist planning' agenda for a new England that, David Matless argues, developed during the interwar years.⁷⁰

Priestley's vision of the English countryside as a space of reconciliation is one way in which he attempts to heal the divisions within Englishness that opened up for him during the Great War and that are expressed in *English Journey* as a form of civil war. Another is Priestley's persona: that of the commonsensical Englishman, who prefers 'concrete details' to 'abstractions' (330), believes differences of opinion can be resolved through an unmediated encounter with reality (most English people, he says, would agree with his assessment of the state of the nation 'if they only took the trouble to go and look' (335)), and attributes economic disaster to 'muddle'

⁷⁰ Matless, pp. 26-27. Priestley's vision of England cannot, however, easily accommodate ethnic diversity, especially where this takes the form of 'Americanization': that is, the influence of black music on Anglo-British popular culture: see *English Journey*, pp. 220-21, and Davey, pp. 69-70 and 73-74.

rather than malice (329).⁷¹ (Priestley's self-representation as a bluff, plain-speaking Yorkshireman differentiates him slightly from the (stereo)typical interwar Englishman, but only slightly.)⁷² This persona is similar in many respects to that which Sassoon constructed for himself in the *Memoirs of George Sherston*, but Priestley differs from Sassoon in that his Englishness is a plea for action, not a hymn to quietism: for *national* rather than personal regeneration. *English Journey* is a call to enlist in the war against what Priestley describes in fine Bunyan—and Beveridge—style as 'Want, Disease, Hopelessness, Misery' (332): a war already being fought by the inhabitants of East Durham and the Tyne (or perhaps by those who have moved there to help them). By fighting this war, England will rediscover her true self, the 'inner glowing tradition of the English spirit'. 'Let us be', he writes,

too proud [...] to refuse shelter to exiled foreigners, too proud to do dirty little tricks because other people can stoop to them, too proud to lose an inch of our freedom, too proud, even if it beggars us, to tolerate social injustice here, too proud to suffer anywhere in this country an ugly mean way of living (336).

To the tune of this 'peroration', the wandering author finds himself 'home' at last (336). A new home, a renewed identification with England replacing the home he lost in 1914-18, has been made through the imagining of a regenerative war.

Reading *English Journey* with an eye not only on what came before it but what came after, one is struck by the extent to which it anticipates the radical

⁷¹ Priestley's reconciling use of 'muddle' recalls Dickens's Stephen Blackpool's attribution of suffering and injustice to 'muddle' in *Hard Times* (1854; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 87 and elsewhere).

populist patriotism of the People's War as it was constructed after 1939—reflecting both the fact that, as Angus Calder argues, the People's War was largely scripted before the Second World War began, and Priestley's important role in its wartime elaboration.⁷³ The mood of accusation and anxiety in Britain at the outbreak of war in 1939 was the culmination of a decade of growing crisis, in which, despite calls for change of which Priestley's was only one amongst many, successive governments had failed to find a way out of depression or to halt the rise of totalitarianism in Europe. The problems of social division that exercise Priestley in *English Journey* were thus powerfully present in Britain as the Second World War began, and it was feared that they had the potential to intensify into catastrophic social and psychological disintegration as the war went on.⁷⁴ As Angus Calder and others have shown, the 'myth' and the reality of the People's War were able to turn this moment of potential disaster for Britain, and for Englishness, into its 'finest hour'. Interwar constructions of Englishness, with the addition of a new emphasis on modest, collective heroism, and perhaps, understandably, with a greater prominence given to stoicism, a 'sense of humour', and emotional restraint, were mobilised in the war effort.⁷⁵ So too were images of 'the English landscape' and English history—the

⁷² On interwar representations of English character, see Calder, *Myth of the Blitz*, p. 187, Colls, *Identity of England*, pp. 80-84, and Light.

⁷³ Calder, *Myth of the Blitz*, pp. 195-203. On Priestley's radical populism, and on his wartime role as an advocate of 'a modernising democratic and socialist agenda', see Davey, pp. 70-74, and Baxendale.

⁷⁴ On the situation in Britain at the outset of the war, and predictions of what was to come, see Paul Addison, *The Road to 1945: British Politics and the Second World War*, rev. edn (London: Pimlico, 1994), pp. 103-12, Angus Calder, *The People's War: Britain 1939-1945* (1969; London: Pimlico, 1992), pp. 21-34, 61-63, 86-87, 106-13 and 136-39, and Tom Harrison, *Living Through the Blitz* (London: Collins, 1976), pp. 17-41.

⁷⁵ Jeffrey Richards, 'National Identity in British Wartime Films', in *Britain and the Cinema in the Second World War*, ed. by Philip M. Taylor (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988) pp. 42-61 (pp. 55-60) (a later version of this essay appears as 'World War Two' in Richards's

latter inevitably stressing England's 'heroic spirit in times of adversity', but also its essentially domestic, peaceful character.⁷⁶ And as the war went on, a new political and social consensus emerged that saw a managed economy and an expanded welfare state as the key to the postwar consolidation of Britain's regeneration. On the surface, it appeared that Priestley's vision of Englishness reborn would be realised, and the nation made whole once again, through the People's War.⁷⁷

Mark Rawlinson has suggested that the ideology of the People's War is 'the legitimate form of the bellicist credo that war produces cultural and political health', and, just as this image of war as the midwife of a better world is shadowed by that of war as an entropic machine bringing destruction, so too was the People's War shadowed by anxieties.⁷⁸ At one level, these anxieties can be understood as reflections of the real limitations of the 1945 consensus, as well as of the profound exhaustion felt by many at the war's end.⁷⁹ It is also fruitful, however, to explore

Films and British National Identity: From Dickens to 'Dad's Army' (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), pp. 85-127). Richards includes accounts of the national character from Stanley Baldwin, George Orwell, Priestley, Sir Ernest Barker, Leslie Howard, and Leland DeWitt Baldwin (an 'Anglophile American'), and from wartime films, as well as Dr Stephen Taylor's contemporary assessment of the work of the Home Intelligence Unit, whose role it was to monitor national morale. See also Calder, *Myth of the Blitz*, pp. 187-88.

⁷⁶ Richards, pp. 44-50. See also Appleyard, pp. 12-15, Calder, *Myth of the Blitz*, pp. 195-96, Nigel Mace, 'British Historical Epics in the Second World War', in Taylor, *Britain and the Cinema in the Second World War*, pp. 101-20, Matless, pp. 173-264, and Taylor, *A Dream of England*, pp. 182-211.

⁷⁷ Colls, *Identity of England*, p. 314. Priestley himself did not think so: see Davey, pp. 74-75, and Hewison, *In Anger*, p. 4.

⁷⁸ Rawlinson, p. 78.

⁷⁹ For a range of views, see Addison, *Road to 1945*, pp. 273-92, Correlli Barnett, *The Audit of War: The Illusion & Reality of Britain as a Great Nation* (London: Macmillan, 1986), Calder, *People's War*, pp. 584-86, Steven Fielding, Peter Thompson and Nick Tiratsoo, *'England Arise!': The Labour Party and Popular Politics in 1940s Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp. 209-20, Peter Hennessy, *Never Again: Britain, 1945-1951* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), Harriet Jones and Michael Kandiah, eds, *The Myth of Consensus: New Views on British History, 1945-64* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1996),

them as indications of unease about the war's mobilisation of Englishness in the service of what Tom Harrisson calls 'wartime's compulsive loyalty—the tool to make civilized men break the commandments and be honoured for murder': an unease that was masked at the time—and to the extent that it still dominates collective memory, has been masked since—by the idea of the People's War.⁸⁰ In acknowledging this, my intention is not to deny the extraordinary degree of resolve and unity with which British people fought the Second World War: as Calder has argued, the fact that the 'Myth of the Blitz' was 'scripted' does not mean that it was not, to an extent, also real.⁸¹ But in order to understand the complexity of the 'unfinished business' relating to the Second World War in contemporary British culture, and the kinds of issues that emerged from the crypt of public memory when the 1945 consensus began manifestly to break down in the mid-1970s, it is helpful to explore the anxieties and doubts, the fears of dissolution and loss, that shadow the People's War in the 1940s work of one writer for whom Englishness was profoundly disturbed by war.

In her postscript to her wartime collection, *The Demon Lover and Other Stories* (1945), Elizabeth Bowen attempts to describe what seems to her to be the essence of these stories, all written between the spring of 1941 and the late autumn of 1944. They are, she says, 'war-time', rather than 'war' stories: studies of the 'war-

Robert Mackay, *The Test of War: Inside Britain 1939-1945* (London: UCL Press, 1999), pp. 227-33, and Kenneth O. Morgan, *Britain since 1945: The People's Peace*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 3-28. On exhaustion, see Paul Addison, *Now the War is Over: A Social History of Britain 1945-51* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Jonathan Cape, 1985), especially pp. 24-28.

⁸⁰ Harrisson, p. 334. On the power of the 'myth' of the People's War in (re)shaping individual and collective memories of the war, see Harrisson, pp. 324-30, Noakes, and Calder, *Myth of the Blitz*.

⁸¹ *Myth of the Blitz*, p. 14.

climate, and of the strange growths it raised', of the psychological 'territory' rather than the events of the war.⁸² This territory is one in which boundaries between people, and between people and things, are porous: as the bombs destroyed 'the illusion that prestige, power and permanence attach to bulk and weight', so too 'the overcharged subconsciousnesses of everybody overflowed and merged', and 'we felt, if not knew, each other' (217-18).⁸³ People are possessed by these spectral others, and dispossessed, by the loss of their homes, by 'the *desiccation*, by war, of our day-to-day lives', and by the frankly 'stupefying' scale of events, 'out of all proportion to our faculties for knowing, thinking and checking up' (219).

In the face of these multiple possessions and dispossessions, people clung to the fragmentary remains of their lives and selves:

People whose homes had been blown up went to infinite lengths to assemble bits of themselves—broken ornaments, odd shoes, torn scraps of the curtains that had hung in a room—from the wreckage. In the same way, they assembled and checked themselves from stories and poems, from their memories, from one another's talk. (220)

The struggle to shore up the 'uncertain "I"' of wartime led people 'down strange paths', writes Bowen, into compensatory dreams and fantasies: 'small worlds-within-worlds of hallucination' (220-21). But these supposedly saving attachments 'to every object or image or place or love or fragment of memory with which [their]

⁸² *The Demon Lover and Other Stories* (London: Cape, 1952), p. 217. Further references will be given in parentheses.

⁸³ On the disconcerting porousness of boundaries and the determining power of settings or 'habitats' in Bowen's fiction, see Maud Ellmann, 'Elizabeth Bowen: The Shadowy Fifth', in *The Fiction of the 1940s: Stories of Survival*, ed. by Rod Mengham and N. H. Reeve (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 1-25. On the significance in wartime writing of buildings and particularly of private interiors as extensions of the self, see Rawlinson, pp. 94-96.

destiny seemed to be identified, and by which the [*sic*] destiny seemed to be assured' (220) are double-edged. They have the uncanny effect of '[discharging] into the anaesthetized and bewildered present' an unintegrated past (221). As Bowen herself writes of three of the stories in *The Demon Lover*:

In 'The Happy Autumn Fields', one finds a woman projected from flying-bombed London, with its day-and-night eeriness, into the key emotional crisis of a Victorian girlhood. In 'Ivy Gripp'd the Steps', a man in the early forties peers through the rusted fortifications and down the dusty empty perspectives of a seaside town at the Edwardian episode that has crippled his faculty for love. In 'The Inherited Clock', a girl is led to find the key to her own neurosis inside a timepiece. (221)

These examples, and the slightly puzzling choice of 'destiny' in the passage cited above, suggest that for Bowen, the psychological crises of war had their roots in the past, or, more pointedly, that they were the uncanny return of forces always present, but disavowed or repressed, in British—or rather English—life. Like Graham Greene—to whom I will return in my discussion of Swift's novel *Shuttlecock* in Chapter Two—Bowen seems to have seen the (dis)possessions of wartime as somehow 'destined', as the inevitable and not unwelcome crisis of 'an old dog-toothed civilization'.⁸⁴ Her writing from the 1940s represents England as a place rendered uncanny by war, in which the English home becomes *unheimlich* through the return of a violence that has been integral to it all along.

One of the strongest stories in *The Demon Lover* expresses precisely this ambivalent relationship between Englishness and war's violence. In 'Mysterious

⁸⁴ Graham Greene, 'At Home' (1940), quoted in Norman Sherry, *The Life of Graham Greene* (London: Cape, 1989-), II: 1939-1955 (1994), p. 52. On Bowen's views, see Hermione Lee, *Elizabeth Bowen: An Estimation* (London: Vision; Totowa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble, 1981), pp. 156-57.

Kôr', a young woman fantasises that London under a wintry full moon, in the middle of the war when this no longer signifies a likely German raid, is Kôr, the ancient 'ghost city' (213) of Rider Haggard's imperial degeneration fantasy, *She* (1887).⁸⁵ Kôr is an appealing fantasy for Pepita for several reasons. In contrast to London's dissolving buildings and boundaries, its impermeable walls offer not only physical safety, but privacy: she and her lover would have 'a place' there (202), whereas in London they have to spend his leave in the tiny flat that she shares with another girl. Kôr also represents an imaginative escape from the mundane present. Remembering an Andrew Lang poem inspired by Haggard's novel takes her into a world of childhood fantasy and also into a fortified city/self, a landscape of 'wide, void, pure streets' (215), empty of the people about whom, 'these days', she cannot bear to think (199).⁸⁶ The text is ambiguous about *why* she cannot bear to think about people, however: a simple sense that, as Arthur says, 'to be human's to be at a dead loss' (213), mixes with a desire for privacy and disgust at being part of an engulfing mass.⁸⁷ But these perplexities and desires issue in a strange and violent—not simply escapist—longing for the inhuman, the 'void', for an apocalypse that would bring

⁸⁵ H. Rider Haggard, *She* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). On *She* as a warning about Britain's degeneration, see Stephen Arata, *Fictions of Loss in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 89-104.

⁸⁶ In Lang's poem, 'She: To H. R. H.', Ayesha—the Queen of Kôr, and 'She Who Must Be Obeyed'—no longer dwells in Kôr,

but in whatever spot,
 In town or field, or by the insatiate sea,
 Men brood on buried loves, and unforgot,
 Or break themselves on some divine decree,
 Or would o'erleap the limits of their lot,
 There, in the tombs and deathless, dwelleth she!

See *The Poetical Works of Andrew Lang*, ed. by Mrs Lang, 4 vols (London: Longmans Green, 1923), I, 168.

⁸⁷ On enforced intimacy as 'an invasion, an engulfing', see Rawlinson, p. 95.

‘civilization’ to an end, leaving only Kôr. It cheers her up, she tells an alarmed Arthur, to think that

this war shows we’ve by no means come to the end. If you can blow whole places out of existence, you can blow whole places into it. I don’t see why not. They say we can’t say what’s come out since the bombing started. By the time we’ve come to the end, Kôr may be the one city left: the abiding city. (199)

The absent presence of Kôr, the vision conjured by moonlight out of a London that ‘[looks] like the moon’s capital—shallow, cratered, extinct’, and apparently abandoned (196), signals an uncanny return of the terrifying void and violence abjected from Englishness. But this violence is not so much a return from without, as from within: as Jeslyn Medoff observes, ‘the political enemy [Germany] is absent from this picture’ of a London threatened by ‘something more immaterial’ (196).⁸⁸

The return of something immaterial from within England is the closest thing to an explanation offered for the treason of Robert Kelway in Bowen’s war novel, *The Heat of the Day* (1948).⁸⁹ The novel, set mostly in the autumn of 1942, deals with Stella Rodney’s confrontation with the allegation that Robert, her lover of two years, is a Nazi spy, and her blackmail by the shady spy-catcher, Harrison, who offers

⁸⁸ “‘There Is No Elsewhere’: Elizabeth Bowen’s Perceptions of War’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 30.1 (1984), 73-81 (p. 77). Bowen herself discovered *She* at the age of 12, and, like Pepita, found in it an imaginative escape from ‘what seemed the sheer uniformity of the human lot, [...] its feebleness, arising from some deficiency’. Also like Pepita, she fantasised about London’s ruin through Kôr: ‘I saw Kôr before I saw London [...]. I was inclined to see London as Kôr with the roofs still on. The idea that life in any capital city must be ephemeral, and with a doom ahead, remained with me—a curious obsession for an Edwardian child. At the same time I found something reassuring and comforting in the idea that, whatever happened, buildings survived people.’ (Elizabeth Bowen, ‘Rider Haggard: *She*’, in *The Mulberry Tree: Writings of Elizabeth Bowen*, selected and introduced by Hermione Lee (London: Virago, 1986), pp. 246-50 (pp. 246-47 and 249).)

⁸⁹ *The Heat of the Day* (London: Vintage, 1998). Further references will be given in parentheses.

to overlook Robert's treason if Stella will take up with him (Harrison) instead. Many of its critics have observed, or lamented, that as a spy story the novel is more than defective: Lee writes that, considered 'as a spy-fiction against the work of Conrad or Kipling, Buchan or Greene, Fleming or le Carré, [*The Heat of the Day*] is obviously risible', containing as it does 'no scenes of recruitment, no government department meetings, no stories of infiltration, no details of espionage or counter-spying, no information about Intelligence, nothing about the operations of M.I.5 or S.I.S.'.⁹⁰ But as Bowen's own comments on her wartime stories might suggest, *The Heat of the Day* is not so much a spy novel as a study of the psychological 'territory' of war. *The Heat of the Day* reads the war as the uncanny return of disintegrative forces from within a 'denatured and dispossessed' civilisation—specifically, from within English civilisation.⁹¹ It also explores the possibilities for the renewal of that civilisation, through fascism, through the People's War, or through a reforged allegiance to old ideas of inheritance and the natural continuation of life.

All three of the novel's main characters—Stella, Robert and Harrison—are displaced before the war begins. Stella, a divorcée and seemingly estranged from her own family and class, 'gentry till lately owning, still recollecting, land', has not found any new 'position' (115). Robert is the violently disaffected product of an English middle class that is itself 'suspended in the middle of nothing' (114), sustaining itself so ferociously, so terrifyingly, on illusion that when he returns to the family house he feels, he tells Stella, 'that I don't exist—that I not only am not but

⁹⁰ Lee, *Elizabeth Bowen*, p. 175. Contemporary reviewers were puzzled by the novel's 'failure' in this respect: see Orville Prescott, 'Books of the Times', *The New York Times*, 21 February 1949, p. 21, and Anon., 'The Climate of Treason', *Times Literary Supplement*, 5 March 1949, p. 152.

⁹¹ Lee, *Elizabeth Bowen*, p. 189.

never have been' (117). And Harrison seems to have almost no background at all—he 'more or less' had a mother; he may be South African, or Australian (134)—and indeed seems to Stella to have no continuous existence from one of their meetings to the next. The war, as Harrison puts it, 'hasn't started anything that wasn't there already' (33)—or as one of the characters in Bowen's story 'Pink May' remarks, 'whatever you are these days, you are rather more so'.⁹² Thus, Stella initially finds 'the sensation of being on furlough from her own life' in the London of the summer and autumn of 1940 exhilarating: both she and Robert are 'in their element' in this 'garrison' society, an impermanent world where 'life-stories were shed as so much superfluous weight' (94-95). Their relationship is born of the violent 'demolition' of peacetime's apparent 'solidity': it begins with a bomb's 'direct hit, somewhere else' (95-96), and flourishes amongst the 'nomad existences' and 'dismantling of the bourgeois family' that Adam Piette identifies as central to British home front experience during the Second World War.⁹³ By autumn 1942 when the novel opens, however, excitement has been replaced by a 'malarial' exhaustion and 'heaviness', as 'reverses, losses, deadlocks now almost unnoticed [breed] one another': the war's violence has left identity both cruelly exposed and suspended—exposed *as* suspended—in an 'insidious echoless propriety of ruins' (92-93).

Stella's visit to Holme Dene, Robert's family seat in the Home Counties stockbroker belt, brings home to her this awareness of her own, and England's, ungroundedness. When seen from the railway platform, the neighbourhood seems to

⁹² 'Pink May', in *Demon Lover*, pp. 171-81 (p. 173).

⁹³ Piette, p. 6. Stella Rodney is, of course, not 'bourgeois' but declined gentry, but, as will be seen below, for Robert Kelway the chance to reject his middle-class origins is a crucial motivating factor in his treachery.

offer ‘one kind of pattern of English life at its most incoherent and reassuring’ (104). But at Holme Dene itself a *parvenu* attempt to reproduce the architectural accretions of old England—the house ‘[combines] half-timbering with bow and french windows and two or three balconies’ (105-06)—produces a sinister construction of maximum ‘complication’ (108), designed to facilitate both surveillance and concealment, over which the malevolent Mrs Kelway presides like a witch over a ‘bewitched wood’ (110). Under Mrs Kelway’s corrosive gaze, and that of her typically Bowenesque ‘psychic’ tea table, Stella ‘[feels] every one of the anxieties, the uncertainties of the hybrid’ (114), and from her ‘hybrid’ position she reads Holme Dene as the architectural expression of an England similarly, but unknowingly, adrift:

The English, she could only tell herself, were extraordinary—for if this were not England she did not know what it was. You could not account for this family headed by Mrs Kelway by simply saying that it was middle class, because that left you asking, middle of what? She saw the Kelways suspended in the middle of nothing. She could envisage them so suspended when there *was* nothing more. Always without a quiver as to their state. (114)⁹⁴

Bowen’s treatment of Holme Dene grows out of the interwar hysteria about suburbia that we have seen already in Sassoon’s disgust at the ‘rubble of industrial suburbs’ gradually claiming farmland outside Liverpool. As David Matless has shown, the suburbs are often represented in 1920s and 30s writing as ‘an indeterminate place;

⁹⁴ Stella’s relationship to this Englishness is complicated. She is obviously differentiated from it in class terms, and perhaps also by her nationality; critics tend to assume that she is Anglo-Irish, although the evidence for this is largely extra-textual, depending on the equation of Stella with Bowen herself, as the location of Stella’s family’s seat is not specified, and Mount Morris belonged to her former husband’s cousin. But she also shares this England’s ‘[suspension] in the middle of nothing’, both physically and temporally: it

visually, socially, sexually'. In suburbia's confusion of land use, class and gender, the muddle or compromise so often taken to be an English virtue becomes a peculiarly 'English predicament'. In particular, the suburb is represented as 'a site of emasculation, a domestic realm constraining the English man'.⁹⁵ Bowen is quite clear that Holme Dene is a 'man-eating house', and that Robert and his father stood no chance against it and the waning of masculine 'prestige' it represents (257). Robert's later career as a spy is therefore partly explained as an attempt to assert his masculinity and escape the gender 'muddle' of interwar Englishness: an attempt to exorcise by making explicit the conditions of subterfuge and surveillance in which he grew up.

The alternative to Holme Dene is figured in the novel in Mount Morris, the Irish Big House that Stella's son Roderick has inherited from his father's elderly cousin. Mount Morris represents the virtues of groundedness, of continuity, of a more benign because more demanding possession of and by place.⁹⁶ 'Better', thinks Stella, to be 'fitted into a destiny' of this kind than to have 'freedom in nothing' (175). She herself cannot choose this 'destiny', however, because her generation—those born around 1900, who came of age during or immediately after the First World War—broke 'the fatal connexion between the past and future' (176). She declined to take her place in the procession of ladies of the house driven 'not quite mad' by the 'unfinishable hours in which they could only reflect again' on what 'they

was her generation, she reflects later during a visit to Mount Morris, 'who had broken the link' between past and future (176).

⁹⁵ Matless, pp. 34-35. On English compromise, see Colls, *Identity of England*, pp. 70-74 and elsewhere.

⁹⁶ As Bowen writes of Roderick's fantasies about Mount Morris, 'whether he sought them out or they him; whether they nourished him or he them, could not be said' (50).

suspected [but] refused to prove' (174). But she has nonetheless echoed their 'enactment of ignorance' (174) in her relationship with Robert.

For all that she is excluded from the super-personal destiny that is embodied in Mount Morris, her encounter with the 'rapture of strength' (177) to be felt in the estate's woods does, in some obscure way, steel her to confront Robert, to test the 'isolation' of their relationship from the world (188), when she returns to London. In an often-quoted passage, the narrator asserts their part in history's 'larger story' (195). Although the ruin that surrounds them has allowed them to imagine their love as isolation from history, their time has always 'sat in the third place at their table' (194). The apparently private world of love is not an escape from history, but a possession by it:

there is no such thing as being alone together. Daylight moves round the walls; night rings the changes of its intensity; everything is on its way to somewhere else—there is the presence of movement, that third presence, however still, however unheeding in their trance two may try to stay. Unceasingly something is at its work. Even, each beat of the other beloved heart is one beat nearer the destination, unknowable, towards which that heart is beating its way; under what compulsion, what?—to love is to be unescapably conscious of the question. To have turned away from everything to one face is to find oneself face to face with everything. (195)

War, like love, is 'a thinning of the membrane between the this and the that, it [is] a becoming apparent' (195) of the intimate relationship between inside and outside—of the self, of the relationship, and indeed of the nation. Robert's admission that he has been spying for the Nazis, his denouncement of England as a country that has already sold itself out in the name of 'freedom to be [...] muddled, mediocre, damned' (268), suggests that fascism could appeal to the 'unwhole', those 'never earthed in' (272), in England as much as in Germany. The fiasco of Dunkirk, during which Robert was wounded, revealed to him what he had always known, and been:

I was born wounded; my father's son. Dunkirk was waiting there in us—what a race! A class without a middle, a race without a country. Unwhole. Never earthed in—and there are thousands of thousands of us, and we're still breeding—breeding what? (272-73)

Stella is appalled by Robert's treason, but she is also paralysed by a sense of her own complicity in it—and not just because she has wanted to protect her lover from the impersonal forces of the state. She too has longed to feel 'earthed in', 'whole', and she wonders whether even 'the revulsion in her against his act' might be the last etiolated trace of the 'illusion' in whose name her brothers fought, and died, in the Great War (276-77).⁹⁷ Robert's problem is his belatedness, which leaves in him a 'twisted inspiration, [...] romanticism fired once too often': had he been born half a generation earlier, Bowen implies, he might have died for England rather than turned against it (277). Furthermore, to the extent that Stella shares this 'romanticism', she too comes uncomfortably close to a quasi-fascist contempt for the 'breeding' mass. Although Stella finds it 'impossible' to think that 'the population, the other people' of London 'should at least be less to be honoured than trees walking', her sympathy with 'the human lava-flow' can be formulated only in these indirect and negative terms (275). It falls well short of any positive projection of the future, let alone an identification with the regenerative project of the People's War, which appears in the novel only as a media-generated illusion, sold to those, like Louie Lewis, vulnerable or stupid enough to buy it, or perhaps, like Stella's son Roderick, young enough to tolerate its co-option of individuality into uniform. Stella

⁹⁷ Compare p. 176, where Stella feels the 'broken edges' of 'the fatal connexion between the past and future [...] grating inside her soul'.

herself seems to have no future: even her decision, when we last see her in February 1944, to marry a cousin of a cousin, is only a 'prospect' with 'alternatives' (322).

Bowen's decision that the novel should end before the war's end, in the summer of 1944 shortly after the Normandy landings, is an indication of the difficulty she had in imagining a future for England, even after the war was over.⁹⁸ As both Angus Calder and Alan Munton argue, the question of closure in war novels is intimately related to their politics and their vision of the future. To confine a novel to 1940-41 is often to emphasise heroism, unity and, perhaps, the vision of a transformed society. To extend a novel into the postwar period with its 'effort of detailed, horrific reconstruction', on the other hand, 'raise[s] too many issues for glib long-term resolution'.⁹⁹ And by closing *The Heat of the Day* in mid-1944—despite

⁹⁸ Victoria Glendinning records that although Bowen identified intensely with London during the war, this was a temporary stay in her increasing alienation from England. Bowen wrote to William Plomer from Bowen's Court in the summer of 1945 that, 'selfishly speaking, I'd much rather live my life here. I've been coming gradually unstuck from England for a long time. I have adored England since 1940 because of the stylishness Mr Churchill gave it, but I've always felt, "when Mr Churchill goes, I go". I can't stick all these little middle-class Labour wets with their Old London School of Economics ties and their women. Scratch any of those cuties and you find the governess. Or so I have always found' (*Elizabeth Bowen: Portrait of a Writer* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977), p. 166). Adding such biographical evidence to the evidence in the novel itself, it is not difficult to see why Alan Sinfield believes that 'the precise project of [*The Heat of the Day*] is to entertain the thought that vulgarity dwells with the democratic victors of 1945, and civilization with fascism' (*Literature Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain*, 2nd edn (London: Athlone, 1997), p. 17), although I think this downplays Bowen's critique of Robert's treachery.

⁹⁹ Calder, *Myth of the Blitz*, pp. 167-68, and Alan Munton, *English Fiction of the Second World War* (London: Faber, 1989), pp. 2-3 and elsewhere. Those critics who have read some kind of recuperation of war's losses in *The Heat of the Day* would seem to be themselves caught up in the imperative to make symbolic goods out of war's evils. For three different examples, see Kristine A. Miller's reading of the novel as charting Stella's development of a 'feminist political voice' and perspective on the war, Phyllis Lassner's contention that the novel offers homelessness as a positive alternative to the 'conventional fictions and imagined fates' of female characters, and John Coates's argument that it affirms a 'sense of large impersonal powers which circumvent human egotism and obsession', brought into the open when Stella realises her shared humanity with Louie and Harrison (Miller, "'Even a Shelter's Not Safe": The Blitz on Homes in Elizabeth Bowen's Wartime Writing', *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 45.2 (1999), 138-58 (p. 149), Lassner, *Elizabeth*

the fact that, finishing the novel after the war was over, she could have resolved questions such as whether Roderick would survive to assume responsibility for Mount Morris—Bowen underlines her sense of uncertainty about the value of the England that would emerge from the war's blitzing of a world 'that has for years been asking to be brought to an end' (121).

Stella herself disappears from view before the novel's close. When we last see her, it is during the 'little Blitz' of February 1944, living in another anonymous rented flat, and apparently indifferent to the threat of the 'utter solution', death, offered by the renewal of bombing (319). She has spent the months since Robert's death and Harrison's disappearance in an activity very close to Laplanche's description of mourning—or melancholia: she has, she tells Harrison, been endlessly going back over the enigmatic voices of the dead, 'piecing and repiecing [what they said] together to try and make out something they had not time to say—possibly even had not had time to know'. 'There still must be something that matters that one has forgotten,' she tells him,

forgotten because at the time one did not realize how much it did matter. Yet most of all there is something one has got to forget—that is, if it is to be possible to live. The more wars there are, I suppose, the more we shall learn how to be survivors (317).

This is an odd moment, seeming to slip loose from its place in the text, and to speak, perhaps, not so much of Stella's rather vague perplexities as of the postwar writer's task, faced with the 'complex and untidy heritage' of the thirty-plus years of 'war-

Bowen (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), p. 139, and Coates, *Social Discontinuity in the Novels of Elizabeth Bowen: The Conservative Quest*, *Studies in British Literature*, 38 (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1998), p. 177).

climate' that marked the twentieth century so profoundly.¹⁰⁰ What, Bowen seems to ask through the figure of the mourning survivor Stella, must the postwar world remember of this 'war-climate', and what forget, in order to live? And what would that 'living' look like?

Bowen herself seems to have seen the only possibility of 'living' in a profoundly reactionary retreat from England after 1945. In her unease about the postwar condition of England she was not alone. Culturally, the 'English settlement' of 1945 was troubled from the start, both by internal contradictions and crises and by international events, and anxieties about Englishness never disappeared from view in the postwar period, especially after national decline became a major theme of public discourse at the end of the 1950s.¹⁰¹ Unfortunately, there is not space in this study to trace the ways that war, violence and Englishness were written about in the three decades between the publication of *The Heat of the Day* and that of *The Sweet Shop Owner*, the earliest of the 1980s and 90s novels I will be discussing in Chapters Two to Five—although both 'declinism' and the ubiquitous violence of 1960s British writing noted by Patricia Waugh, for example, surely bear analysis in relation to ideas of the postwar.¹⁰² Nor will I anticipate here my discussion of the particular nature of Swift's, Barker's and Thorpe's engagement with the cultural legacy of the

¹⁰⁰ Morgan, p. 26, Bowen, *Demon Lover*, p. 217.

¹⁰¹ See Steven Connor, *The English Novel in History 1950-1995* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 44-127, Hewison, *Culture and Consensus*, Sinfield, pp. 6-22, D. J. Taylor, *After the War: The Novel and English Society since 1945* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), especially pp. xxii and 37, Patricia Waugh, *The Harvest of the Sixties: English Literature and its Background 1960-1990* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 2-4, and Wright, *A Journey Through Ruins*. On the rise of 'declinism', see Jim Tomlinson, *The Politics of Decline: Understanding Post-War Britain* (Harlow: Longman, 2001), Colls, *Identity of England*, p. 143, and Stuart Ward, 'Introduction', *British Culture and the End of Empire*, ed. by Stuart Ward (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), pp. 1-20 (pp. 9-11).

two world wars. I would, however, like to conclude this chapter with some brief observations on the generational and wider political and social context for their interest in war and Englishness.

As has been the case with the equivalent generation of German writers and film-makers discussed by Santner, coming to terms with the Second World War has been, for Barker and Swift (who were born in 1943 and 1949 respectively), inextricable from understanding contemporary patterns of personal and family life. (Thorpe, who is slightly younger and has spent a good portion of his life living outside Britain, has a more distanced, perhaps a more abstract, approach to Englishness and war, as we shall see.) In the broader political and social arena, meanwhile, two developments seem to have been particularly significant in bringing memories of war to the fore. The breakdown of the 1945 consensus, expressed most clearly in the Thatcher Government's attack on many of the institutions of the postwar welfare state, and Thatcher's simultaneous assertions of a revived Anglo-Great Britishness—above all during the Falklands War—focused attention once more on questions of war and national identity.¹⁰³ Consensus itself may have been, as recent studies argue, something of a myth, and the reform of the structures of the

¹⁰² Waugh, *Harvest*, p. 10.

¹⁰³ See Foster, *Fighting Fictions*, Barbara Korte and Klaus Peter Müller, 'Unity in Diversity Revisited: Complex Paradoxes Beyond Post-/Modernism', in *Unity in Diversity Revisited?*, pp. 9-33 (p. 17), Anna Marie Smith, *New Right Discourses on Race and Sexuality: Britain, 1968-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), and Waugh, *Harvest*, p. 161. The relationship between the baby-boom generation's reaction to the war's legacy and the end of consensus is an intriguing one. In *The Days of Mars*, first published in 1972, Bryher wonders whether 'the rejection of order by the young' in the 1960s was a kind of transgenerational haunting: is it not due, she asks, 'to memories inherited from parents who were adolescent during the war and suffered so much from austerity and restraint? "Your rebellion goes back to the forties," I think, as they stroll noisily down the streets in their dirty clothes, "it does not belong to the sixties at all"' ('1940', in *Writing in a War: Stories, Poems and Essays of 1939-1945*, rev. edn, ed. by Ronald Blythe (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), pp. 47-62 (p. 48)). See also my discussion of Swift's *The Sweet Shop Owner*, below.

welfare state and the managed economy slower and patchier in practice, particularly during Thatcher's first term, than the rhetoric suggested.¹⁰⁴ Nonetheless, the perceived unravelling of the postwar settlement and the eruption of violence, both discursive and real, in 1980s Britain undermined the construction of Englishness as domestic and peace-loving, and reopened the question of how the Second World War, and the thirty years of war or the threat of war leading up to 1945, should be remembered.¹⁰⁵

Wendy Wheeler has suggested that the troubling of national narratives occasioned by the end of consensus stimulated the belated flowering in the 1980s of a specifically English postmodernist fiction.¹⁰⁶ I would argue that we might pursue a more historically-inflected reading of the questioning of national narratives in the fiction of this period by considering its postwar, as well as its postmodern and postcolonial, dimensions. The re-readings of Englishness in the examples of 1980s and 90s fiction considered here, as will become clear, are haunted by war, and by the questions about England and Englishness raised in the mid-century texts discussed in this chapter. As we shall see, the uncomfortable work of memory and mourning they undertake shapes both the thematic preoccupations and the form of these texts. Swift's, Barker's and Thorpe's novels seem to support Patricia Waugh's contention that as political consensus unravelled, British writers abandoned the 'consensus

¹⁰⁴ See Harriet Jones's introduction to *The Myth of Consensus*, pp. xiii-xvii, Morgan, pp. 396 and 437-67, and Arthur Marwick, *British Society since 1945*, 3rd edn (London: Penguin, 1996), pp. 184-276.

¹⁰⁵ The most notable examples of this violence were the miners' strike, race riots in the inner cities, IRA bombing campaigns, football hooliganism, and the Falklands War; for a discussion see Marwick, pp. 330-52.

¹⁰⁶ 'From the Sublime to the Domestic: Postmodernism and the Novels of Graham Swift and Peter Ackroyd' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Sussex, 1994, abstract in *Index to Theses*, <http://www.theses.com>).

aesthetic' of social realism, with its 'narratorial reliability and authority, modulation and integration of points of view, [and] assumption of an intrinsic and even moral organic relationship between the form and structure of the literary text and relations in the world outside it', in favour of 'modes of fantasy, self-reflexivity, absurdism, and the grotesque, on the one hand, or a modification of social realism but in the service of a political refusal of consensus as a statement of differential identity politics by minority groups on the other'.¹⁰⁷ Such generalisations are, of course, problematic, but it is accurate to say that the challenge of representing the 'unhealing wound' at the heart of Englishness forces even Barker, whose texts have the strongest affinities with social realism, to move further and further away from social realism in the course of *The Regeneration Trilogy*.¹⁰⁸ It is not to Barker that we will turn first of all, however, but to Swift, best known for the historiographical, postmodernist play of *Waterland*. Through a reading of Swift's early fiction, I hope to show that the disturbance of the grand narratives of the nation noted by so many critics in his work can be attributed not only to an interest in postmodernist theories of historical representation, but also to a specific engagement with British cultural memories of the First and Second World Wars.

¹⁰⁷ Waugh, *Harvest*, pp. 20-21.

¹⁰⁸ Priestley, *Margin Released*, p. 139.

CHAPTER TWO

‘SOMETHING LEFT OVER FROM THE WAR’:

THE EARLY NOVELS OF GRAHAM SWIFT

At the end of Graham Swift’s early short story ‘Gabor’, the Hungarian refugee boy of the title tells his foster father: ‘I like London. Iss full history. Iss full history.’¹ Gabor has just returned from a day trip with the narrator, his foster brother Roger, riding on the Underground and on the top decks of buses, visiting the Tower and Trafalgar Square and watching the Life Guards in the Mall. Roger’s version of it is that the day was simply ‘fun’. Gabor, he tells us, had only ‘a token, dutiful interest’ in the kind of London his father had wanted to show him on an earlier visit: the London of ‘buildings and monuments’. Gabor is therefore, in Roger’s account, offering Mr Everett—a serious, melancholic man on whom, after his experiences during the Second World War, history weighs heavily—what he thinks he wants to hear, and his ‘grave, wise expression’ is a con, a cover for the boys’ contentment with the frivolous pleasures of the city as playground (87). It is possible, however, that Roger himself is misreading Gabor or, more sinisterly, misrepresenting him. The text might be not so much an account of the formation of Roger’s alliance with Gabor against his father, and against his father’s view that ‘suffering was the reality of life’ and that ‘peace was [...] a brittle veneer’ (81), but of Roger’s role in

¹ Graham Swift, ‘Gabor’, in *Learning to Swim and Other Stories* (1982; London: Picador, 1985), pp. 80-87 (p. 87). Further references will be given in parentheses.

detaching Gabor from his nation's history and his own memory, and conscripting him into Roger's English war games, and his war against his father and his father's sense of history. In this reading of the story, the history London displays to day-trippers displaces the awkward or even unspeakable memories of Gabor and Roger's father: memories of European war and atrocity at odds with the 'mythology' Roger has absorbed from films (80-82).

Roger partially acknowledges a sense of guilt at his role in this process of displacement, disbelieving his father's wartime 'credentials' (82) and using Gabor against his father, but ultimately slides away from full recognition of it, preferring to assert that he, and not his father, knows the truth of Gabor's experience. In the very act of affirming Gabor's allegiance to himself, however, Roger allows into his narrative the traces of the suffering and atrocity he wants to exclude:

[Father] saw how Gabor looked to me and not to him, how when he returned from our forays at the end of the garden Gabor would follow me like a trusted commander; how, from the very beginning, that affinity which he had hoped to have with this child of suffering had eluded him. I often wondered how they had managed together on that first day, when father had gone up to 'collect' Gabor, like some new purchase. I pictured them coming home, sitting mutely on opposite seats in the train compartment as they bounced through suburbia, like two lost souls. (82-83)

Although Roger clearly intends to assert that his father and Gabor have nothing to say to one another, his vision of them travelling 'mutely' through suburbia together, sharing the experience of being 'lost souls', suggests that it is suburban London which is unable to hear what they might say, even in their silence, about their experiences in North Africa and Normandy, at the opening of the concentration camps and in Budapest.

'Gabor' exemplifies one of Swift's major thematic concerns: guilt-ridden conflict between the generations, and particularly between fathers and sons. In Swift's universe, children must inevitably reject their parents' interpretations of the world, and feel guilty about doing so. The story explores this theme in a specific historical context, however, and one which is not merely incidental. Roger's difficulty with his father turns on the meaning of the Second World War. He does not believe his father's version of the war, despite what, as an adult, he now recognises as his father's 'quite authentic credentials', because it does not accord with the film version. Mr Everett will not participate in or endorse his son's cinema-inspired war games, and lacks the 'sunburned cragginess or devil-may-care nonchalance' of Richard Todd or Kenneth More; Roger therefore '[suspects] that his real exploits in the war (which I had only heard about vaguely) were lies' (82). Father and son are divided over how to memorialise the war: in the lugubrious self-containment of Roger's father, for whom the modest delights of peace are really 'nonsense' (86), or the 'bellicose games' (84) of the postwar generation. Entangled in these memories of the war are two different models of post-war Englishness, or, specifically, English masculinity: the restrained, suburban 'little man', and the guilty son for whom masculinity is defined by cinema war heroes.

As in the novels upon which this chapter will focus, the treatment of place in 'Gabor' is very significant. Places in Swift's work are the ground of historical memory, sites of contests over how the past will be remembered and commemorated, holders of both what is remembered and what is forgotten. The 'sunny playground' (81) of Roger's suburban childhood is also a space 'of infinite imaginary depths', containing the 'debris of former existences', including a flying-bomb crater now 'filled with old paint cans and discarded prams' where he and Gabor would 'crouch

[...] and pretend we were being blown up; after each grisly death our bodies would be miraculously reconstituted' (84). What Gabor learns from these games are 'English manners', equated quite explicitly with a simplified version of the war as 'a national duel between England and Germany' (82). In the process, he is forced to repress whatever it is—'some sorrow, some memory of which none of us knew' (86)—that, spying on a couple making love one summer afternoon, '[makes] him forget his English' (85).

'Gabor' testifies to a guilty, conflicted attitude on the part of English men of Swift's generation towards the war their fathers fought, a war which, in invisible as well as obvious ways, pervaded the world in which they grew up. It depicts an English suburbia rendered unhomely not only by physical reminders of war but also, less tangibly, by the ways war has shaped the postwar family. In his first two novels, *The Sweet Shop Owner* (1980) and *Shuttlecock* (1981), Swift pursues this theme further, exploring how the forms and structures of postwar English life encrypt frozen memories of war. These novels, I would suggest, exemplify a growing consciousness in the 1970s of the unresolved legacy of the Second World War, and of the decades of 'war-climate' between 1914 and 1945, amongst the postwar generation that was then in its late twenties or thirties and was grappling, as A. S. Byatt has suggested, with 'the after-life of damage and death-dealing' and with the mediation of the memory of the war through the clichés of popular culture.² With *Waterland* (1983), Swift begins his search for a fictional form adequate to effective mourning of the impact of the Second World War in particular on Britain and on ideas of Englishness. But, although *Waterland* wants to move beyond the various

ends of the world it marks, it too is ultimately unable to do so. It is not until *Last Orders* (1996), which I will discuss in Chapter Five, that Swift succeeds in finding a form for this postwar mourning work, moving beyond the melancholic narratives of his earlier career on a specifically, and openly, memorial journey. *Last Orders*, I will argue, connects late-twentieth-century English melancholia to wartime states of mind, but, crucially, attempts to loosen the grip of that melancholia by opening up Englishness to a wider frame of reference: to what is figured in the novel as the ‘one sea’.

My reading of Swift’s fiction, emphasising his interest in postwar English history and in English responses to the twentieth century’s wars, and in particular the Second World War, departs somewhat from the mainstream of Swift criticism. Critical responses to his work have, until recently, been focused on *Waterland* and, unsurprisingly given the way this issue is foregrounded in this novel, have been predominantly concerned with the *representation* of history: taking a lead from Linda Hutcheon’s classification of *Waterland* as an exemplary ‘historiographic metafiction’, they have concentrated on the novels’ interest in historiography rather than in particular histories.³ Following the publication of *Last Orders*, critics have

² ‘Fathers’, in *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2000), pp. 9-35 (p. 25).

³ See Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988). Hutcheon stresses that postmodernism is ‘resolutely historical’ (p. 4), but concentrates in her discussion on the ways that this fiction contests notions of history and reference. ‘Whether it be in fiction like Swift’s *Waterland* or in films like Schell’s *Marlene*’, she writes, ‘it is the process of negotiating the postmodern contradictions that is brought to the fore, not any satisfactorily completed and closed product that results from their resolution’ (p. xi). See also Andrzej Gąsiorek, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After* (London: Arnold, 1995), pp. 149-58, Del Ivan Janik, ‘History and the “Here and Now”’: The Novels of Graham Swift’, *Twentieth-Century Literature: A Scholarly and Critical Journal*, 35.1 (1989), 74-88, Donald P. Kaczvinsky, “‘For One Thing, There Are the Gaps’”: History in Graham Swift’s *Shuttlecock*’, *Critique*, 40.1 (1998), 3-14, George P. Landow, ‘History, His Story, and Stories in Graham Swift’s *Waterland*’, *Studies in the*

become interested in Swift's texts as narratives of mourning, and, to an extent, of a specifically English mourning.⁴ But even this work has tended to pay too little attention to the specific histories narrated in the novels, and to the specific versions of Englishness with which they deal. The emphasis of Swift criticism to date has been on the novels' negotiations of the postmodern condition of historical knowledge, or on postmodern mourning for lost certainties, and not on the novels as *historical* fictions. I do not wish to suggest that the emphasis on Swift's interest in the process of representing history is unwarranted, nor that his novels offer a 'satisfactorily completed and closed' history.⁵ I would argue, however, that the problems of historical knowledge and representation in his novels are situated in specific, and not incidental, historical contexts, and, indeed, that they are historical problems, located in certain kinds of postwar English identity and cultural memory.

Literary Imagination, 23.2 (1990), 197-211, Alison Lee, *Realism and Power: Postmodern British Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 40-46, John Lloyd Marsden, 'After Modernism: Representations of the Past in the Novels of Graham Swift' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Ohio University, 1996; abstract in *Digital Dissertations*, <http://wwwlib.umi.com/dissertations>, AAT 9707702), John Schad, 'The End of the End of History: Graham Swift's *Waterland*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 38.4 (1992), 911-25, Richard Todd, 'Narrative Trickery and Performative Historiography: Fictional Representation of National Identity in Graham Swift, Peter Carey, and Mordecai Richler', in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 305-28, and Ernst van Alphen, 'The Performativity of Histories: Graham Swift's *Waterland* as a Theory of History', in *The Point of Theory: Practices of Cultural Analysis*, ed. by Mieke Bal and Inge E. Boer (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1994), pp. 202-10.

⁴ Critics who have taken an interest in Swift's engagement with Englishness and English history include Raphaël Ingelbein, "'England and Nowhere": Contestations of Englishness in Philip Larkin and Graham Swift', *English*, 48 (1999), 33-48, Adrian Poole, 'Graham Swift and the Mourning After', in *An Introduction to Contemporary Fiction: International Writing in English since 1970*, ed. by Rod Mengham (Oxford: Polity Press, 1999), pp. 150-67, Todd, 'Narrative Trickery', and Wendy Wheeler, 'Sublime to Domestic' and 'Melancholic Modernity and Contemporary Grief: the Novels of Graham Swift', in *Literature and the Contemporary: Fictions and Theories of the Present*, ed. by Roger Luckhurst and Peter Marks (Harlow: Longman, 1999), pp. 63-79.

⁵ Hutcheon, p. xi.

The location of Swift's first novel, *The Sweet Shop Owner*, is the South London of small businessmen and their families: a nation of shopkeepers, indeed.⁶ Willy Chapman has watched forty or so years of English history from behind the counter of his high street newsagent's shop. His life has consisted of days spent in the shop and evenings at home pottering in the garden or doing his books. In the last year, however, his wife Irene has died, and he and their daughter Dorothy, or Dorry, whose relationship with her parents was already tense, have become estranged over the conditions of Irene's will, under which Willy inherited all her money and Dorry got none of it unless by *his* will (i.e., at his death) (184-86). *The Sweet Shop Owner* recounts the last day of Willy's life, a Friday in June 1974. He has written to Dorothy, sending her the money that she believes is rightfully hers, and asking her to come and see him on that day, her birthday. He does not know whether she will come—she has not said one way or the other—but he has planned that if she does, she will find him dead of a heart attack brought on by deliberate over-exertion. Having decided to end his life, he subtly alters his customary Friday routine by adding a parting gift to his employees' wage packets, but does not tell them that this will be his last day. Then at half-past five he closes the shop early, slips out the back door, and goes home to wait for Dorothy, and to die.

The Sweet Shop Owner creates a detailed picture of suburban London from the 1930s to the mid-1970s. Willy, through whose eyes we see this world, seems uninterested in grasping its place in a larger history. Both he and Irene value pattern and stability, and react with fear or incomprehension to what Irene calls 'life', and Willy calls 'history'. Noting the rapidly changing face of the novel's unspecified

⁶ Graham Swift, *The Sweet Shop Owner* (1980; London: Picador, 1997). References will be

High Street in the post-war period, John Lloyd Marsden suggests that it represents in microcosm ‘the broad sweep of historical change’ in the years after 1945, and argues that it is the velocity of this change that makes both Willy and Irene want to escape history.⁷ This reading, the key reference points for which are Habermas and Hayden White, exemplifies the critical tendency already mentioned to look past the specific histories in Swift’s texts to a larger, ‘modern’ or ‘postmodern’, condition. *The Sweet Shop Owner* suggests a more precise historical and cultural location for Willy and Irene’s attitudes to history, however, and it is one that focuses not on the postwar but the interwar years.

Both Willy and Irene offer accounts of their adolescence and young adulthood in the 1920s and 1930s that situate their attitudes to ‘history’ and to ‘life’ as responses to the cultural impact of the First World War. Irene’s account of the reasons why she wants peace and stasis comes at the beginning of Chapter Seven, in a section in which she silently addresses Willy, offering him an explanation of her emotional coldness during their marriage as a form, perhaps, of apology. The key to her narrative is her rape by a family friend, Frank Hancock, on their way back from a drive to Brighton:

He looked at me as if I should have expected this. He pulled up my clothes like a man unwrapping a parcel. ‘All right,’ he said, ‘all right, now’, as if we had both been anticipating. I struggled. The sun was in my face. This was like a performance in which people were really stabbed and wounded. He needed his victory. And afterwards, in the green Riley—it was a careless evening in June with sunlight through trees—his face, watching the road, terrified me. I only knew I wasn’t prepared. Life, life. (52)

given in parentheses.

⁷ Marsden, pp. 60-65.

The language of this passage, with its references to struggle, to a performance, to stabbing and wounding, conveys simultaneously the violence of the attack, Irene's dissociated sense of its unreality, and the implication that they are acting out prescribed gender roles. With 'his lean sportsman's body and his prize-seeker's eyes', Hancock has 'the air of a participant in some competition', and she herself is the prize (52-53). But in Irene's narrative the rape, and her parents' refusal to understand her resistance to going out with Hancock again, merely confirm her sense of her place in the world in which she comes to adulthood. In a society devastated by the Great War, Irene feels that her beauty makes her responsible, in the eyes of both her family and the men in the High Street who escaped death, for the continuation or reassertion of life. 'They wanted to forget history. They wanted new life', and they see her, she feels, as one of the 'Fruits of Peace'. But in a culture so full of death that 'nobody mentioned it', 'life' itself seems fatal: 'life' is a deadly blow, as in the passage cited above, or the 'knocking down' of 'bright painted skittles'.⁸ Furthermore, because her looks do not belong to her, her beauty is itself a deadly kind of performance, splitting her between the image in the mirror and the self that 'cowered inside my looks like a captive', turning her into 'a puppet'. The deathliness of this society is encapsulated in Irene's association of the duty of 'purity' enjoined on her with the 'white war memorial' on which her mother's three brothers' names are engraved (50-51).⁹

⁸ The notion of the trenches as 'skittle alley' is a commonplace of First World War culture; it appears in Swift's work again in *Waterland*, p. 223.

⁹ For accounts of the pervasive culture of commemoration and mourning in the society of the 1920s, see George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), Katie Trumpener, 'Memories Carved in Granite: Great War Memorials and Everyday Life', *PMLA*, 115.5 (2000), 1096-1103, and Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural*

Irene's resistance to her symbolic status is two-fold. She becomes ill, first with asthma and then with a mental breakdown. Consigned by her family to a 'Home' in Surrey—the first of many such institutions in Swift's work, signalling the disruption of 'home' which is one of his key themes—she sits 'marooned in [her] easy chair' until she has 'found [her] balance, struck [her] bargain' with life. She too is 'a skittle', but she will not fall (54). Thereafter her life is dedicated to maintaining this precarious balance by choosing stasis and refusing any deep emotional involvement, by playing a part behind which she can hide. Her second act of resistance is to marry Willy. She chooses him—a choice that is hastily endorsed by her parents, despite his being a good few steps down the social ladder, as a way of getting her off their hands—because he is so unlike her brothers (and, of course, Hancock): she senses in him an instinct simply to endure, and an absence of eagerness, of competitiveness, that answers her own need for peace rather than life or action.

Willy's passivity and fatalism, his belief that 'plans emerged. You stepped into them' (24), do not initially seem to have as specific an origin as Irene's desire for balance: they seem to be simply innate. Despite having won a place at grammar school, he 'lacks talent and initiative' (25), and is 'only good at woodwork and distance running' (45). In particular, he does not 'have the right attitude' for history, writing in an essay that 'Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries because he'd have done so anyway' (190). This lack of aptitude is entirely in keeping with his belief that, whether or not you go to meet it, to seek out 'wild adventure', 'history would come anyway' (44-45). But an explanation of Willy's fatalism starts to emerge when

History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). On contemporary perceptions of

we attend to the precise language used in the novel and to the historical context in which Willy grows up. He remembers thinking that ‘history would come anyway’ as he sat in a history class in 1931, looking out the window:

The history master was speaking as if his words were turning into print. Henry VIII and his wives were like characters in costume. They weren’t real, but they didn’t know it. History fitted them into patterns. He was looking out at the still rows of chestnuts, the asphalt, the footballers on their marked-out pitches. You touch nothing, nothing touches you. All the rest is wild adventure. See how the football players turn their game into grim earnest. Their shouts sound like the screams of fighters. And see them still, unappeased by their fervour, trailing home down the path by the iron railings, restless, greedy for something to happen, for the real thing ... (44-45)

In isolation, this passage could be read as innocent of any reference to war: the ‘fighters’ might not, after all, be soldiers. But as I will demonstrate, *The Sweet Shop Owner* uses the language of war so consistently that it is difficult, in my view, to read these schoolboy footballers as other than future soldiers who a few years later would ‘see action’—‘as if there were no action besides wars’ (56). For these boys and young men, growing up in the shadow of the Great War, and literally of the war memorial in its plot by the school gates, war was ‘the real thing’ that would prove their masculinity; as Willy reflects a few pages later, likening his army barracks to school, the other boys had ‘wanted “action” [...]’. The real thing, the thing itself’, and ‘here suddenly was “History” [...] here suddenly was the real thing’ (59).

Willy himself does not share the other boys’ restless desire for ‘the real thing’. Although the novel suggests he is atypical, his is the mood of a generation that learned a wariness of military rhetoric from the classic narratives of the Great

War which appeared during the 1920s.¹⁰ If the other schoolboys, Irene's brothers and Hancock embody an older form of martial masculinity, with its enthusiasm for 'wild adventure', Willy is "the little man", the suburban husband pottering in his herbaceous borders' and tending his shop which, in accord with the values of the age, sells only useless, ephemeral things. For this, as Alison Light has argued, was a society in which 'the virtues of the private sphere of middle-class life'—specifically 'civilian virtues and pleasures'—acquired 'a new public and national significance'.¹¹

The Sweet Shop Owner anticipates Light's work on the roots of interwar Englishness in a response to the trauma of the Great War, insistently displaying the frozen memories of the war encrypted in suburban family life. War provides metaphors for family conflict and breakdown, but cannot be discussed at the dinner table (140-42): it is the threatening reality, the 'real thing', which must be kept at bay by the 'columns, captions and neat gradations of print' in the newspapers Willy sells (17). Sells but does not read: implicitly, Willy seems to feel, like the 'Youth of 20' interviewed by a Mass Observation worker in September 1938, that there is no point in taking any notice of what is in the papers, because 'What's the good? If they want yer they'll take yer. They don't ask your permission like'.¹² Willy's role as 'the sweet shop owner', moreover, is a mirror-image of the parts adopted by civilian-

¹⁰ Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* (London: Pimlico, 1998), p. 147.

¹¹ Light, p. 8; emphasis mine. Willy, it should be noted, likes to 'potter gently in the garden', and says that 'if [he] hadn't been a shop-keeper [he'd] have been a gardener. Arranging the flower beds was like arranging the sweets in the shop window' (pp. 219 and 221).

¹² Tom Harrison and Charles Madge, *Britain by Mass-Observation*, (1939; London: Cresset, 1986), p. 31.

soldiers in the First and Second World Wars.¹³ His sweet shop owner's clothes are 'camouflage' (99); he surveys his paper-boys 'like a commander his best men' (15); he stands 'like a sentry' at his shop counter (56). This camouflage is protection from the 'real thing'. By wearing it, he thinks, he will remain untouched by the deadly grasp of 'history': 'He would play his part. What was easier? To step inside it like a bubble, to feel it buoy you up over the passing days, so that though you moved and gestured and the grime of loose change came off on your hands, you were really intact. Nothing touches you, you touch nothing.' (44)

Like many other civilian-soldiers, however, Willy finds that 'playing his part' is deadly. When he finally steps out of it on his last evening, it is only to cross over into a uncanny 'museum-world', in which he wanders like a 'ghost' (218-19). Now he sees the tokens of English lower-middle-class suburban taste—'the ticking barometer-clock, [...] the polished cabinets, one for china, one for glass, the green baize on the oval table, the spiralling stem of the standard lamp'—as the record of an historical calamity: the hands of the clock 'might have stopped for ever at [half-past six], like a clock rescued from some catastrophe, recording the exact moment of disaster' (218). Both house and shop are '[memorials] of trifles, useless things' (221): the 'things' that Willy and Irene have shored up against 'life', against the 'real thing'. But by 'minding the store' (59) so diligently, they have turned themselves, too, into memorials to the Great War. As Willy waits for death, he feels a 'metal pain [...] filling his limbs and welding him to the chair': he is becoming a 'cold statue', like the 'bronze soldiers' on the memorial outside the town hall (221-22).

¹³ See Fussell, *Modern Memory*, pp. 191-230, and Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale*, pp. 145-52. Swift refers to this sense of playing an ill-learned part in Willy's military service, too (p. 58).

This reading of the text casts a rather different light on Swift's representation of England than do the comments of Nicholas Tredell after *Last Orders* won the Booker Prize. Tredell alleges that

[Swift's] England is one in which class structures are not challenged; in which feminists, gays and ethnic minorities are almost invisible; and in which images of past, problematic glories (the British Empire, the Industrial Revolution, the Second World War) cast a warm, nostalgic glow over an alien present.¹⁴

Certainly, *The Sweet Shop Owner* contains few references to the social changes that were transforming Britain in the early 1970s. On his walk to his Pond Street shop, Willy notices an 'Asian food shop' (176-77), and graffiti saying 'Russell Bootboys' and 'Judy Freeman fucks coons' (177, 189), and there is one reference to the power cuts of 1973-74 (187). These are only faint shadows of the changes that Tim Lott remembers from growing up in Southall in the 1970s:

There is inflation, decimalization, oil shock, IRA bombs, industrial strife. Mass immigration is changing the face of England [...]. These things are not distant, like the floating silver bubbles of the 1960s. They hector and threaten a whole raft of what once were certainties: civility, stability, money's absolute value; whiteness, and superiority over what are politely referred to as 'our colonial cousins' or 'coloureds'.¹⁵

¹⁴ 'Feelgood Fiction', *Oxford Quarterly*, 1.4/2.1 (Spring/Summer 1997), 37-41 (p. 41). See also Flint, 'Looking Backward?', pp. 40-44, and Nigel Reynolds, 'Book Prize Judge Attacks "Smug" English Novelists', *Daily Telegraph*, 7 May 1997, p. 7. It is possible that some of these critics' discomfort with Swift is due to his interest in the lower middle class: as Rita Felski has observed, this is perhaps the class most consistently reviled by intellectuals, 'blamed for everything from exceedingly bad taste to the rise of Hitler' ('Nothing to Declare: Identity, Shame, and the Lower Middle Class', *PMLA*, 115.1 (2000), 33-45 (p. 34)).

¹⁵ *The Scent of Dried Roses* (London: Penguin, 1997), p. 157.

This does not mean, however, that Swift wishes to deny these changes. As I read it, *The Sweet Shop Owner* is a study of why the England represented by Willy and Irene is barely able to recognise, let alone embrace or understand, change. In their world, change means ‘action’, and ‘action’ is a synonym for battle, for killing or being killed. But the ironic consequence of their attempts to avoid action is that even apparently life-affirming or expansive moments—the purchase of the shop, the birth of their daughter—turn out to be bargains designed to maintain a deadly stillness.

The melancholic denial of the traumas of the Great War that Swift suggests is playing itself out in Willy and Irene’s dedication to ‘minding the store’ expresses itself in the rhythms of the text. Certain key phrases are repeated throughout, the most noteworthy being ‘they were paid’, ‘what you ‘ave don’t belong to you’, ‘war? what war?’, ‘in the end’, and ‘things remain’, all of which point to the process of repression and of ‘converted history’ (217) on which the world of the sweet shop owner is built. The sense of stasis created by this repetition is intensified by the way that the text as a whole arcs towards death, anticipating from its opening words the ‘end’ that Willy is planning, and the way that its individual sections and sub-sections return, again and again, to a ‘peace’ that is nothing more than a disavowal of the impact of war. In Chapter Two, for example, each section deals in some way with Willy’s, or Irene’s, refusal to depart from their protective patterns. The first, fifth and sixth sections show Willy maintaining his ‘impenetrable’ disguise as the sweet shop owner (20), and therefore avoiding being ‘touched’ by either the paper-boys or Mrs Cooper, his assistant of sixteen years. The third and fourth show Irene’s implicit insistence that part of the bargain of ‘giving’ him Dorothy was that she be spared any ‘excitement’ or ‘nonsense’ (17), and her instinctive understanding that his decision, twelve years before, to sell toys in the shop, will not threaten their bargain that

nothing should be ‘useful or permanent’ (18)—or without profit. The ending of the second section, moreover, in which Willy’s eyes scan a newspaper headline announcing that an (unnamed) ‘PEACE BID FAILS’ (17), suggests the connection between the Chapmans’ family conflict and the wider history of which it is a part.

In his final minutes, Willy does seem to recognise the melancholic repetition in which he has been engaged all his life, and to hope that Dorry’s return will ‘dissolve history’ (217), a dissolution he imagines as the destruction of his ‘memorial of trifles’ (221). But he cannot see that, in trying to force Dorothy to recognise and mourn him as her father and to play the role of ‘the good, the loyal daughter’ (178), he is repeating history rather than dissolving it. He waits for Dorry as Irene waited for him in death, and the last words of the text repeat Hancock’s on the June evening long ago when he raped Irene, and Willy’s own when he kicked on to win—or not—the mile race at school: ‘All right. All right—now.’ (52, 198, 222) In these moments, Irene and Willy were explicitly captured or petrified by ‘life’ or ‘history’, and Willy is never more fully conscripted by history, caught up in the compulsion to repeat, than at the seemingly self-chosen moment of his death, when he is simply ‘a powerless skittle towards which was hurtling an invisible ball’ (222).

If *The Sweet Shop Owner* suggests that, by the mid-1970s, the mode of Englishness represented by Willy and Irene Chapman was dying, this does not mean that it is optimistic that the ‘converted history’ (217) contained in Irene’s money will be ‘dissolved’ in the next generation. Dorry, to be sure, rejects her parents’ world. But her desire for ‘loot’ (216) suggests that she too will repeat the past under the illusion that she is leaving it behind; Irene, after all, used this money to revenge herself on, and separate herself from, her own family. If ‘the needle in the barometer [points] to “Change”’ (220), it is not clear that it will be change for the better. In a

sense, Dorry might be exemplary of the generation coming of age in the 1970s that Tim Lott describes as ‘biting the hand that fed them and voting in their millions for an end to soft consensus, slow drift’: the generation that brought Margaret Thatcher to power.¹⁶ But Swift is not a writer who connects his fictional worlds directly to contemporary politics. *The Sweet Shop Owner* does no more than suggest that, if a ‘Little Englishness’ formed in response to two world wars was dying by the 1970s, it was being replaced by a form of Englishness no less shaped by the traumatic, unhomely impact of war.

In identifying the First World War as late-twentieth-century England’s founding trauma however, *The Sweet Shop Owner* obscures both earlier and later history, and to an extent it could be said that it endorses the myth of that war as *the* ‘crack in the looking-glass’, *the* ‘deep unhealing wound’, of Englishness.¹⁷ But arguably, by seeming to pass over the significance of the Second World War, *The Sweet Shop Owner* testifies both to the difficulty of imagining that truly global conflict, and to a certain protective insularity in the British response to it. From his job in the Stores, Willy can find no ‘connection’ between the capes, helmets and side-packs he issues and the ‘action’ for which the endless stream of ‘passers-through’ are destined, the ‘History’ of which he is a part (58-59).¹⁸ After the war, he and the other shopkeepers ‘[resume] their old ploys as if history could be

¹⁶ Lott, p. 173.

¹⁷ Priestley, *Margin Released*, pp. 88 and 139.

¹⁸ Compare the reactions to the Battle of Britain and the Blitz reported by Harrison and Calder. A young woman stands watching the London docks burning, and ‘[tries] to fix the scene in my mind, because one day this will be history, and I shall be one of those who actually saw it’ (Harrison, *Living Through the Blitz*, p. 78). On 1 August 1940, however, the editorial in the Hampstead A.R.P. *Warden’s Bulletin* had commented, more wryly, that ‘it may be a privilege to see history in the making, but we have a feeling that it is being overdone at the present time’ (Calder, *People’s War*, p. 77).

circumvented and the war (what war?) veiled by the allurements of their windows' (98). Nevertheless, the High Street is 'damaged' (98): 'you seemed to walk (but perhaps you always had) through a world in which holes might open, surfaces prove unsolid' (96).¹⁹

Swift's second novel is also an exploration of what lies underneath the surface peace of suburban South London, and of how, to borrow Santner's formulation, 'the legacies—or perhaps more accurately: the ghosts, the revenant objects' of the Second World War 'are transmitted to the second and third generations at the sites of the primal scenes of socialization, that is, within the context of a certain psychopathology of the postwar family'.²⁰ *Shuttlecock* is, almost too obviously, a tale of fathers and sons, of the narrator Prentis's desire to 'step into Dad's shoes', and of his fear of being overtaken, or deposed, by his own sons—particularly by the eldest, Martin.²¹ The novel deals with Prentis's struggle with two 'fathers': Dad, a hero of World War Two and latterly a successful businessman who, two years before the novel opens, suffered a breakdown and retreated into 'a kind of language-coma' (40), and Quinn, the head of the police archive where he works, which keeps the records of 'dead crimes', those which 'because of some factor or other [...] have ceased to be acted upon' (14-15). When the novel opens, Prentis is attempting to find out why his father broke down, and also to find the connection between the apparently disparate pieces of information in a case, C9, assigned to him

¹⁹ Willy thinks that Irene seems to be more comfortable with open war than with apparent peace, because in peacetime 'bright moments' urge us to forget that we 'belong to history' (60).

²⁰ Santner, p. 35.

²¹ *Shuttlecock* (1981; London: Penguin, 1982), pp. 71 and 76. Further references will be given in parentheses.

by Quinn, a task made almost impossible by the fact that one of the relevant files is missing from the shelves. As the novel progresses, however, Prentis comes to realise that case C9 concerns his father, and contains evidence, although not conclusive evidence, that Dad's account of his service as a Special Operations agent in occupied France, in his memoir 'Shuttlecock', is a lie: that when captured and interrogated by the Gestapo, Dad broke down and betrayed four of his fellow-agents, and instead of escaping heroically, was allowed to go free.²² In both of his investigations, however, Prentis is confronted with texts that will not, or cannot, reveal the truth of the events to which they refer, and when Quinn finally offers him the chance to read the missing file from C9 that might—or might not—confirm his suspicions, he chooses to remain in ignorance.

Prentis's search amongst the textual remnants of the past for his father's truth, and his feeling that this holds the key to his own present predicament, signal *Shuttlecock's* affinities with the popular 1980s and 90s genre, the family or parental memoir. In her study of memory, narrative and identity in contemporary writing, Nicola King argues that what characterises such texts—for example, Carolyn Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman* and Ronald Fraser's *In Search of a Past*—is their subjects' 'complex process of negotiation—of resistance, identification or over-identification, hostility or idealisation—with parental figures who may be unknown, mysterious, absent or all-too-present', and, in the more self-conscious of them, an awareness of the unreliability of memory and of representations of the past.²³ Many of these texts enact a working-through of

²² Following Kaczvinsky, I will distinguish father's and son's narratives by putting Prentis Senior's 'Shuttlecock' in quotation marks.

²³ King, pp. 6-7.

individual and family memory, an acceptance both of what happened in the past, and of the impossibility of truly knowing what that was, and the majority of critics see such a working-through in Prentis's narrative. His choice to stop pursuing his father and to accept uncertainty has been read as marking the resolution of his Oedipal conflict and the advent of a reciprocal emotional relationship with his wife and sons, and as an acknowledgement of the futility of any search for a grand narrative.²⁴

In reading *Shuttlecock* as allegorising a process of postmodern mourning for lost epistemological certainty, or as dramatising the resolution of an Oedipal conflict, however, critics have tended to overlook the specific history out of which Prentis's dilemma grows.²⁵ Indeed, in one of the few readings that explicitly connects Prentis's predicament with his father's status as a war hero, Adrian Poole nonetheless asserts that, compared to the rest of Swift's work, the confrontation in *Shuttlecock* with 'what it means to be a father and son' has 'little grounding in the past, apart from the hamster [Prentis] once tormented, and his father's memoir'.²⁶ I would argue, however, that far from having 'little grounding in the past', Prentis's narrative is haunted not only by the impossible ideal of masculinity that his father, the war hero, represents, but also by the disturbing memories that have been excluded from the dominant national myths of the war and which, Prentis increasingly comes to believe, are encoded in the pages of his father's war narrative.

Prentis's investigation of his father's 'good war', and of 'a certain psychopathology of the postwar family', enacts the re-examination of the war and its legacy that took hold in the 1970s, as the postwar 'baby boom' generation came to

²⁴ Janik, p. 82, Marsden, pp. 84-106, Wheeler, 'Sublime to Domestic', pp. 118-23.

²⁵ A recent exception is A. S. Byatt's discussion of *Shuttlecock* in 'Fathers', pp. 25-27.

adulthood and the 1945 consensus was perceived to be unravelling. And Swift is careful to situate Prentis's father's memoir in the history of the Second World War's remembrance. It is, Prentis tells us, an example of a 'whole spate of war books and war films' that appeared in the early and mid-1950s, 'when the actual after-effects of the war were fading' (49-50).²⁷ 'Shuttlecock: The Story of a Secret Agent' is an account of his 'daring operations in France', during which he would 'liaise with resistance fighters, keep watch on German installations and help to blow them up', and which 'reached their height in the intense period between D-day and the Allied invasion of Germany'. It reaches its climax with Prentis Senior's capture by the Gestapo, and his escape, after eight days of interrogation, from the Château Martine (49). Dad's war service, which becomes well-known with the publication of his memoir, is the basis for his postwar business and social success, and also for Prentis's perception of his father's masculinity: recalling caddying for his father at the golf club as a ten-year-old, he observes that Dad and his friends 'all had the confident, weathered looks of men who had had, as they used to say then, "good wars" and become well set-up afterwards' (47).

As a narrative of adventure, and more particularly of escape, 'Shuttlecock' is part of the process by which Britain's war was shaped into 'a selective, legible and usable past'.²⁸ Identifying POW escape narratives as 'one of the leading genres of [British] post-war narrative about 1939-45', Rawlinson suggests that they both reflected and reinforced the insularity of the British response to the war already noted

²⁶ Poole, p. 155.

²⁷ Prentis Senior's memoir appeared when Prentis, who was born in August 1945, was about eleven.

²⁸ Rawlinson, p. 186.

in *The Sweet Shop Owner*. This insularity, he argues, allowed Colditz to take the place of Auschwitz, for some decades after 1945 at least, as the emblem of the war in Europe for the British, despite the fact that, as Henry Chancellor has put it, ‘the prisoners at Colditz were fighting their own private battle against a scrupulous and correct enemy, which had little to do with the events in Europe, and as the war went on, less and less to do with Nazi Germany’.²⁹ In Primo Levi’s description of the ‘Grey Zone’ of the concentration camps, the inmate ‘felt overwhelmed by an enormous edifice of violence and menace but could not form for himself a representation of it’—or, for that matter, formulate a plan of escape—‘because his eyes were fastened to the ground by every single minute’s needs’.³⁰ But in postwar British escape stories, Rawlinson suggests, escape is a moral imperative, an affirmation of the desirability of reconnecting with the British war effort, and an opportunity for individual ‘self-discovery and development’. These narratives represent, therefore, a turning away from the realities of the concentration camps, from those of the European war in general, and from the attempts at a more critical appraisal of Britain’s war and of its imaginative insularity found in the prison fictions of former POWs such as Robert Kee and Michael Burn.³¹

It should be emphasised, of course, that Prentis Senior is not an officer POW, but a spy, and his capture would therefore have meant execution, death under torture,

²⁹ Rawlinson, pp. 203 and 172-73, Henry Chancellor, *Colditz: The Definitive History* (London: Hodder and Stoughton and Channel 4 Television, 2001), pp. 1-2. The longevity of this memory of the war is indicated by the promotion for a recent BBC documentary on British POW experience (*The War Behind the Wire*, BBC2, 10 and 17 November 2000), which referred to Colditz as ‘the most notorious symbol of wartime oppression’.

³⁰ Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. by Raymond Rosenthal (London: Abacus, 1989), p. 6.

³¹ Rawlinson, pp. 180-98.

or consignment to a concentration camp. His escape attempt is driven by a simple desire to survive, not by the moral imperatives of postwar escape stories. But his narrative—at least as reported by Prentis—enacts the movement away from an encounter with occupied Europe that can be seen in British POW texts after the war: it is both literally and in this wider cultural sense an escape story. As Prentis himself observes, for the most part his father presents a tough, unsentimental, invulnerable persona, eschewing both ‘philosophizing’ about civilisation and war, and ‘nostalgia’ (60, 157). This persona serves to maintain a distance between himself and the local people: he does not hesitate when deciding to dispatch the German sentry guarding the factory in Caen, even though he expects—rightly, as it turns out—that this will lead to reprisals against the ‘innocent factory workers’ (62). When he does lapse into philosophising, he comes no closer to a recognition of the war’s human cost. Recording the Germans’ destruction of a ‘small wood of no great distinction’ outside Ligny, in which five members of the Maquis, two of whom he knew, were killed, he writes:

I felt the loss of that wood like few human losses. The thing that most embodies the evil of war, is not, it seems to me, its human violence (for humans cause wars), but its wilful disregard for nature. ... (107-08)³²

After briefly experiencing torture, and the ‘demoralizing’ nakedness and animality forced on the prisoners in the Château (145), Prentis Senior escapes into the woods and is discovered by the advancing American Seventh Army, picked up by

³² There are parallels here with British, or perhaps more properly English, wartime tendencies to represent the war as being fought to protect the countryside and its wild inhabitants, and to focus on the threat and damage to buildings rather than people: see

‘a lawyer’s son from Connecticut, with impeccable politeness and a truck-load of canned meat’ (105). This ‘last, succinct scene’ of his narrative (105) conforms to the fable of the war’s ending described, with terrible irony, by Levi: ‘After the disease, health returns; to deliver us from imprisonment “our boys” arrive just in time, the liberators, with waving flags; the soldier returns and again finds his family and peace.’³³ The brutal German retreat from France in the summer and autumn of 1944, with its ‘burning villages, [...] corpses lining the streets and dangling from trees, [...] atrocities of all kinds’ are, for Prentis Senior, a ‘thankfully, brief-lived phase’ of the war (106), and he returns, apparently, to ‘his family and peace’. It is possible, however, that his breakdown is, at least in part, a return of his wartime experiences—and whatever the truth of this speculation, his war has come home to England in another form: Prentis’s own psychopathology, the economy of power and secrecy which structures his relation to the world.

Prentis’s way of reading the world represents an unhomely crossing-over of a state of mind appropriate to wartime Europe into peacetime London, as the following passage, in which he observes his fellow-passengers on the Tube, illustrates:

They look at each other beadily and inquisitively, [...] as if everybody is trying to search out everybody else’s story, everybody else’s secret, and the assumption is that this secret will always be a weakness; it must be something unpleasant and shameful which will make it possible for its owner to be humiliated and degraded. [...] Everyone is trying to strip everyone else bare, and everyone, at the same time, is trying not to be stripped bare himself. Oh yes, I know, in one sense, this is almost literally true. Half the men in the carriage are mentally removing the clothes of the girls who are strap-hanging near the doors. They are titillated by their stretched arms, by the little ovals of sweat which appear at the armpits on

Wright, *On Living in an Old Country*, pp. 83-84, and *Journey Through Ruins*, p. 75, and Rawlinson, pp. 84-87.

³³ Levi, p. 52.

their blouses. But, beyond this, something deeper, something darker, is going on. Am I right? (25-26)

Prentis's alertness to people's secret weaknesses is writ large here, as is his habit of defending himself from being (metaphorically) 'stripped bare' through sexual violence and fantasy, the girls' 'stretched arms' suggesting the positions into which he arranges Marian during sex. It is significant, too, that this sense of 'something deeper, something darker' going on should be identified with the Underground, for this space is at once familiar, almost domestic, and an example of *Shuttlecock's* architecture of encryption and secrets. Underground locations are where the 'darker' reality that Prentis sees beneath the ordinary, daylight world makes itself manifest. His father's secret seems to be hidden in his account of his time in the cellars of the Château, and Prentis himself works in 'a cavernous room half below and half above pavement level', a 'crypt' (16).

The vehicle for the transmission of this pathology in the novel is the father's text, but it could equally have been the fiction of wartime London which in some ways *Shuttlecock* echoes.³⁴ Both Elizabeth Bowen and Graham Greene figure in the architecture and landscapes of the city at war anxieties about the boundaries between 'home' and enemy territory, and about the permeability of the private self and history, that resurface in *Shuttlecock*. For these writers, the question of how one should 'read' the city is inseparable from how one should understand the war. Stella Rodney, newly returned from her visit to Holme Dene with a consciousness of the appalling rootlessness of middle-class England, feels that

³⁴ Byatt observes that Prentis's 'office is reminiscent of those inhabited by the heroes of le Carré and Deighton, crossed with a Kafkaesque aimlessness' (p. 26). It is Swift's debts to wartime writing in his representation of London, however, that interest me here.

occupied Europe [is] occupying London—suspicious listening, surreptitious movement, and leaden hearts. The weather-quarter tonight was the conquered lands. The physical nearness of the Enemy—how few were the miles between the capital and the coast, between coast and coast!—became palpable. (126)

Ruined London is an appropriate habitat for Bowen's rootless characters, and for Greene, too, this London felt not only familiar, but inevitable. As he wrote in October 1940, 'some beast in [us] has prepared each man for this life':

Violence comes to us more easily because it was so long expected—not only by the political sense but by the moral sense. The world we live in could not have ended any other way. [...]

One feels at home in London [...] or any of the bombed cities—because life here is what it ought to be. If a cracked cup is put in boiling water it breaks, and an old dog-toothed civilization is breaking now.³⁵

Arthur Rowe, the protagonist of *The Ministry of Fear* (1943), is very much a denizen of this 'old dog-toothed' city. For him the war brings no promise of regeneration, certainly no sense of camaraderie. Having served time before the war for killing his wife—a mercy killing, although he is unsure whether he killed her to save *her* from suffering, or to save himself—Rowe is unwanted by both the army and civil defence. He has no part in the People's War, and London's destruction, and the destruction of the past associated with it, promise him an amnesiac freedom.³⁶ Rowe accidentally becomes entangled with fifth columnists attempting to smuggle crucial film out of Britain, and, forced to hide out in the Tube, he sees this 'dim lurid underground

³⁵ Greene, 'At Home', in Sherry, p. 52.

³⁶ Graham Greene, *The Ministry of Fear* (1943; London: Heinemann and Bodley Head, 1973), pp. 16-17. Further references will be given in parentheses. Swift may have taken his protagonist's name from that of Greene's spy-catcher, Prentice.

place' as emblematic of a vicious and seedy world (67). There is no other reality: as a policeman tells him in a dream, 'this [the Underground] is home. There isn't anywhere else at all' (71). Soon after his stay in the Underground, Rowe is nearly killed by a bomb, loses his memory, and is incarcerated, by the fifth columnists, in a mock asylum. The remainder of the novel sees him struggling to remember who he is, and equally 'to find a style of perception adequate to the demands of his fractured present'.³⁷ Having lost all his adult memories, he cannot assimilate what he reads in the newspapers, or align it with his adolescent moral framework, learned from boys' adventure romance. Greene's treatment of this disjunction is ambivalent. On the one hand, Rowe's emulation of an adventure hero enables him to escape from the asylum, and provides a yardstick against which to measure the 'cruelty and meaninglessness' of 'this whole business of war and hate' (188). On the other hand, if heroism depends on amnesia, on absencing oneself from history—on an escape from the Underground—it is not only unsustainable, but of questionable moral value. Indeed, it may be that heroism, in the guise of 'pity', is responsible for making the world what it is—a point to which I shall return later.

Like *The Heat of the Day* and *The Ministry of Fear*, *Shuttlecock* employs spatial oppositions to express the appeal of escape and amnesia. The world of underground London is contrasted with pastoral spaces in which the characters can either draw strength from a nature indifferent to human history, or find refuge in amnesia. Dr Forester's rural 'asylum' in *The Ministry of Fear*, where Rowe lives as the history-less Digby ('the happy man' in Greene's schema), has its counterpart in

³⁷ Rowland Smith, 'A People's War in Greenland: Heroic Virtue and Communal Effort in the Wartime Tales', in *Graham Greene: A Revaluation*, ed. by Jeffrey Meyers (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 104-30 (p. 115).

the mental hospital, 'like an old red-brick country house of another age, set amidst trees', to which Prentis's father has retreated (44).³⁸ To know oneself as part of history, in these novels, is to be aware of being tainted, of being part of the world of Greene's Underground sleepers, or of Bowen's nightmare subterranean bar peopled with grotesques, not one of whom 'did not betray,' she writes, 'by one or another glaring peculiarity, the fact of being human', in which every last shadow '[has] been ferreted out and killed' (225). There is an awful inevitability about the war for Bowen and for Greene, and Prentis too anticipates a disaster from which only nature seems to offer a refuge. Following the passage quoted above, Prentis talks about his fear, 'now and then, when I travel on the Tube, [...] that something terrible and inevitable is going to happen':

All those bodies crammed together, all those furtive faces searching each other. [...] When I get out at Clapham South, up into the air, past the newsstand and the florist's, I breathe a deep breath of relief. Opposite the station is the common—criss-crossed and encircled by incessant chains of ill-tempered traffic—but it is the common. It's spring. There are daffodils nodding near the bowling-green [...]; the sticky-buds are opening on the chestnuts, and there are catkins on the silver birches. There is no doubt what commons are for. They are proof that, huddled as we are in cities, we couldn't live without trees and grass, at the expense of no matter what urban convenience. (26)

The Tube, symbol of Londoners' good-humoured and steadfast resistance to Hitler in wartime propaganda and postwar memory, is here transformed into a site of 'suspicion and menace', where 'something terrible and inevitable', something 'humiliating and degrading' might well happen—not for the first time, but as uncanny repetition (25-26).

³⁸ The four sections of *The Ministry of Fear* are entitled 'The Unhappy Man', 'The Happy Man', 'Bits and Pieces', and 'The Whole Man'.

Prentis abandons his attempt to discover the truth about his father when he is called to meet his boss Quinn, outside working hours, at his basement flat ‘somewhere in the leafy region between Richmond Park and Richmond proper’—the kind of neighbourhood Prentis dislikes because he envies the wealth that enables these houses to pretend they are part of nature when in fact, ‘with their burglar-alarms and brick walls capped with broken glass’, they ‘smack [...] of [urban, human] distrust, of secrecy’ (171). At Quinn’s he is offered the truth—or something closer to it—about his father, in the shape of the missing documents from C9, although not before he has heard about Quinn’s own less-than-perfect World War Two service record. During his first action in Normandy in 1944, Quinn fled from German fire, and in escaping he trod on the face of a wounded man (191-92). Quinn offers Prentis the idea that weakness, flawed masculinity, might not be so shameful after all, and Prentis decides to stop pursuing his father—he has earlier likened his pursuit of the truth to that of his father’s Gestapo tormentors (146)—and to remain ‘in the dark’ (199). Paradoxically, his choice to *remain* in the dark allows Prentis to escape from the dark: from his paranoid, subterranean London into airy, outdoor space. He learns he is to be promoted and so to take Quinn’s place in the above-ground office with a view of a cherry tree, and on his way home from Quinn’s, he stops at a pub by Wimbledon Common, orders a large gin and tonic and takes it outside to drink:

People were sitting at wooden tables, chatting and laughing. It seemed I’d emerged out of some confinement. Perhaps the people were happy because of the warm summer twilight wrapping round them and making the world grow soft and dim. Perhaps it was all a case of the pathetic fallacy. Then I thought: these people are happy because of what they don’t know. (203)

As I have already noted, Prentis's choice has been interpreted as positive by most critics, who see it as signalling the resolution of his Oedipal complex, or his acceptance of epistemological uncertainty—that is, they read his resolute 'I don't know' (in reference to his father's guilt) as an admission that he *doesn't* know rather than a choice *not* to know (200).³⁹ This is certainly the kind of light in which Prentis wants us to see it, but as Donald P. Kaczvinsky has pointed out, *Shuttlecock's* apparent resolution is problematic. At the end of his narrative Prentis has not actually given up his desire for power over others, but has merely 'learned how to achieve [it]', at work and at home, 'with a more subtle technique than physical force'.⁴⁰ Taking over from Quinn on his retirement, which happens only three months or so after their secret meeting, Prentis eschews Quinn's military 'barking of full-blown orders', preferring to ask his subordinates if they can 'spare a moment', but he knows that his 'words are a command—and a provocation—nonetheless'

³⁹ See, for example, Marsden, and Wheeler, 'Sublime to Domestic', pp. 118-23.

⁴⁰ Kaczvinsky, p. 12. Kaczvinsky points out that 'gaps' much like those that trouble Prentis in Dad's account of the days in the Château can be found in his own narrative, notably in his glossing-over of crucial details of his conversations with Quinn, and particularly those relating to his promotion. On this basis, Kaczvinsky speculates that 'perhaps Quinn promoted Prentis not because he saw a lot of himself in his underling', and felt confident that he would carry on his work, 'but because Prentis knew or discovered Quinn's cowardice and dereliction of duty [in Normandy] and threatened to expose Quinn to the authorities. In that scenario, Prentis may be the blackmailing X and Quinn the cowardly Y' of Case C9 (p. 8). Kaczvinsky offers as further evidence for the blackmail hypothesis the fact that 'now Quinn, like Dad, is silent; and Prentis's association with Quinn is similar to one between a blackmailer who has been paid off and his victim. "I haven't seen or heard of Quinn since. No phone calls or invitations. No chance, passing visits back to his old office. I *imagine* that is how he wishes it to be. We will cease to associate, like old *accomplices* who have done the deed and gone to ground. Our mutual silence will be as constant as Dad's'" (p. 8; emphasis Kaczvinsky's). The suggestion that Prentis might blackmail Quinn about his behaviour during World War Two seems far-fetched; it is much more likely that Prentis would blackmail Quinn about his practices at work. But it is true that Prentis himself raises the possibility that, had he known all along what he discovers when he visits Quinn's house, he 'might have blackmailed' him (185), and mentions that there has been some speculation that his promotion was the result of 'secret machination'

(208). He also retains the power of the head of the household, even if he exercises it benignly, and suspects that both Marian and his older son Martin know that underneath it he is weak. Above all, he now has the power to reveal, withhold, or destroy information in the files at work—to write history—as he sees fit. This is not a trivial power, for his place of work, as Quinn observes, ‘isn’t just an office’: like Greene’s Ministry of Fear, ‘it spreads everywhere’ (175).⁴¹

By choosing not to destroy his fathers, by agreeing to keep their secrets, Prentis is able to assume the place of the father both at work and at home. He justifies his concealment of what are, he insists, ‘dead crimes’, as the price of others’ ‘comfort’, and insists that his wife and sons, thankful that he is no longer ‘acting the tyrant’ with them, are content not to know whether someone—one of his underlings at work, for example—is being tormented in their stead (209-10). He has ‘reproduced [the] symptoms of a year ago’ in his former colleague Eric (209), and turned his family into ‘shrewd’ (215) collaborators in a patriarchal regime founded on the decidedly masculine narrative of the ‘good war’.

Prentis’s new regime is celebrated with an escape from London, a day trip to Camber Sands. This episode is generally read as evidence of a benign forgetting, of Prentis’s letting go of his obsession with his father’s memoir and his reconciliation with his wife and sons: he accompanies his smaller, less confident son Peter to paddle at the water’s edge, he plays cricket with the boys, and he and Marian make

(208); are these disclosures, like the greater vulnerability his father displays when narrating his escape story, a way of concealing the truth on the surface of the tale?

⁴¹ Compare Rowe’s reflections that he ‘had joined [the] permanent staff’ of the Ministry of Fear: ‘it wasn’t the small Ministry to which Johns [an assistant to Dr Forester] had referred, with limited aims like winning a war or changing a constitution. It was a Ministry as large as life to which all who loved belonged. If one loved one feared’ (p. 258).

love, now without ‘pointless sophistication’, in the dunes (219). But Camber Sands is not just any beach. Prentis chooses it for complex memorial reasons, for its ‘old savours of love and war’ (217): he hopes, in going there, to reconnect not only with the early years of his marriage, but with the years of his childhood, before he became estranged from his father. Then, in the late forties and early fifties, he was ‘attracted’ by ‘the relics of the war that still littered the region’:

All this was scenery from that awesome drama in which Dad had only recently been an actor [...]. Looking out at the grey, flat English Channel, which in that part of the coast retreats to a sullen distance at low tide, I would have a vision of the war as a simple, romantic affair of opposing powers. I would think of watchers on the shore with telescopes; of the dim line of the horizon hiding on its further side massing, unknown forces. [...] The tide would come in, slick, shallow and frothy—and the incoming tide, as every child knows, is an enemy invader. (216)

His visit to Camber Sands, then, is an attempt to recapture this pre-lapsarian vision, to escape history and the cryptic city, where the ‘enemy invaders’ are already within. Asked by Peter what the ‘rusty metal things’ on the beach are, Prentis dismisses them as just ‘something left over from the war’, which makes him ‘[think], almost for the first time, that day, of his own Dad’, but in the next moment, his father and the war are ‘suddenly and literally washed away’ by icy water licking over his foot (219). The passage quoted above repudiates Bowen’s vision of ‘occupied Europe [...] occupying London’, of the ‘physical nearness of the Enemy’, just as Prentis has repudiated Bowen’s and Greene’s scrutiny of the discourse of war, advising his readers that ‘perhaps it is best not to probe too deeply into those invisible regions’ between the lines of a text:

Once you have read [this book], it may be better not to peer too hard beneath the surface of what it says—or (who knows if you may not be one

of those happily left in peace of mind by my 'work' at the department?)
 what it doesn't say. (214)

Better for whom?, we might ask. *Shuttlecock* is sympathetic to Prentis's decision—what is the point, after all, of pursuing an elderly man who, as Quinn argues, may only have done 'what any ordinary, natural human being would have done' in his circumstances: tried to '[save] his own skin' (190). But Swift is also concerned about whose interests are served by Prentis's 'humane' decision to preserve what we might well call 'the name of the father'. And in its suspicions *Shuttlecock* echoes, and extends into the realm of cultural memory, Greene's suspicion of Rowe's pity in *The Ministry of Fear*.

As Damon DeCoste has argued in a recent article, far from being the opposite of the 'pitiless violence of war', or of the boys' adventure ethos, as many critics have taken it to be, Rowe's pity is 'one of the cardinal virtues of the hero of the adventure tale'.⁴² At its heart is the belief that Rowe is uniquely equipped to determine, and act in, the best interests of others, even if this means killing them, or killing *with* them and risking damnation (150). This belief is distinguishable only in degree from the idealism of Dr Forester, who runs the clinic where Rowe is interned, and approves of the Nazis' elimination of 'old people and incurables' (212), or even from the nihilism of the Nazi spy, Willi Hilfe, which 'reveals the violence of such an imposition of will shorn even of pity's respectability'.⁴³ Greene suggests, that is, that this arrogant pity has spawned not only Rowe's murder of his wife, but the war's

⁴² Damon Marcel DeCoste, 'Modernism's Shell-Shocked History: Amnesia, Repetition, and the War in Graham Greene's *The Ministry of Fear*', *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 45.4 (1999), 428-51 (p. 440).

⁴³ DeCoste, p. 443.

large-scale violence: just as ‘courage smashes a cathedral, [and] endurance lets a city starve, pity kills ... we are trapped and betrayed by our virtues’ (79). In the place of this atrocious—and atrocity-producing—pity, Greene affirms ‘fallibility. Doubts’.⁴⁴ But *Shuttlecock* is sceptical even of fallibility and doubt, asking whether, in Prentis’s case, the choice to say ‘I don’t know’ is not pity in yet another disguise, if it carries with it the will to determine what others shall and shall not know too, for their own ‘comfort’.

Swift is concerned with the ethics of forgetting so-called ‘dead crimes’ on the cultural level as well as the familial. There are signs, moreover, of the ongoing transmission of an unhomely history, and of wartime psychological structures, during Prentis’s account of the visit to Camber Sands. Martin and Peter run off across the sand and are transformed into ‘two naked, fleeing creatures’—echoing their grandfather’s account of his flight from the Gestapo (218). They play cricket, and Martin turns out to be a ‘murderous’ fast bowler, surely not an innocent choice of adjective in this text of Oedipal conflicts and dead crimes (219). Martin seems to have inherited his grandfather’s apparent ‘Bionic Man’ confidence (211), but in Peter, Prentis sees a younger version of himself: the boy already has his ‘harassed, irresolute look’, and the ‘hard knot [...] between the brows, which bespeaks a kind of cruelty’: a cruelty born of the desire to resolve ‘irresolution’ (218-19).

In *Shuttlecock*, then, Swift gives two answers to Stella Rodney’s questions about what must be remembered about the war, and what forgotten in order to live. The novel appears to endorse a benign forgetting, a healing dissolution of the war’s legacies. But there is also scepticism about whether that forgetting might not be, as

⁴⁴ Greene in DeCoste, p. 445.

The Sweet Shop Owner also suggests, a melancholic denial that anything was ever invested in patriotism or heroic masculinity, or worse, a covert way of protecting the name of the father. The family, which as we shall see is the heart of Burke's domestic Englishness, is troubled by—in *Shuttlecock*, perhaps even founded upon—a violence that encrypts the legacies of forgotten wars. Beneath the surface of *Shuttlecock*'s contemporary suburban pastoral lies a London in darkness, in ruins.

In Swift's third novel, *Waterland*, his questioning of the Burkean formulation of Englishness becomes more explicit still, as does his attempt to express in spatial terms the presence of the 'wide world' within an Englishness constructed on its exclusion. In the Fens, Swift figures the many histories through which his narrator, Tom Crick, attempts to come to terms with the end of history, but *Waterland* has a particular emphasis, as I shall show, on British cultural memories and literary representations of World War Two. *Waterland* is an attempt to mourn the end of history and of a certain narrative of the English nation, and to give the loss of this domestic, insular Englishness a positive inflection, replacing 'phlegm' and 'inhibition' with a less parochial engagement with the 'wide world' and the 'Here and Now'.⁴⁵ How far the novel succeeds in doing so, however, is a question to which I will return at the end of this chapter.

My reading of *Waterland* is not without its difficulties. It attempts to tease out of the novel's metafictional gambits, its competing allegories, its many small stories, an engagement with a specific construction of Englishness in a specific historical context. *Waterland* is, however, the most strongly historiographical of Swift's novels, and a specific cultural history—as opposed to an expression of a

⁴⁵ See Graham Swift, 'Throwing Off Our Inhibitions', *The Times*, 5 March 1988, p. 20.

universal, postmodern, failure of history as grand narrative, for example—is accordingly more difficult to locate in this text than in *The Sweet Shop Owner* and *Shuttlecock*, or, for that matter, *Last Orders*.

In *Waterland*'s present, 1980, Tom Crick, a history teacher in his fifties, has been overtaken by personal catastrophe. In the grip of madness, or religious mania, his wife Mary has stolen a baby, and been committed to a psychiatric hospital. This incident, and Tom's recent digressions from the syllabus to tell stories of his childhood and the Fens, have given the headmaster of the school at which he teaches the opportunity to press him into early retirement, as a cover for cost-cutting measures that will see the amalgamation of History with General Studies—the 'end' of History. All this takes place under the threat of another end of history: the 'end of the world' brought about by nuclear war (269). Facing these crises, Tom begins telling stories to himself: stories of the Fens, of his family history, and of his own adolescence in 1940-45, particularly of the summer of 1943, which saw an abortion that left the sixteen-year-old Mary unable to have another child; the murder, by his brother Dick, of his friend Freddie Parr; and Dick's mysterious suicide or disappearance. Just as he plays a 'plaintive do-you-remember game' (330) to try to recall Mary from the traumatic 'midst of events [...] which haven't ceased' (329), he tells himself stories when he is alone in the house at night. This story-telling is explicitly a work of consolation and of mourning. Stories, Tom tells us, console us when the world seems to have ended not simply because they distract us from the dark, but because they are our way of beginning again, through the laborious process of translation of 'happening' into 'the telling of it', into 'the safe, sane realm of hindsight' (329), replacing 'empty space' with 'the comforting marker-buoys and trail-signs of stories' (63).

I am not the first to argue that Swift has written a mourning text for the times. Wendy Wheeler has analysed Swift's work as mourning the loss, in modernity, of 'religious and traditional narratives of man's meaning and place in the cosmos', and Adrian Poole has written of the many 'good reasons for grief' in his work, 'with bereavements, abortions, suicides, wars, wounds, violence and madness'.⁴⁶ I would suggest, however, that it is possible to be more specific about what *Waterland* is mourning: to elucidate in what sense the Second World War is, as Poole puts it, 'the last "end of the world" the English have known'.⁴⁷ Mary's madness, as I will show, is the uncanny return of events that she and Tom have buried for nearly forty years beneath 'the flat and uniform terrain' of their marriage (127). It opens the England of the novel's present to the events of 1940-43, to the destabilising power of the uncanny 'something' that 'wants to go back' (17).

That 'something', of course, is figured most prominently in the Fens, an unstable place, a place of too much reality and not enough, where the waters of chaos, 'Nothing' (13) or the 'Here and Now' (51), are always ready to return and overwhelm human efforts to create order. This chaotic sublimity is (un)grounded in the watery soil of the Fens.⁴⁸ 'For what is water,' asks Tom,

⁴⁶ 'Melancholic Modernity', p. 64, Poole, p. 150.

⁴⁷ Poole, pp. 157-58.

⁴⁸ For discussions of Swift's use of the Fens, see Pamela Cooper, 'Imperial Topographies: The Spaces of History in *Waterland*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 42.2 (1996), 371-96, and Paul Smethurst, *The Postmodern Chronotope: Reading Space and Time in Contemporary Fiction* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), pp. 145-72. Swift's reasons for setting the novel in the Fens are obscure. He has suggested that it might have had to do with their flatness being a perfect stage for his story ('Throwing Off Our Inhibitions'), but intriguingly, Alun Howkins records that the stereotypical fen-man in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the "'fen-tiger", the hard working, hard drinking and hard fighting man, who was beholden to no one and quite distinct from the tied and hired farm labourers of west Norfolk' (*Reshaping Rural England: A Social History 1850-1925* (London: HarperCollinsAcademic, 1991), p. 32). There are many different regional Englishmen (and

which seeks to make all things level, which has no taste or colour of its own, but a liquid form of Nothing? And what are the Fens, which so imitate in their levelness the natural disposition of water, but a landscape which, of all landscapes, most approximates to Nothing? (13)

The Fens are not just the Fens, however: they are also an exemplary English place. They are the ‘sink of England’ (15), forming out of silt from the Great Ouse, which flows from ‘the heart of England’ (146) into the Wash, ‘that gaping wound in the backbone of Britain’ (271). They point, as these phrases suggest, to something—or Nothing—in England itself. Thus, the Fens, and England, are in *Waterland* the site of uncanny repetitions and returns, of ‘melancholia and self-murder [...] heavy drinking, madness and sudden acts of violence’ (17). Identifying where the unhomely energy that drives this melancholia comes from—the nature of Britain’s or England’s ‘gaping wound’—is central to understanding *Waterland*’s engagement with history.

As Raphaël Ingelbein has observed, Swift’s treatment of the Fens is an explicit riposte to Burke’s emphasis on the familial, the local and the traditional in his construction of Englishness.⁴⁹ In the *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke envisages the English nation as a family, and the English constitution as a form of ‘family settlement’ based on ‘natural’ feeling rather than ‘speculation’ or ‘invention’. This constitution, he argues, has

given to our frame of polity the image of a relation in blood; binding up the constitution of our country with our dearest domestic ties; adopting our

women), and perhaps Swift’s choice of the Fens for his anatomy of Englishness and violence was more appropriate than he knew.

⁴⁹ Ingelbein, p. 45.

fundamental laws into the bosom of our family affections; keeping inseparable, and cherishing with the warmth of all their combined and mutually reflected charities, our state, our hearths, our sepulchres, and our altars.⁵⁰

What is more, familial and local loyalties are for Burke the basis of an already militarised national identification: it is from love of ‘the little platoon we belong to in society’ that ‘we proceed towards a love to our country and to mankind’.⁵¹ This vision is accompanied by a confident sense of inheritance and continuity between the generations: in Burke’s famous formulation, society is a pact between ‘those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born’.⁵²

Tom Crick’s own reflections on the French Revolution—the subject of the lessons he is supposed to be giving his class—certainly point us to Burke. Like Burke, Tom emphasises the ‘fear and terror’ (141) that this revolution was to bring in its wake, and his pupil Price shares a surname with Burke’s interlocutor in the English debate about the Revolution.⁵³ But whereas for Burke terror was the consequence of the Revolution’s elevation of reason over tradition and custom, and was located outside England in France, Tom sees terror, Nothingness, in the very soil of the Fens, in the ‘sink’ of England. If Burke’s was a vision of English civilisation as characterised by continuity, Tom Crick’s is of civilisation, England’s included, as at best a fragile artifice, of progress as something that ‘doesn’t go anywhere’ (336), that takes ‘one step forward, one step back (and sometimes one step to the side)’ (135), and of ‘our dearest domestic ties’ as characterised by violence, incest, and

⁵⁰ Burke, pp. 84-85.

⁵¹ Burke, pp. 97-98.

⁵² Burke, p. 147.

⁵³ Ingelbein, p. 45.

madness. Burke's vision of the nation as a pact between the dead, the living, and the unborn, in which history flows from the past, through the present, to the future, is displaced by one in which repeated returns of 'Nothing' annihilate meaning and put into question the direction of history.⁵⁴

As my discussion of *Shuttlecock* may already have suggested, there is a Second World War version of Burke's England, expressed in what Adam Piette has called the 'island dream' of England as a pastoral place of peace and continuity, separate from the war-torn continent.⁵⁵ Piette connects this dream to the deadly seduction, during the war, of the British 'private imagination' into a militarised, propaganda-saturated hall of mirrors. The understandable desire to escape the conflict, in imagination or memory, he argues, exposed the individual to the power of 'public dreams fabricated to appease war fears and stress'. Moreover, 'private memories were being fragmented and desecrated under war conditions, leaving minds brokenly remembering between "a dream and a mask", between the war culture's fabrications and the imagination's defensive mock self'—a process we have already seen at work in Bowen's war writing.⁵⁶ Looking specifically at poets, Piette writes that

⁵⁴ In this reading I differ from Ingelbein, who argues that 'if Crick's desperate attempts to cling to his stories align him with Burke, Price's disturbing presence and Swift's Beckettian subversion of narrative modes reveal the artificiality of Burke's project' (p. 45). This suggests that Price is somehow the locus of that in the text which disturbs the domesticated sublime of Burkean Englishness, whereas in fact such disturbance has many sources, and it is, to a certain extent, embraced by Tom.

⁵⁵ Piette, pp. 264-72. Bergonzi also notes the importance of what he calls the 'island rhetoric' in wartime writing, although he argues that there was a simultaneous move towards greater cosmopolitanism during the war (*Wartime and Aftermath: English Literature and its Background 1939-1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 19).

forgetting the war turned out to be [...] the most satisfactory way of subordinating their imaginations to public service. For, by so doing, poets were participating in their country's most precious ideological asset—the image of England as unutterably distinct from war-torn Europe, as a haven of light, as the Blessed Isles of peace and dream.⁵⁷

A variant of the 'island dream' is also common in fiction from the 1940s and early 1950s. In his survey of the period, Randall Stevenson notes the ubiquity of portrayals of children's encounters with 'the disturbing complexities of adult life' in works as various as Henry Green's *Caught* (1943), Forrest Reid's *Young Tom* (1944), Rosamond Lehmann's *The Ballad and the Source* (1944), John Cousins's *The Desolate Market* (1948), and L. P. Hartley's *The Go-Between* (1953). Stevenson argues that this return to childhood in wartime fiction '[appears] not so much as an alternative to facing the shock of the war, but as a means of finding a context within individual experience in which to examine and come to terms with its challenge to imagination and understanding'. 'Novelists generally did not retreat into childhood *instead* of dealing with the war', he continues. 'Rather they examine childhood innocence, jointly with its disillusioning loss, as contexts which reduplicate the coexistence in the imagination of [...] memories of peace [and] actual experience of the war'.⁵⁸ The confrontation between innocence and experience often takes the form of a traumatic irruption of unruly sexuality and knowledge: for example, the tale of sexual infidelity and incestuous ties transmitted to the young Rebecca Landon as she listens in Sybil Jardine's garden in *The Ballad and the Source*, Leo Colston's

⁵⁶ Piette, p. 262, quoting George Barker, 'Second Cycle of Love Poems: VII', in *Eros in Dogma*, in *Collected Poems*, ed. by Robert Fraser (London: Faber, 1987), p. 157.

⁵⁷ Piette, pp. 265-66.

⁵⁸ Stevenson, *British Novel since the Thirties*, pp. 88-89.

witnessing of Marian and Ted having sex in the outhouse in *The Go-Between*, or the possible incest between Pye and his sister in *Caught*.⁵⁹

The entry of the serpent into the garden perhaps registers war's troubling of the pastoral dream of England, and of Burke's domestic, insular Englishness. But in a novel such as *The Ballad and the Source*, or *The Go-Between*, 'the real war' takes place in 'the conflicts and disillusionment of individual lives'.⁶⁰ As Maisie puts it in *The Ballad and the Source*, referring to her mother's catastrophic reappearance on the family scene in July 1914: 'When I think about it now I feel as if the war started then—all roaring armies marching against one another and land mines bursting under everybody. When the real war started and every one else was in a state of chaos, it seemed to me a mere rumble on the horizon.'⁶¹ The question that must be asked, however, and that *Waterland* asks by both repeating and undercutting the 'island dream' of England, is whether this strategy of indirect representation is too oblique, or even evasive, to be an effective way of coming to terms with the war's meanings. As Piette observes, the price of protecting the island dream was a ruthless distinction of England from 'the European madness', and a certain insularity persisted in immediately postwar responses to the conflict, both in the 'anaesthetized or evasive'

⁵⁹ Rosamond Lehmann, *The Ballad and the Source* (London: Virago, 1982), L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958), and Henry Green, *Caught* (London: Harvill, 2001).

⁶⁰ Stevenson, p. 90. For a reading that argues that Lehmann's novel critiques the separation of war and the garden, see Phyllis Lassner, 'The Timeless Elsewhere of the Second World War: Rosamond Lehmann's *The Ballad and the Source* and Kate O'Brien's *The Last of Summer*', in Mengham and Reeves, pp. 70-90.

⁶¹ Lehmann, pp. 257-58.

responses of many English writers, and in the displacement, already discussed, of Auschwitz by Colditz as the emblem of the war in Europe.⁶²

Tom recognises his own desire to return to his 'Fenland backwater' (28), and 'to that time before history claimed us, before things went wrong':

How we yearn even for the gold of a July evening on which, though things had already gone wrong, things had not gone as wrong as they were going to. How we pine for Paradise. For mother's milk. To draw back the curtain of events that has fallen between us and the Golden Age. (136)

In narrating the events of his wartime adolescence, however, he draws our attention at key moments to 'the muffled noises-off of world events' (181). As he and his friends have their swimming contest in the Hockwell Lode, for example, he observes that at that moment, July 1940, Hitler was conferring with Goering over Operation Sealion, the plan to invade Britain (180-81), and while describing his and Mary's exploration of 'holes' and 'things' in August 1942 he parenthetically notes that August 1942 also saw 'defeat in the desert; the U-boat stranglehold' (50). Still more significantly, at moments of personal crisis—when he and his father discover Freddie's body in the lock, when he and Mary are making their way to Martha Clay's hut for the abortion, and when he and his father are pursuing the fugitive Dick to the dredger where he works—he refers to the flights of bombers either heard overhead or 'roosting' nearby (28, 299, 354-55). This history in parentheses poses the question of how we should understand the relationship between the personal disasters that overtake Mary, Tom and Dick, not to mention the unfortunate Freddie Parr, and the events taking place in the 'wide world'. One reading would be that there is no

⁶² Piette, p. 266, Bergonzi, *Wartime and Aftermath*, p. 206.

connection, the perceived link between individual and national history that Tom imagines his Victorian forebears feeling, and that he can—albeit with some difficulty—apply to make a kind of fabulous sense out of the ‘muddy madness’ of the Great War (220), having broken down or at least become hopelessly obscure. This approach is useful as far as it goes, but *Waterland* also offers a more specific engagement with the representational strategies and themes of World War Two writing, and thus with the relationship between war and Englishness.

Consideration of the presence and function of bombers in the novel may help to illustrate my point. Tom sees their work in symbolic terms, as one example of how ‘regression’ and terror inevitably accompany ‘the great so-called forward movements of civilization, whether moral or technological’ (135), of how progress ‘doesn’t progress, it doesn’t go anywhere’ (336). Their significance goes beyond the broadly symbolic, however: he can offer, he says, a ‘twofold eye-witness account: the nightly flights of bombers from East Anglian bases from 1941 onwards’, and ‘the ruins of Cologne, Düsseldorf and Essen’ which he saw during his National Service (136). Tom’s choice of examples of bombing places him at some distance from the dominant perception and cultural memory of Britain’s war, which, as both Angus Calder and Adam Piette have observed, finds it difficult to accommodate the Allied bombing of German cities.⁶³ Tom’s ‘twofold eye-witness account’ ignores the Blitz on British cities of 1940-41—although it does not, of course, deny its existence—to focus instead on what the poet Geoffrey Matthews calls ‘the fierce image of ourselves / Armed in another sky’.⁶⁴ Swift is proposing here a construction of

⁶³ Calder, *Myth of the Blitz*, pp. 42-43, Piette, pp. 224-25.

⁶⁴ Geoffrey Matthews, ‘Night Piece for You’, in Piette, p. 224.

England's relationship to the war in which she is not an 'other Eden—demi-paradise' set apart from the conflict, as many wartime representations had it, nor the plucky target of the German Blitz, but the home—the 'roost'—of the bombers, and thus of the 'Apocalypse' brought to Germany by R.A.F. Area Bombing (299).⁶⁵

Swift implies that this was not a terror that could be justified simply because 'there was a war on', or because the Nazi regime was committing greater atrocities. He emphasises that the citizens of Hamburg, Nuremberg, Berlin, Cologne, Düsseldorf and Essen, like 'the brave pilots and navigators and gunners and bomb-aimers' who brought 'the Apocalypse' to them, 'had hearts and had once sucked mother's milk' (299). This passage refers us back to the novel's opening words:

'And don't forget,' my father would say, as if he expected me at any moment to up and leave to seek my fortune in the wide world, 'whatever you learn about people, however bad they turn out, each one of them has a heart, and each one of them was once a tiny baby sucking his mother's milk...'. (1)

'Fairy-tale words; fairy-tale advice', for 'a fairy-tale place [...] in the middle of the Fens. Far away from the wide world', comments Tom (1). But his narrative testifies

⁶⁵ William Shakespeare, *Richard II* (London: Penguin, 1969), II.1.42. Although John of Gaunt's speech provided inspiration for wartime representations of England as the noble and embattled object of 'the envy of less happier lands' (II.1.49), it is at least as preoccupied with England's decline from its position of world conqueror: 'That England that was wont to conquer others / Hath made a shameful conquest of itself.' (II.1.65-66) It is intriguing to note that the relationship between 'the island and the aeroplane' in *Waterland* is the same as that which Gillian Beer identifies in Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts* (1941): the war planes overhead, she writes, '[rupture] the reiteration of island life', and thus the imagining of England as 'defensive, secure, compacted, even paradisaic—a safe place; a safe place too from which to set out on predations and from which to launch the building of an empire' ('The Island and the Aeroplane: the Case of Virginia Woolf', in *Nation and Narration*, ed. by Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 265-90 (pp. 288 and 269). Tom actually seems to find it difficult to acknowledge Britain's role in this bombing: the airmen who appear in *Waterland* are American, although he does once mention Lancasters, which were flown by British and Commonwealth crews (p. 28).

to, and mourns, the fact that the Fens are *not* far away from 'the wide world', that the wide world has, on the contrary, always been 'at home' there.

We can be more specific still about the significance of bombing, however. Freddie Parr's body is discovered on the morning of 26 July 1943, a date which associates the bombers roosting nearby with the 'Battle' of Hamburg, the most 'clear-cut' example of R.A.F. Bomber Command's strategy of Area Bombing, the indiscriminate night-time bombing of German cities with the 'primary object' of destroying 'the morale of the enemy civil population'.⁶⁶ Between 24-25 July and 2-3 August 1943, British Bomber Command carried out four massive night-time raids on Hamburg, killing a total of around forty-five thousand people, mostly women, children and men above military age.⁶⁷ Forty thousand of them died in the early hours of 28 July, when the combined effects of concentrated bombing, hot dry weather conditions and the deployment of the city's firefighters elsewhere produced a firestorm covering around four square miles of the densely-populated city centre. Temperatures reached up to 800 degrees Centigrade, and air was sucked into the centre of the fire at speeds of hurricane force. Those who obeyed advice that they would be safest in the basement shelters of their apartment blocks died in their thousands, largely from carbon monoxide poisoning, as the buildings above them

⁶⁶ Martin Middlebrook, *The Battle of Hamburg: Allied Bomber Forces against a German City in 1943* (1980; London: Penguin, 1984), pp. 338 and 24. Swift errs in siting B-24s in East Anglia in July 1943 rather than B-17s (p. 28). Middlebrook records that the only two B-24 groups of the United States Eighth Army Air Force, the 44th and the 93rd Groups, had at that time been sent to North Africa to support the Allied invasion of Sicily and to prepare for a raid on the Romanian oil-refinery town of Ploesti (p. 48).

⁶⁷ Middlebrook, p. 328. The U.S.A.A.F. also bombed Hamburg twice during this time, but both raids were by day, and were aimed at military and industrial targets.

collapsed and trapped them inside. Many of those who tried to escape through the streets were sucked into the fire.⁶⁸

In hindsight, it has been generally although not unanimously agreed that, although Area Bombing did contribute to the eventual defeat of Germany, its high cost in terms of British manpower and industrial production relative to its impact on German industrial production and morale made it of 'doubtful value'.⁶⁹ Its moral cost is more difficult to calculate. The British public at the time, however, 'were happy to accept [the official explanations] that their bombers were mainly engaged in destroying German industry', and after the war, as Sven Lindqvist attests, they were reluctant to confront the fact that the R.A.F. had deliberately attacked German civilians.⁷⁰ The majority of the airmen who flew on the Hamburg raids believed, and still believed when contacted by Middlebrook in the 1970s, that Area Bombing was justified, but some had deep reservations and regrets.⁷¹ Freeman Dyson, an operations analyst with 'Bomber' Harris at the time of the Hamburg raid, wondered later about the difference between himself and Nazi bureaucrats like Eichmann: 'They had sat in their offices, writing memoranda and calculating how to murder

⁶⁸ Middlebrook, pp. 261-72.

⁶⁹ Middlebrook, p. 339. See also R. A. C. Parker, *The Second World War: A Short History*, rev. edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 165. The Americans rejected the use of Area Bombing in Europe, insisting on bombing by day and attacking military and industrial targets, although, as Middlebrook observes, they were much less scrupulous in their bombing of Japan (p. 340).

⁷⁰ Sven Lindqvist, *A History of Bombing*, trans. by Linda Haverty Rugg (London: Granta, 2001), fragment 11. Lindqvist adds that it is still uncommon to find recognition of this aspect of the war in British museums (fragment 200). See also Patrick Wright, 'Dropping Their Eggs', *London Review of Books*, 23 August 2001, pp. 11-14.

⁷¹ Middlebrook, pp. 347-49.

people efficiently, just like me. The main difference was that they were sent to jail or hanged as war criminals, while I went free.’⁷²

Whatever one’s conclusion about whether Area Bombing was justified, this apocalypse, brought to Hamburg from England, puts into question cultural memories of Britain’s war as in any simple sense a ‘good’ war, and undercuts any construction of Englishness as antithetical to violence. The destabilisation of such an ideal of England is registered in *Waterland* in the breakdown of the conventional opposition between war and pastoral as Tom comes to perceive terror, and history, as always already present in his English home. His fall into history and into a secular world is also a fall into a transformed landscape. On the evening of 26 July 1943, Tom and Mary sit in front of their windmill bower, taking in their responsibility in Freddie’s death, and Tom, looking at the landscape, thinks it is ‘emptying’ (57). The benign world watched over by God is giving way to the wide world: a world beyond the small world of the Fens, but also a world that is empty, no longer pregnant with miraculous significance, and so needs to be filled, and endlessly refilled, with ‘artificial’ meaning. As they wait in vain ten days later for Mary to miscarry, the pastoral scene of ‘poplar leaves and scarlet poppies’, a ‘cornflower sky’ and the warm wind ‘turning Fenland wheat fields with its oven-gusts to the colour of the loaves they will one day become’, provides an ironic counterpoint to their waiting ‘for Nothing to happen. For something to unhappen’ (294-95).

As something unhappens in Martha Clay’s hut, Tom has a dream or hallucination which suggests the significance of the war as the focus of the novel’s

⁷² In Lindqvist, fragment 205.

sense of the end of the world and of pastoral, pacific dream of England. I will cite the passage in full:

And so, while, inside, Martha Clay ministers, as only she can minister, to Mary, your future history teacher sits outside and begins dutifully to pluck a duck. It's a moonless August night. Shoals of stars, silver geese, swim through the sky. His head starts to spin. The duck he's holding in his hand isn't a duck, it's a hen. He's sitting in the sunny space between the chicken coop and the kitchen door, where Mother stands, in her apron. But the hen's not dead, it's still alive. Its wings start to flap and it starts to lay eggs (so it hadn't stopped laying after all). A copious, unending stream of eggs, so many that he has to collect them with the help of his mother and her apron. But Mother says they're not really eggs, they're fallen stars. And so they are, twinkling and winking on the ground. We carry the fallen stars into the chicken coop. Which isn't a chicken coop at all. It's the shell of the old wooden windmill by the Hockwell Lode. And Mary's inside lying naked with her knees up. Mother discreetly retires. And Mary starts to explain about her menstrual cycle and about the wonders inside her hole and how babies get to be born. She says, 'I've got eggs, you know.' And he, ignorant but eager to learn, says, 'What, like hens?' And Mary laughs. And then she screams and then she says she's the mother of God— (307)

We can read this dream, I would suggest, as linking the dislocation of a Burkean Englishness to Area Bombing. The 'silver geese' swimming through the sky above Tom are bombers; a few pages earlier, drawing on a commonplace in the imaginary of bombing, Swift has developed this conceit at length, observing that these birds have 'the trick of laying explosive and inflammatory eggs while still in mid-air' (299).⁷³ The unending stream of eggs that lie 'twinkling and winking on the ground', therefore, suggests an aerial view—the bomb-aimers' view, not that of the victim—of bombs exploding on impact far below; Tom is identifying here with the bringers of Apocalypse who have recently flown over him and Mary. The eggs are carried

⁷³ See Lindqvist, *A History of Bombing*, fragment 95. The syntax is unclear at this point, allowing either 'shoals of stars: silver geese', or 'shoals of stars *and* silver geese', but in either case there is an associative connection with Tom's earlier reference to the bombers as geese (pp. 298-99).

inside the old wooden windmill: once a symbol of miraculous plenitude, the windmill is now a 'shell', inside which waits Mary, with eggs already inside her. But she too will shortly be a 'shell': septicaemia following the abortion will mean that her eggs will always remain unfertilised, and there will be no child in whom the continuity lauded by Burke would be embodied. 'Short', that is, 'of a miracle' (122): but in this dream, God too has been murdered: the stars that Tom once saw as 'the silver dust of God's blessing' (1) are now bombers, or bombs.

Waterland does not assert that World War Two was *the* end of the world, but that it was the end of the ideal of a peaceful and homely England constructed so painstakingly in the aftermath of the First World War. It suggests, moreover, that the failure productively to work through that loss has left postwar Englishness blasted, traumatised, unable to renew itself. Anticipating Adam Piette's argument that British, by which he means predominantly English, culture 'broke its back' during the war, *Waterland* figures the Cricks' postwar life as a question of 'making do', sheltering 'behind all the stage-props of their marriage [from] the empty space of reality' (126).⁷⁴ This 'flat and uniform terrain' is no place for the 'make-believe' that might allow life to begin again (127). 'Make-believe' cannot be thwarted for ever, however, and if it is not turned to more productive uses it will return in twisted attempts to re-enchant the world and re-establish a sense of continuity between the generations and a projected future, such as Mary's theft of the baby—or, one might argue, Margaret Thatcher's adventure in the Falklands, taking place as Swift worked on *Waterland*.

⁷⁴ Piette, p. 1.

Swift himself has described one of his aims in *Waterland* as throwing off his English ‘inhibition’, countering ‘the traditional detachment, introversion and impassiveness of the English’ with an exuberant, even ‘exhibitionist’, work. *Waterland* itself suggests, however, that if postwar Englishness is characterised by ‘phlegm’, by ‘the suppression of the emotions’, then this has more than a little to do with the unmourned legacy of the Second World War.⁷⁵ The novel’s proliferating stories, its elements of magic realism, and its affirmation of mystery and ‘obscurity’ over ‘realism’ can, moreover, be read as an attempt to reassert the value of ‘make-believe’ in the wake of the war’s debasement of imagination, and also to move beyond an insular Englishness towards recognition of a connection with the ‘wide world’.

Waterland’s attempt to mourn for an Englishness lost—or rendered unviable—during World War Two culminate, I would suggest, in a spatial move that occurs in its final chapter. Tom and his father pursue the fugitive Dick to the dredger, the *Rosa II*, where he works, hoping in vain to prevent another catastrophe. As they do so, they leave the familiar territory around the Leem for the Ouse, a place described in terms which place it beyond the parochial, localist England of the Burkean tradition:

It’s not like our little old Leem. It’s like a sea. It’s the Great Ouse, which flows into the Wash. Which once merged with the Rhine. It has a salty, unparochial tang. (353)

⁷⁵ See ‘Throwing Off Our Inhibitions’.

Dick dives from the dredger 'with scarcely a splash. And is gone', leaving behind 'empty bottles.[...] Ribbons of mist. Obscurity'—and, 'abandoned but vigilant', his beloved motorcycle (357-58).

Although it comes at the novel's end, Dick's disappearance retrospectively structures all that came before, positioning Tom's narrative(s) as an attempt to mourn that loss, dredged up years later by Mary's madness. In a general sense, Dick seems to embody the mute facticity of loss, the feeling of formlessness that accompanies it, and the material that must be remembered and mourned in its wake. His work, for which he has an instinctual affinity, is dredging, and dredging is, in this text, a metaphor for the work of mourning. No one would choose 'dredgery-drudgery, sludgery-sloggery' for their calling, says Tom:

And yet it has to be done. Because it [silt] won't go away. It gathers, congeals, no matter what's going on in the busy world above. Because silt, as we know, is the builder and destroyer of land, the usurper of rivers, the foe of drainage. There's no simple solution. We have to keep scooping, scooping up from the depths this remorseless stuff that time leaves behind. (346)

As the physical form of history's revenants, however, Dick himself has only limited powers of memory.⁷⁶ On his dredger-refuge, smelling of 'something hauled from primitive depths', 'he's here, he's now. Not there or then. No past, no future'. He is, in particular, oblivious to 'the fleeting aerial clamour of global strife. He hears no bombers, sees no bombers' (355). Yet it is at this moment, as the bombers fly off to bring hell to the citizens of Germany, that Swift chooses to make the idea of

⁷⁶ See Cooper, p. 381, and Wheeler, 'Melancholic Modernity', p. 71.

salvation—albeit embodied in a defective ‘saviour’ begotten in the madness and chaos of the Great War, a ‘last, thin hope’—disappear altogether (358).

This time of revelation and loss is uncanny: Henry Crick wears a ‘witness-of-a-ghost look’ (348); an enamel sign ‘announces ghostly ferry charges’ (349) and ‘a stray ghost of a breeze’ disturbs his hair (352). The smell of silt is ‘the smell that haunts Dick’s bedroom’, and Tom is unsure whether he had witnessed Dick’s final dive ‘somewhere already—a memory before it occurred’ (355-56). In the novel’s final chapter, past, present and future collide: an end of the world, certainly, but also a moment which, strangely, opens up the possibility of newness, of a new departure, an opening on an ‘unparochial’ world. Raphaël Ingelbein has characterised this new departure as ‘a sort of negative humanism which carries meaning beyond the rejection of English identity, and where England becomes only one metaphor among others’.⁷⁷ I would suggest, however, that the violent end of the Burkean dream of Englishness charted in this novel propels us instead into a (hi)story-telling that tries to reckon not only with the entanglement of civilisation and terror, but with postwar England’s uneasy, melancholic forgetting of its wartime dreaming and of its intimacy with the Here and Now.

⁷⁷ Ingelbein, p. 44.

CHAPTER THREE

‘WE ARE YOUR GHOSTS’:

THE REGENERATION TRILOGY

AND THE USES OF GOTHIC

If Graham Swift’s early novels chart an uneasy awareness of the ways that the legacies of the First and Second World Wars have shaped an implicitly southern, suburban, postwar Englishness, Pat Barker’s fiction takes us to a different England, and offers a different perspective on the relationship between violence and Englishness. Barker made her reputation in the 1980s with novels of northern, working-class, women’s lives: *Union Street* (1982), *Blow Your House Down* (1984), and *The Century’s Daughter* (1986; renamed *Liza’s England* when it was reprinted in 1996). There was therefore some surprise when, in 1991, she published *Regeneration*, the first in her trilogy of First World War novels: where, it was asked, had Barker’s interest in the predominantly upper-middle-class officer war poets come from?¹ To the extent that *Regeneration* was a new departure for Barker, it might be explained as, in part, the outcome of a desire to escape critics’ pigeon-holing of her work: she has spoken of feeling that her early work was judged as sociology rather than fiction, and that she ‘had become strongly typecast as a northern, regional, working-class feminist ... label, label, label. You get to the point where people are

¹ Pat Barker, *Regeneration* (London: Viking, 1991). The other two novels in the trilogy are *The Eye in the Door* (London: Viking, 1993) and *The Ghost Road* (London: Viking, 1995).

reading the label instead of the book'.² As Sharon Monteith has observed, however, 'representations and stories of both World Wars, and of human emotional and physical conflict in general, have long been a source of interest and concern' for Barker—both wars feature prominently in *Liza's England*, for example.³ Barker herself, moreover, does not feel there is a break between her novels of the early to mid-1980s and her war writing, which arguably includes not only *The Regeneration Trilogy* but also *The Man Who Wasn't There* (1989) and *Another World* (1998), nor between writing about women and writing about men. She stresses that throughout her career she has been interested in 'trauma and recovery', and argues that the problems of lack of autonomy and survival faced by the working-class women's communities in her earlier work have strong affinities with those confronting soldiers in the Great War.⁴ One might also argue that all her novels are preoccupied with violence, whether 'the violence in our midst' or 'the violence of this century', and about how, or whether, that violence can be put behind us.⁵

Barker has offered personal reasons for her interest in the Great War: the almost Edwardian world in which she was raised by her grandparents, and the

Collectively, they will be referred to as *The Regeneration Trilogy*, but references will be given, in parentheses, to the individual volumes.

² In Rob Nixon, 'Soldiers of Misfortune: In the Trenches with Pat Barker', *Village Voice*, 14 July 1992, p. 91.

³ Sharon Monteith, 'Warring Fictions: Reading Pat Barker', *Moderna Sprak*, 91.2 (1997), 124-29 (p. 127).

⁴ In Donna Perry, *Backtalk: Women Writers Speak Out* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), pp. 51-52. Barker has Rivers articulate the parallels between trench soldiers and women in *Regeneration*, pp. 107-08. See also Donna Perry, 'Going Home Again: An Interview with Pat Barker', *Literary Review*, 34 (1991), 235-44 (pp. 241-42), and Karin Westman, *Pat Barker's 'Regeneration': A Reader's Guide* (New York: Continuum, 2001), p. 15.

⁵ Barker in Mackenzie, p. 31.

grotesque fascination of her Great War veteran grandfather's bayonet scar.⁶ But in more general terms, she sees World War One as an example both of 'what [the twentieth century] reveals about human nature', and of the necessity of continuing to remember and re-tell the past in order to 'keep the past clear', and thus, perhaps, free ourselves from the threat of repetition. 'Because the past', she insists, 'is not the past. The dead do not lie down.'⁷ The Joseph Brodsky epigraph to *Another World* reiterates this idea, exhorting the reader to 'remember: the past won't fit into memory without something left over; it must have a future.'⁸ But if this is so, we must ask ourselves what it is exactly that is 'not the past' about the Great War. This chapter will argue that, in Barker's work, this is more than a matter of the pity and horror still elicited by the slaughter in the trenches, and the commonplace sense that pity and horror are the truth of war. It is more, too, than the notion that the Great War is 'the test tube of the modern spirit'.⁹ It is a question of attempting to understand contemporary violence and social division—problems that were especially obvious in the North-East in the 1980s—by exploring the origins of violence, psychological and social, in an earlier moment of crisis for Englishness.¹⁰ In this sense, we can see continuities between Priestley's grappling with social breakdown—also felt very powerfully in the North-East in the 1930s—by remembering and imagining war in

⁶ Mackenzie, p. 31, and Blake Morrison, 'War Stories', *New Yorker*, 22 January 1996, pp. 78-82 (p. 79). Characteristically, Barker notes that there is 'a built-in yuck factor' to this story: 'golden-haired little girl slips her hand inside the Christ-like wound of her dear grandpa', but adds—again characteristically—that 'in fact, seeing my grandfather's balls when he was getting washed made a much greater impression on me' (Morrison, p. 79).

⁷ Mackenzie, pp. 31, 33.

⁸ Pat Barker, *Another World* (London: Viking, 1998).

⁹ See Morrison, p. 78.

¹⁰ See Barker's comments in Perry, *Backtalk*, p. 45.

English Journey, and Barker's *Trilogy*. For both writers, war is both an historical event whose legacy continues to be felt, and a symbolic rupture in the fabric of the nation, through which its internal conflicts become visible. As we shall see, however, Barker is much less optimistic than Priestley about the possibility of national 'regeneration'.

This approach to the significance of the First World War in *The Regeneration Trilogy* raises some questions about the *Trilogy's* form: in particular, whether it should be read as straightforward, realist, historical fiction. Margaretta Jolly has written of the strong 'realist "illusion"' created by Barker's use of third person omniscient narration alternating with dialogue and free indirect speech, her heavily-patterned plots and strong closures, and her eschewing of anything that 'breaks the frame of time or place'.¹¹ Other critics have doubts about Barker's realism, noting textual strategies that take her work closer to the creation of 'a collective experience and consciousness' than to 'the individualistic one associated with the [realist] novel of middle-class life': the prominence of symbolism, dream and fantasy, the tendency for characters to have access to each other's psychic lives, the use of nonlinear narrative, and the difficulty of clearly distinguishing the narrator's voice from those of the characters.¹² As will become clear, I believe that the question of the permeability of boundaries—psychic, historical and textual—is crucial to an

¹¹ Margaretta Jolly, 'After Feminism: Pat Barker, Penelope Lively and the Contemporary Novel', in *British Culture of the Postwar: An Introduction to Literature and Society 1945-1999*, ed. by Alistair Davies and Alan Sinfield (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 58-82 (p. 77).

¹² John Kirk, 'Recovered Perspectives: Gender, Class, and Memory in Pat Barker's Writing', *Contemporary Literature*, 40.4 (1999), 603-26 (p. 612). See also Sue Anderson, 'Life on the Street: Pat Barker's Realist Fictions', in *It's My Party: Reading Twentieth-Century Women's Writing*, ed. by Gina Wisker (London: Pluto Press, 1994), pp. 181-92, and

understanding of *The Regeneration Trilogy*. But given the ways in which, superficially at least, Barker's novels appear to be realist historical fiction, it is understandable that they have provoked criticism from those concerned about anachronism.

Ben Shephard, the author of a history of military psychiatry, complains that in taking a late-twentieth-century view of shell-shock, Barker distorts the historical material, reading a complex phenomenon through the lens of 'post-feminist pieties', 'the chic abstractions of modern historians', and 'seminar clichés'.¹³ He also identifies a falseness of tone, particularly in the parts of the *Trilogy* dealing with Billy Prior, whom he dismisses as not a 'credible character', but rather

an assemblage of attributes—working-class, grammar-school, officer, bisexual, embittered about war, yet determined to return to it. His class attitudes are those of a confidently stropky grammar-school boy of the 1950s, worlds away from the likes of Wilfred Owen and R. C. Sherriff who emulated, rather than mocked, public-school officers.¹⁴

Bernard Bergonzi disagrees: Prior, he says, *is* a credible character, but only 'as a literary creation, [...] not as a figure in the history in which Barker presents him'.

Lyn Pykett, 'The Century's Daughters: Recent Women's Fiction and History', *Critical Quarterly*, 29.3 (Autumn 1987), 71-77 (p. 73).

¹³ Ben Shephard, 'Digging Up the Past', *Times Literary Supplement*, 22 March 1996, pp. 12-13 (p. 13). The two 'modern historians' in the firing line here are Eric J. Leed and Elaine Showalter, whose work Barker recommends as '[containing] stimulating discussions of "shell-shock"' in the Author's Note at the end of *Regeneration* (pp. 251-52). See Leed, *No Man's Land*, and Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980* (New York: Pantheon, 1985) and 'Rivers and Sassoon: The Inscription of Male Gender Anxieties', in *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*, ed. by Margaret Randolph Higgonet and others (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), pp. 61-69.

¹⁴ Shephard, p. 13. Shephard's criticisms are echoed in Martin Löschnigg, '...The Novelist's Responsibility to the Past': History, Myth, and the Narratives of Crisis in Pat Barker's *Regeneration Trilogy* [*sic*] (1991-1995)', *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, 47.3 (1999), 214-28.

‘The point’, he continues, ‘is not that people could not have been bisexual or bitterly class-conscious eighty years ago, but that they could not have thought or spoken about these things in the terms that Barker gives to Billy.’¹⁵ Both critics protest that Prior could not be familiar, in 1917-18, with the work of Freud; Bergonzi adds that when Billy tells Beattie Roper that he does not see how believing Lloyd George to be solely responsible for the war can be ‘[derived] from a Marxist analysis’ (*Eye*, 33), ‘he is handling the intellectual small change of 1968 rather than of 1918’.¹⁶ Underlying these complaints is the belief that, as Bergonzi insists, historical novelists must ‘get things right’. Mistakes in historical detail, while irritating, are forgivable as long as the historical novelist has ‘a convincing sense of the past’ as, to paraphrase L. P. Hartley, ‘that foreign country where they do things differently’. Moreover, the author who is writing about actual people has an ‘implied contract with the reader’, under which he or she is allowed ‘to invent where little or nothing is known, but [must] respect such facts as are available’. Bergonzi distinguishes between historical fiction, which, although he does not say so explicitly, he implies should be realist, and the ‘very different kind of writing, which starts in history but transforms it into jokes or fantasy’: Woolf’s *Orlando*, for example, or Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*.¹⁷

Barker’s own comments on the form of *The Regeneration Trilogy* are somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, she seems to endorse the clear separation of historical fact from fictional invention. Her Author’s Note at the end of *Regeneration* aims to help the reader distinguish between ‘fact and fiction’, ‘what is

¹⁵ Bernard Bergonzi, ‘*Regeneration: Pat Barker’s Trilogy*’, in *War Poets and Other Subjects* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), pp. 3-14 (p. 8).

¹⁶ Shephard, p. 13; Bergonzi, ‘Pat Barker’s Trilogy’, p. 9.

¹⁷ Bergonzi, ‘Pat Barker’s Trilogy’, pp. 9-10 and 14; see Hartley, *Go-Between*, p. 7.

historical and what is not', citing Leed and Showalter's historical studies, the writings of W. H. R. Rivers, and the manuscript evidence for Sassoon's amendments to 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' as sources (251-52). This last reference to Owen's *Complete Poems* is the only reference here and in the equivalent notes at the end of *The Eye in the Door* and *The Ghost Road* to any of the *literary* texts used as sources for her work. The view of the historical fiction writer's responsibilities implied by this omission seems to be close to that offered by Bergonzi or Shepherd. But Barker has also, on occasion, contested the use of the term 'historical novel' to describe her work, because, as Karin Westman puts it, 'it suggests that the novel's events are past, no longer a part of the present'.¹⁸ On the contrary, Barker argues, *The Regeneration Trilogy* is 'about a period of the world's history that we have never come to terms with', and, in a wider sense, about 'the pain of all wars'.¹⁹ We forget 'what we found out about human beings on the battlefields of the First World War and in the death camps of the Second World War [...] at our peril', she has said, 'because we are the same people'.²⁰ Her decision to give her First World War characters 1990s speech and consciousness instead of 'their adopted "mock-medieval facetious humor"' is consistent with this conviction, but difficult to reconcile with a clear distinction between historical fact and fiction.²¹

The effects of Barker's reworking of First World War material can be gauged by considering her use in *Regeneration* of an incident from a well-known source,

¹⁸ Westman, p. 16.

¹⁹ Barker in Westman, p. 16, and in Wera Reusch, 'A Backdoor into the Present: An Interview with Pat Barker, One of Britain's Most Successful Novelists', http://www.lolapress.org/elect/artenglish/reus_e.htm [10 September 2002].

²⁰ Barker in D. S., 'N.B.', *Times Literary Supplement*, 17 November 1995, p. 18.

²¹ Morrison, 'War Stories', p. 80.

Edmund Blunden's *Undertones of War* (1928). Under hypnosis, Prior recovers his memory of the incident that brought on his breakdown, which occurred as he helped clear away the remains of two of his men, blown up by a shell moments after he had seen them peaceably frying bacon and making tea over a small fire:

He'd gone, perhaps, three fire bays along when he heard the whoop of a shell, and, spinning round, saw the scrawl of dusty brown smoke already drifting away. He thought it'd gone clear over, but then he heard a cry and, feeling sick in his stomach, he ran back. Logan was there already. It must have been Logan's cry he heard, for nothing in that devastation could have had a voice. A conical black hole, still smoking, had been driven into the side of the trench. Of the kettle, the frying-pan, the carefully tended fire, there was no sign, and not much of Sawdon and Towers either, or not much that was recognizable.

There was a pile of sandbags and shovels close by, stacked against the parapet by a returning work party. He reached for a shovel. Logan picked up a sandbag and held it open, and he began shovelling soil, flesh and splinters of blackened bone into the bag. As he shovelled, he retched. He felt something jar against his teeth and saw that Logan was offering him a rum bottle. He forced down bile and rum together. Logan kept his face averted as the shovelling went on. He was swearing under his breath, steadily, blasphemously, obscenely, inventively. Somebody came running. 'Don't stand there gawping, man,' Logan said. 'Go and get some lime.'

They'd almost finished when Prior shifted his position on the duckboards, glanced down, and found himself staring into an eye. Delicately, like somebody selecting a particularly choice morsel from a plate, he put his thumb and forefinger down through the duckboards. His fingers touched the smooth surface and slid before they managed to get a hold. He got it out, transferred it to the palm of his hand, and held it out towards Logan. He could see his hand was shaking, but the shaking didn't seem to be anything to do with him. 'What am I supposed to do with this gob-stopper?' He saw Logan blink and knew he was afraid. At last Logan reached out, grasped his shaking wrist, and tipped the eye into the bag. 'Williams and me'll do the rest, sir. You go on back now.' (102-03)

Prior refuses, but when they have finished spreading lime over the scene, finds that 'a numbness [has] spread all over the lower half of his face' (103): his muteness is the voicelessness of the two dead men, his symptom the witness of their silence.

Now consider the passage on which Prior's memory is based, from Edmund Blunden's *Undertones of War*.

Cambrin was beginning to terrify. Not far away from that shafthead [where miners were killed by a minenwerfer], a young and cheerful lance-corporal of ours was making some tea as I passed one warm afternoon. Wishing him a good tea, I went along three firebays; one shell dropped without warning behind me; I saw its smoke faint out, and I thought all was as lucky as it should be. Soon a cry from that place recalled me; the shell had burst all wrong. Its butting impression was black and stinking in the parados where three minutes ago the lance-corporal's mess-tin was bubbling over a little flame. For him, how could the gobbets of blackening flesh, the earth-wall sotted with blood, with flesh, the eye under the duckboard, the pulpy bone be the only answer? At this moment, while we looked with dreadful fixity at so isolated a horror, the lance-corporal's brother came round the traverse.

He was sent to company headquarters in a kind of catalepsy. The bay had to be put right, and red-faced Sergeant Simmons, having helped himself and me to a share of rum, biting hard on his pipe, shovelled into the sandbag I held, not without self-protecting profanity, and an air of 'it's a lie; we're a lie.'²²

With the lance-corporal's brother arriving right on cue, the passage from Blunden is typical of the 'satires of circumstance' found in so many 1920s accounts of the Great War, which have 'become an inseparable element of the general vision of war in our time'.²³ Prior's memory is not quite so neat, but the essential scenario of peaceable domesticity literally blown apart, and the survivor escaping random death by a matter of seconds, is the same: the two passages are strikingly similar in content and structure. But whereas Blunden employs an elevated and slightly archaic diction and a kind of touching naiveté—very much the 'harmless young shepherd in a soldier's coat'²⁴—Barker's version is more prosaic and more obscene, with a characteristic visceral black humour ('not much of Sawdon and Towers either, or not much that was recognizable') and lingering physicality—the likening of the eye to a morsel of

²² Edmund Blunden, *Undertones of War* (1928; London: Penguin, 1982), p. 67.

²³ Fussell, *Modern Memory*, pp. 32-33.

²⁴ Blunden, p. 242.

food, Prior's fingers sliding on its smooth surface before managing to grip it, and the mixture of bile and rum that Prior forces down.

In her discussion of *Regeneration*, Anne Whitehead reads the moment in which Prior recovers his memory as highlighting Barker's negotiation of the tensions between what she calls 'modern' and 'postmodern', or 'modernist' and 'postmodernist', models of history and memory. 'Modern' memory, she argues 'depends upon a notion of authorship', in which a subject's identity is consolidated by the possession of, and ability to narrate, his or her past. In 'postmodern' memory, however, the past is 'an anachronistic collision of temporalities', a traumatic event that returns to inhabit or possess the subject: 'the detective story, or the mastery of the past through a process of interpretation, has become a ghost story, in which the specters of the past persistently haunt the present'.²⁵ This uncanny return of the past in forms which 'do not readily submit to the processes of narrative transformation', argues Whitehead, puts into question narrative's implicit promise to 'regenerate' the past as it happened.²⁶ She cites Sassoon's haunting by Orme, which makes use not only of Sassoon's *Memoirs of George Sherston*, but also of Lockwood's nightmare of, or haunting by, Cathy in *Wuthering Heights*, as evidence of how the 'event' is always transformed in the telling through 'the influence of other powerful and affective narratives'.²⁷ She does not recognise, however, the presence of Blunden's

²⁵ Anne Whitehead, 'Open to Suggestion: Hypnosis and History in Pat Barker's *Regeneration*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 44.3 (1998), 674-94 (p. 678). Whitehead refers interchangeably to 'modern' and 'modernist', 'postmodern' and 'postmodernist', models of history and memory. For another reading of *Regeneration* that develops Whitehead's argument, see Middleton and Woods, pp. 86-109.

²⁶ Whitehead, pp. 689 and 692. Disorders of speech such as stammering and mutism are particularly symbolic of the fragility of narrative: see Ankhi Mukherjee, 'Stammering to Story: Neurosis and Narration in Pat Barker's *Regeneration*', *Critique*, 43.1 (2001), 49-62.

²⁷ Whitehead, pp. 684-85 and 691.

narrative in Barker's account of Prior's recovered memory. For Whitehead, this moment is 'the only point in the novel at which the past is possessed as a form of knowledge' instead of being a form of possession by 'compulsive rhythms and routines'. But this is also, she writes, 'the only episode in the novel which is entirely fictional', and thus the 'modern' idea of memory is undermined precisely where it appears to be in the ascendant.²⁸ In designating Prior's recovered memory as 'entirely fictional', however, Whitehead misses Barker's echoing of Blunden. What is more, she sets up precisely the opposition between 'event', or 'fact', and 'fiction' that she elsewhere wants to problematise—and which, as Fussell has argued, texts such as *Undertones of War* and Sassoon's *Memoirs of George Sherston* disrupt.²⁹ As a result, Whitehead's reading cannot come to grips with the effects of the most significant kind of haunting in the *Trilogy*: the way it is haunted by the literature of the Great War.

For Whitehead, textual borrowings mark a postmodernist scepticism about the status of historical representation. For Bergonzi, on the other hand, puzzling over whether Barker is 'half-remembering or simply lifting' passages from Hemingway and Owen for Prior's journal in *The Ghost Road*, such borrowings can only be read as a failure to observe the conventions of realist historical fiction.³⁰ By attending to the sensation of haunting that they evoke, however, we can formulate an alternative

²⁸ Whitehead, p. 689.

²⁹ Fussell, *Modern Memory*, pp. 310-15.

³⁰ Bergonzi, 'Pat Barker's Trilogy', pp. 12-13. Prior's entry for 3 November 1918 (*Ghost Road*, 257) echoes Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929; London: Vintage, 1999) p. 165, and in writing to Rivers that '[his] nerves are in perfect working order' (*Ghost Road*, 254), he uses almost exactly the same words that Owen uses in letters to his mother and Sassoon (Wilfred Owen, *Collected Letters*, ed. by Harold Owen and John Bell (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 580-81).

approach that concentrates on what Barker actually *does* with her sources, and what this has to say about the postwar concerns with which *The Regeneration Trilogy* is preoccupied. This approach is suggested by Barker's own comments about her work, although not fully developed there. As I have already noted, Barker insists on the presence of the past, believing that 'the dead do not lie down', and that writing historical fiction is a way of dealing with 'contemporary dilemmas' and with what there is in 'human nature' that 'doesn't otherwise change'.³¹ The novelist, she suggests, is as much a medium as an historian, '[communicating] with the dead in the interests of the living'—in the interest of understanding what of them lives on in us.³² Despite Barker's apparent insistence elsewhere on the distinction between fact and fiction, these comments imply not so much a 'regeneration' of the past as it happened but a reanimation of the past, a monstrous and uncanny return of our, and history's, repressed. We are, I would argue, in the realm of the Gothic.

Gothic, writes David Punter, is 'a mode—perhaps *the* mode—of unofficial history'.³³ If realism is the fictional mode in which bourgeois society's official self has been represented, then Gothic is the fragmented, fissured exploration of that society's other. It is concerned with the repressed matter of official history; with the possibility that barbarism and irrationality may not lie beyond the bounds of society, but within it; and with the nature of the taboos that—perhaps—keep barbarism and non-reason at bay. One of its principal characteristics is acute epistemological and ontological uncertainty, an uncertainty which generates paranoia both within the text

³¹ In Reusch.

³² Barker in Mackenzie, p. 33.

³³ *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day* (London: Longman, 1996), II: *The Modern Gothic*, p. 187.

and in the reader.³⁴ Interestingly, when searching for one word to answer the question, ‘What are we like?’, Barker comes up with the word ‘paranoid’: ‘We are more frightened of the violence in our midst than the facts justify. A terribly paranoid lot. That’s one of the things that writing about the past makes you think.’ She implies that remembering the past more fully should make us less afraid, more able to judge the threat of contemporary barbarism, and should give both individuals and society a more ‘secure identity’.³⁵

But what if the opposite is true, if instead of grounding us more securely in a realistic, and realist, appraisal of the world, remembering past violence compounds our fear? Remembering might not ‘keep the past clear’: it might instead make the present more mysterious, and ‘realism’—in both senses—more tenuous.³⁶ Gothic, argues Punter, turns on precisely this uncertain relationship between present and past: ‘The code of Gothic is [...] not a simple one in which past is encoded in present or vice versa, but dialectical, past and present intertwined, and distorting [...] each other with the sheer effort of coming to grips.’ Whereas realism deals in cause and effect, and in the teleology of linear narrative, Gothic suggests that ‘the world, at least in some aspects, is very much more inexplicable—or mysterious, or terrifying, or violent—than that’. Thus, although Gothic texts may make use of realism, they undercut or mix it with other modes: ‘extensive metaphor and symbolism’, ‘poetic prose, the recapture of tragedy, expressionistic writing, the revival of legend, the formation of quasi-myths’. The result is often a text that sits uncomfortably between

³⁴ Punter, pp. 183-84, and Allan Lloyd Smith, ‘Postmodernism/Gothicism’, in *Modern Gothic: A Reader*, ed. by Victor Sage and Allan Lloyd Smith (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp. 6-19 (pp. 7-8).

³⁵ Barker in Mackenzie, p. 31.

modes, prompting criticism that Gothic works are ‘not fully achieved’, that they are ‘fragmentary, inconsistent, jagged’.³⁷

This account of Gothic forms and themes suggests that what Middleton and Woods and Whitehead characterise as postmodern in *The Regeneration Trilogy* could instead be discussed as Gothic.³⁸ Shifting the critical framework in this way allows one to recognise more clearly the *Trilogy*’s interest in the relationships between barbarism and civilisation, and between psychological splitting and a riven social world; and in whether the violence it depicts is produced by social forces—inequality, injustice—or is instinctive, held in check only by social taboo. The *Trilogy*’s indecision about how to explain the violence unleashed in the First World War is the thematic cognate of its generic inconsistency. Just as it entertains a double reading of the violence of the Great War, the *Trilogy* offers us both a social-realist face and what we might call a mythic face.³⁹ In its social realist mode, it holds out the possibility of an historical understanding of the First World War, of a linear account of its causes and effects, and of a ‘modulation and integration’ of conflicting interests and points of view, at least from a distance of eighty years, through the

³⁶ Barker in Mackenzie, p. 31.

³⁷ Punter, pp. 198, 186 and 188-89.

³⁸ As Lloyd Smith argues, there are many similarities between postmodernist and Gothic fiction, so I do not wish to suggest that Barker’s work must be read as one or the other, but rather to suggest that attention to her use of Gothic opens up aspects of the *Trilogy* that have puzzled, or been ignored by, critics. Interestingly, Lucie Armitt has recently argued that ‘though predominantly realist in narrative form’, Barker’s earlier novel *Blow Your House Down* is ‘a contemporary ghost-story, one in which women are repeatedly killed, but refuse to play dead’ (*Contemporary Women’s Fiction and the Fantastic* (Basingstoke: Macmillan; New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), pp. 195-96).

³⁹ Bergonzi notes Barker’s interest in the myths of the Great War (pp. 13-14), but does not, I would suggest, understand it, as for him it can only mean a failure to engage with the historical facts.

power of its narrative.⁴⁰ In its mythic mode, however, it is profoundly sceptical about the possibility of either personal or social integration, and tends towards an ahistoricism that at times approaches what Allan Lloyd Smith describes as the exhibition in Gothic of ‘the tokens of pastness [...] as a fancy dress worn by contemporary sensibility and consciousness’.⁴¹ The balance between these two modes shifts over the course of the three novels: in *Regeneration*, the Gothic elements are largely submerged, although the patients’ memories could perhaps be said to be ‘a series of ghost stories’.⁴² In *The Eye in the Door* the Gothic comes to the surface through Prior’s ‘co-consciousness’ (143), and the text seems to hover between seeing this split as a pathological product of social conditions, and the more alarming possibility that such splitting might be universal, perhaps even functional. In *The Ghost Road*, the dead, and the possibility that there is something in us innately drawn towards killing, take over the text, putting into question not only the boundary between civilisation and barbarism, but also those between past and present, and ‘England’ and its others.

Approaching *The Regeneration Trilogy* as an example of contemporary Gothic, as I hope to show, offers a more enabling reading of the place in it of the myths of the Great War than has generally been advanced hitherto. Some critics have hailed the *Trilogy* as a radical corrective to the way the war has been remembered, seemingly ignorant of the ‘demythologising’ of the war begun by the war poets and continued by the novelists and memoirists whose work was published in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and more recently by influential studies such as

⁴⁰ Compare Waugh, *Harvest*, p. 21.

⁴¹ ‘Postmodernism/Gothicism’, pp. 10-11.

Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Leed's *No Man's Land*, and Showalter's *The Female Malady*—a process which itself has produced alternative myths.⁴³ But others have been troubled by what they see as the *Trilogy*'s reproduction of these counter-myths: about gender, about shell shock, and about the incommunicable nature of experience at the Front.⁴⁴ There is some truth in the latter view, although it should also be said that the persistence in public rituals of remembrance of 'the "high diction" so loathed by Owen and Sassoon', observed by Niall Ferguson on the eightieth anniversary of the Armistice, would suggest that there is still a need for the kind of demythologising of the war that they undertook, and for a reclamation of the more radical aspects of their work from the "'Poppy Day' nationalism' that surrounds them.⁴⁵ This melancholic *mélange* of Brooke's 'The Soldier', Owen's 'Anthem for Doomed Youth', and McCrae's 'In Flanders Fields' downplays the difficulty and ambiguity of the war poets' work, and lives, and turns them into the embodiment of a 'literary redemption' of the 'tragic national error and waste' of the war.⁴⁶ It is a variant, I would suggest, of what Baucom has called the English tendency to see its best self as 'lost, wounded, or vanishing': Englishness as 'a cult of the dead, or, at the very least, [...] a cult of ruin'.⁴⁷ Amongst the things *The Regeneration Trilogy* attempts to regenerate, I will argue, is the challenge posed

⁴² Whitehead, p. 688.

⁴³ See Karen DeMeester 'Trauma and Recovery in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 44.3 (1998), 649-73 (p. 668), and Greg Harris, 'Compulsory Masculinity, Britain, and the Great War: The Literary-Historical Work of Pat Barker', *Critique*, 39.4 (1998), 290-304.

⁴⁴ See Bergonzi, 'Pat Barker's Trilogy', pp. 13-14, and Löschnigg, pp. 215 and 220-27.

⁴⁵ Niall Ferguson, 'Do Today's Public Rituals Hinder Our Understanding of War?', *Independent*, 11 November 1998, 'Review', p. 4, Jolly, p. 75.

⁴⁶ Jolly, pp. 74-75.

⁴⁷ Baucom, pp. 175-76.

by Sassoon's and Owen's wartime work to the recuperative, melancholic, postwar Englishness founded in, or on, their names.

Regeneration deals with Sassoon's stay in Craiglockhart War Hospital, following his open letter of protest against the continuation of the war in July 1917. It closes with his discharge to duty, having decided that he must return to fight in France, but without recanting his anti-war views, on 26 November 1917. While at Craiglockhart, Sassoon comes under the care of W. H. R. Rivers, the neurologist and anthropologist, who is working for the duration of the war as an army psychiatrist. He also meets, and becomes friends with, fellow patient Wilfred Owen. This much, as Barker says in her Author's Note, is historical fact. *Regeneration* also introduces Billy Prior, one of the many 'temporary gentlemen' created by the War: lower-middle- or working-class men given commissions for the duration, who were never allowed to forget their temporary status.⁴⁸ The symptoms of Prior's neurasthenia reflect his marginal status: whereas officers tended to stammer, Prior, like the private soldiers treated by Dr Lewis Yealland later in the novel, is mute (96-97). Through Rivers's treatment of Sassoon, Prior, and his other patients, Barker explores the problem of causality in relation to war trauma: to what extent are their psychological problems produced by the war, and to what extent has the war retroactively mobilised pre-existing social and psychological tensions? Through Prior's girlfriend, Sarah Lumb, she also draws out some of the contradictions of the war: principally, that while for soldiers, the war meant the trenches, passivity and immobilisation, for some women it meant greater freedom, economic independence and 'the only little bit of peace [they'd] ever had' (110).

The Eye in the Door, set in the spring and summer of 1918, focuses on Billy Prior. Now in London, working for the Intelligence Unit of the Ministry of Munitions, he is investigating a network of pacifists that includes his childhood friend, Patrick MacDowell. He is also secretly gathering evidence to prove that another of the network, Beattie Roper, with whom he lived for a year as a child, was wrongly convicted of plotting to poison the Prime Minister, Lloyd George.⁴⁹ Rivers is also in London, and continuing to see Prior as a patient. The therapy concentrates on Prior's increasingly alarming fugue states, in which, it transpires, a 'co-consciousness' takes over (143). London, meanwhile, is in the grip of hysteria over the MP Noel Pemberton Billing's accusations of sexual deviance and treason amongst the nation's political and social elite, and his trial for libel. Prior's split self, and the fears and fantasies given voice in the 'poison plot' and the Pemberton Billing affair, open up the tensions and conflicts at home, and between home and the Front, during the final year of the war.⁵⁰

The Ghost Road, however, turns away from this social terrain to address different kinds of questions: in particular, 'why war?'—from what impulses do wars arise? In exploring these issues, Barker juxtaposes Billy Prior's return to active service, narrated in the third person and, in Parts Two and Three of the novel, in his journal entries, with Rivers's memories of his time on Eddystone Island. Prior records his journey along the 'ghost road' to the Front, while Rivers remembers practices and beliefs relating to death and the dead on Eddystone. The novel closes

⁴⁸ See Gerard J. DeGroot, *Blighty: British Society in the Era of the Great War* (London: Longman, 1996), pp. 166-67 and 298.

⁴⁹ For the real case on which Beattie Roper's is based, see Sheila Rowbotham, *Friends of Alice Wheeldon* (London: Pluto Press, 1986).

at dawn on 4 November 1918, a week before the Armistice. Prior lies dead on the bank of the Sambre-Oise canal and Rivers, at work in the Empire Hospital, is visited by the ghost—perhaps—of Njiru, the healer and priest from Eddystone, chanting a rite of mourning and exorcism.

These brief sketches of the three volumes of *The Regeneration Trilogy* are intended to offer the reader a rough map of how Barker's interests develop and shift between *Regeneration* and *The Ghost Road*. I will now return to consider in more depth the themes, outlined above, of social and psychological splitting, civilisation, barbarism and violence, before turning explicitly to the implications of the *Trilogy's* rewriting of the Great War for late-twentieth-century Englishness.

During his second session with Rivers in *Regeneration*, Sassoon describes his pre-war life as 'like being three different people, and they all wanted to go different ways', with the result that 'I went nowhere'. He then describes two of these people: 'the riding, hunting, cricketing me, and [...] the ... the other side ... that was interested in poetry and music, and things like that'. Rivers prompts him to describe the third, but Sassoon has forgotten he has mentioned three. Rivers's silent 'Ah' indicates that he recognises a Freudian slip: the partially-articulated third is Sassoon's homosexuality (35).⁵¹ *Regeneration* treats Sassoon's divided self as an example of the division constitutive of masculinity in this society. As Rivers reflects, 'they'd been trained to identify emotional repression as the essence of manliness', and 'he himself was a product of the same system, even perhaps a rather

⁵⁰ See Hynes, *A War Imagined*, pp. 226-32.

⁵¹ As Adrian Caesar has argued (p. 77), poetry and homosexuality were closely associated in the Edwardian mind through the paradigm of 'decadence'. Sassoon's reference to the self that was interested in 'poetry and music, *and things like that*' could therefore be understood as already referring to his homosexuality.

extreme product. Certainly the rigorous repression of emotion and desire had been the constant theme of his adult life' (48). The use of 'they' here marks and masks a further social division. Rivers is referring to his patients, almost all of whom are, like him, the upper-middle-class products of public schools and of the code of manliness inculcated there. His assumption of Craiglockhart's social homogeneity is immediately challenged in the next chapter, in his first session with Prior after he recovers his voice. Prior is openly antagonistic to Rivers, to his therapeutic method, and to the implicit assumption that officers constitute a unified 'they': 'you might like to think it's one big happy family out there,' he tells Rivers, 'but it's not. They *despise* each other'. Rivers's response—'you mean you despise yourself'—confronts Prior with his difficulty in coming to terms with his breakdown, but also points to Prior's conflicted identification with the other officers (53; emphasis Barker's).

As the novel explores the causes of Prior's, and Sassoon's, breakdowns further, it becomes clear that Rivers's theory that breakdown was 'a consequence of [a man's] war experience'—of prolonged passivity, and of overwhelming feelings of terror and grief—'rather than of his own innate weakness' is far too simplistic (115).⁵² Prior's breakdown is particularly difficult for him to accept because it compromises his attempt to secure membership of 'the Club to end all Clubs', people

⁵² Barker draws on Rivers's *Conflict and Dream* (1923; London: Routledge, 1999) and 'The Repression of War Experience' (*Lancet*, 2 February 1918, pp. 173-77) for her account of his theories on the causes of war neurosis. Anne Whitehead argues, wrongly, that Rivers did not recognise the significance of traumatic, 'forgotten yet active' combat experience in war neuroses (pp. 686-87). Taking Rivers's work as a whole, it is clear that by emphasising the role of a present conflict in war neurosis he wishes to differentiate not between the period of treatment and the period at the Front, but between wartime and pre-war experience. It is this that distinguishes his theory from both Freud and believers in 'degeneracy' like Lewis Yealland (see *Regeneration*, pp. 115 and 229-33, and, for a defence of Yealland, Shephard, p. 13).

who did well in France (135): a desire that is an extension of his pre-war ambition to escape his working-class roots. This ambition, however, conflicts with Prior's political convictions and his continuing class loyalties.⁵³ Similarly, the conflict between Sassoon's soldier and pacifist, or soldier and poet, selves that drives him to make his protest is represented as growing out of the 'different people' he was before the war. Prior's case in particular testifies to the arousal by experiences at the Front of confused sexual and violent impulses that are addressed less by Rivers's theory than by what Barker calls the 'strict Freudian' account of war neurosis—which holds that breakdown is the result of war conditions arousing repressed homosexual and sadistic impulses (*Eye*, 158)—and by Freud's theories on trauma and the death drive.⁵⁴

The conflicts that come to a head in Sassoon's protest and Prior's breakdown are not, and cannot be, 'resolved' through the therapy that they undergo with Rivers.⁵⁵ At the end of *Regeneration*, as he finishes Sassoon's medical notes, Rivers reflects that

to go back to fight, believing as he did, would be to encounter internal divisions far deeper than anything he'd experienced before. Siegfried's 'solution' was to tell himself that he was going back only to look after some men, but that formula would not survive the realities of France. [...]

⁵³ Prior tells Rivers that he wants to go into politics after the war (135), and his mother says that he is 'all for "the common people", as he calls them' (58).

⁵⁴ Freud, 'Introduction to *Psycho-Analysis and the War Neuroses*' (1919), *SE XVII* (1955), pp. 205-10, and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), in *SE XVIII* (1955), pp. 1-64.

⁵⁵ Karin Westman seems fundamentally to misread *Regeneration* when she represents Rivers as helping Sassoon 'resolve the tension' between his duty to his country and his 'duty to fellow citizens who are dying and suffering in vast numbers each day' by '[returning] to war for the sake of the men under his command' (p. 26). Barker is at pains to make clear, at the end of *Regeneration* (p. 249) and again in *The Eye in the Door* (pp. 229-30), that Sassoon's 'solution' (her inverted commas) is no such thing, and indeed to show Rivers feeling guilty for his complicity in Sassoon's self-delusion.

It was a dilemma with one very obvious way out. Rivers knew, though he had never voiced his knowledge, that Sassoon was going back with the intention of being killed. Partly, no doubt, this was youthful self-dramatization. *I'll show them. They'll be sorry.* But underneath that, Rivers felt there was a genuine and very deep desire for death.

And if death were to be denied? Then he might well break down. A real breakdown, this time. (249-50)⁵⁶

Rivers's work with all of his patients is directed towards returning them to active service. There is irony enough in the situation of the physician healing his patients so that they may be maimed or killed—although Rivers '[wastes] no time' pondering this, having faced it too many times before (248). There is a more deadly irony in the fact that Sassoon's and Prior's returns to the Front will take them back into to an environment where their 'internal divisions' will be intensified. Indeed, as Prior observes in *The Ghost Road*, in teaching his patients to manage their fear and horror in order to return to the fighting, not just to be killed, but to kill, Rivers could be said to be producing monsters:

We are Craiglockhart's success stories. *Look at us.* We don't remember, we don't feel, we don't think—at least not beyond the confines of what's needed to do the job. By any proper civilized standard (but what does *that* mean *now?*) we are objects of horror. But our nerves are completely steady. And we are still alive. (200)⁵⁷

Regeneration, in or through war, leads to degeneration and/or death, both for individuals and for the nation. The regeneration of England hoped for at the war's

⁵⁶ Compare Barker's representation of the events leading to Sassoon being invalided home in 1918, in *Eye*, pp. 231-33.

⁵⁷ Compare Owen's account in a letter to Sassoon of his condition in early October 1918. 'I cannot say I suffered anything', he writes, 'having let my brain go dull: That is to say my nerves are in perfect order. [...] My senses are charred. I shall feel again as soon as I dare, but now I must not. I don't take the cigarette out of my mouth when I write Deceased over their letters' (*Collected Letters*, p. 581 (10 October 1918)).

outset produces instead, Barker suggests, a monstrous growth, the return of the violence that haunts the social body.

For Rivers himself, Craiglockhart proves transformative. Barker represents Rivers as having been profoundly changed—or ‘healed’, as he suggests to Henry Head (242)—as a result of his work not only with Sassoon, but with ‘all of them. Burns and Prior and Pugh and a hundred others’ (249). His ‘healing’ involves a change in his character as well as in his attitude to the war:

As a young man he’d been both by temperament and conviction deeply conservative, and not merely in politics. Now, in middle age, the sheer extent of the *mess* seemed to be forcing him into conflict with the authorities over a very wide range of issues ... medical, military. Whatever. A society that devours its own young deserves no automatic or unquestioning allegiance. Perhaps the rebellion of the old might count for rather more than the rebellion of the young. (249)⁵⁸

War renews the challenge to Rivers’s upper-middle-class English masculinity—his reticence and introversion—that he first experienced during his anthropological field-work in Melanesia. Although he glimpsed then the ‘*amazing freedom*’ that comes from realising ‘not only that we [the imperial anthropologists] weren’t the measure of all things, but that *there was no measure*’, ‘nothing changed *in England*’: his ‘mask’ stayed on (242; emphasis Barker’s). It is his work with the psychological casualties of the war, which provides great emotional satisfaction and ‘[excavates] the ground he stood on’, that enables him to change (48).

For Rivers personally, and also for the women for whom the war brought a new freedom and prosperity, war *is* regenerative. But as Barker represents it, Rivers’s regeneration detaches him from conventional patriotism, taking the form of

a rejection of upper-middle-class English masculinity. And individual regeneration is, moreover, always shadowed by death, by silence, by the violence not only of the war but of a deeply divided society. Sassoon and Prior have the option of a ‘headlong retreat towards the front’ to escape their ambivalence towards England, the war, and their place in both (248).⁵⁹ Rivers does not, and *Regeneration* makes clear that he, too, is to an extent silenced: at the end of the novel, recording Sassoon’s discharge to duty, he finds ‘there [is] nothing more he wanted to say that he could say’ (250). Both Rivers’s and Sassoon’s ambivalence is limited, however, by their class position: by the extent to which they are members of the establishment, albeit dissenting members. Prior is a much more marginal—one might say liminal—figure, and by shifting her focus, in *The Eye in the Door*, to Prior, Barker is able to explore more fully the social conflicts that the war made manifest. Prior’s work for the Ministry of Munitions reveals the extent to which he is internally divided: not only by his upbringing and his status as ‘temporary gentleman’, but between his anti-establishment views and his loyalty to those who, like him, have fought in France; between his pre-war self and his wartime one. *The Eye in the Door* is concerned with displaying the tensions between home and the Front, and within England itself, especially as these manifested themselves towards the end of the war in pathological behaviour, individual and social. Public hysteria, as represented in the Lloyd George ‘poison plot’ and the Pemberton Billing trial, finds its correlative in Prior’s fugue states, when what Rivers calls a ‘co-consciousness’ takes over, leaving gaps of

⁵⁸ For the change in Rivers during and immediately after the war, see Slobodin, pp. 65-69.

⁵⁹ Barker seems to have borrowed Owen’s words for Sassoon here: in his letter to Sassoon of 31 August 1918, Owen describes himself as ‘in hasty retreat towards the Front’ (*Collected Letters*, p. 571).

several hours in Billy's memory. In one of these periods, it seems, Billy betrays his friend Mac to the military police.

Barker's increasing interest in liminality and pathology is expressed in the greater prominence of Gothic elements in *The Eye in the Door*. Prior's borderline status is made clear during his return to Salford to track down Mac. As Mac comments, Prior moves between the 'officers' mess one night, back streets of Salford the next. Equally at home or [...] equally *not* at home, in both' (110). There are many reasons why he is 'not at home'. As a soldier, he cannot side with pacifists who are avoiding the fighting and would make the lives of other soldiers at the Front more difficult by disrupting the supply of armaments (110). But as an officer, and working for the Ministry of Munitions, he feels he is a class traitor and, what is more, knows this treachery is a continuation of his pre-war desire to escape the world in which he grew up. His loyalties are mixed, too, when, walking through his old neighbourhood, he notices 'signs of a new prosperity' everywhere. He wants to be 'simply, unequivocally, unambiguously pleased', especially at the enlarged lives of the women, but the reminders of the price of this prosperity are too apparent (96). Too many of the houses have black-edged cards in the windows, with familiar names on them. Prior's compounded conflicts take spectral form. It seems to him that 'the streets [are] full of ghosts, grey, famished, unappeasable ghosts, jostling on the pavements, waiting outside homes that had prospered in their absence'. He himself '[moves] silently across the cobbles, feeling almost invisible' and 'no more part of the life around him than one of those returning ghosts' (97).

Soldiers often figured as uncanny their sense of estrangement, particularly after the Somme offensive in mid-1916, from what had been home, from civilian allegiances, and from their own past. Owen's dreaming, dying visitants in

‘Exposure’, which Barker’s text clearly echoes, for example, ‘drag home’ to find the ‘shutters and doors, all closed’ on them, and one of the poem’s arguments is that they have become ghosts because those at home have forgotten the ideals for which they went to war, and for which they still fight—the ‘kind fires’, the ‘suns [smiling] true on child, or field, or fruit’.⁶⁰ R. H. Tawney put the point more explicitly in his ‘Some Reflections of a Soldier’, written while he was recovering from being wounded on the Somme. Tawney writes of feeling ill at ease ‘at home’, because he is only ‘really [...] at home’ in ‘the England that’s not an island or an empire, but a wet populous dyke stretching from Flanders to the Somme’. Soldiers who volunteered at the war’s outset have kept faith with ‘the idea which compelled them to enlist’ long after civilians have forgotten it, and so, he asserts, ‘We are your ghosts.’⁶¹

Another, darker reading of both Owen and Tawney is possible, however, in which the ghostly soldiers embody the repressed violence of the social order: what Tawney refers to as ‘the inconsistencies and contradictions, the doubts and bewilderment, which lie beneath the surface of things’.⁶² This reading is much closer to the perspective of *The Eye in the Door*, as can be seen from a consideration of an important section at the end of Part One. Returning from seeing the fugitive Mac, Prior takes a short-cut home across the brick fields, a ‘patch of waste land [that] always reminded him of France’ (115). He reflects on the difference between what England means to him and what it means to his fellow-officers:

⁶⁰ Wilfred Owen, ‘Exposure’, in *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, ed. by Jon Stallworthy (London: Chatto & Windus, Hogarth and Oxford University Press, 1983), I: *The Poems*, pp. 185-87 (p. 185).

⁶¹ In Hynes, *A War Imagined*, pp. 116-19.

One of the ways in which he felt different from his brother officers, one of the many, was that *their* England was a pastoral place: fields, streams, wooded valleys, medieval churches surrounded by ancient elms. They couldn't grasp that for him, and for the vast majority of the men, the Front, with its mechanization, its reduction of the individual to a cog in a machine, its blasted landscape, was not a contrast with the life they'd known at home, in Birmingham or Manchester or Glasgow or the Welsh pit villages, but a nightmarish culmination. (115-16)

'A nightmarish culmination' or an uncanny, vertiginous return—the Front is a repetition of conditions at home, which is a repetition of the Front. The violence and suffering of the war are indistinguishable from the violence and suffering of life in industrial Britain, and both, as we have seen in Sassoon's *Memoirs*, undermine the pastoral ideal of England.

As if in confirmation of this insight, Prior almost immediately falls into a hole, a void where the boundary between home and Front disappears:

One moment he was striding confidently along and the next he was falling, sliding rather, down a steep slope into pitch-black. He lay on his back at the muddy bottom of the hole and saw the tall weeds wave against the sky. He wasn't hurt, but the breath had been knocked out of him. Gradually, his heart stopped thumping. The stars looked brighter down here, just as they did in a trench. He reached out for something to hold on to, and his groping fingers encountered a sort of ledge. He patted along it and then froze. It was a firestep. It couldn't be, but it was. Disorientated and afraid, he felt further and encountered a hole, and then another beside it, and another: funk holes, scooped out of the clay. *He was in a trench.* Even as his mind staggered, he was groping for an explanation. Boys played here. Street gangs. They must have been digging for months to get as deep as this. But then probably the trench was years old, as old as the real trenches, perhaps. He clambered out, over what he suspected was No Man's Land, and there, sure enough, were the enemy lines. (116-17)

⁶² In Hynes, *A War Imagined*, p. 117.

The nature of Prior's fear and disorientation is worthy of exploration. It is not simply a matter of confusion between England and France: of a trench suddenly and inexplicably appearing in Salford. The trench, like the bombsite to which Prior is attracted in the novel's opening pages, represents a 'breach' in the surface of the everyday, through which the repressed can return (9): it is no coincidence that after his fall he begins (again) to have memory lapses.

The repressed clearly has a social dimension—notably, the alienation and the self-division resulting from his background and current status as soldier and as spy. But *The Eye in the Door* suggests that the repressed cannot be understood purely as a matter of class and politics: it also proposes a sexual meaning for the 'breach'. In his essay on the uncanny, Freud links the fear of being buried alive, which 'to some people [...] is the most uncanny thing of all' to a repressed fantasy of a return to the maternal body—a fantasy of a return to 'the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning'.⁶³ This fantasy, moreover, is connected via the Oedipus complex to castration anxiety, and to the fear of death. Prior's fall into the trench might seem to bear only a tangential relationship to these speculations, were it not for what happens next. 'The shock', Barker writes, 'made him rebellious.' Instead of returning home to his parents' house, he decides to go to the pub, to 'do what other men do who come home on leave. Get drunk and forget'. There he meets Mrs Thorpe and Mrs Riley, two women who nursed him when he was a baby and his own mother was very ill, out with 'a great gaggle of other women'. The crowd of women '[opens] up and [takes] him in' (117)—the sexual dimensions of which are made explicit when, later that evening, he has sex with Mrs Riley. Prior's

⁶³ 'The "Uncanny"', pp. 244-45.

‘forgetting’, we might say, takes the form of a repetition of the return to the maternal body, the encounter with death, in his fall into the trench.

Prior’s behaviour seems to be both an attempt to master his shock—to bind through repetition, and particularly through a *sexual* repetition, the destabilising energy released by his fall—and a surrender to shock, to destabilisation, to death. This section of the text ends with Prior’s ‘pure delight’ at ‘every taboo in the whole fucking country [crashing] round his ears’ as he sucks Mrs Riley’s breasts (118)—unknowingly watched by the emasculated father, also unknowing, whose law he is so flagrantly and deliciously breaking.⁶⁴ Prior’s erotic delight is the flip-side, the shadow, of his earlier shock and terror. His ‘affinity with places where the established order has been violently assailed’ contains both sexual and destructive elements. Indeed, one might say that Prior’s ‘sideways pull towards the breach’ poses the question of whether eros and thanatos, sexuality and death, or sexuality and violence, *can* be separated (9).

Behind Barker’s text, of course, lies the Gothic tradition already discussed—notably Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) from which she takes her epigraph—as well as the anthropological, psychological and mythological concerns that converge in Freud’s *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930).⁶⁵ *The Eye in the Door*’s exploration of violence and its psychic and social roots, and of the relationship between the inside and the outside of the psyche and the nation is also informed, I would suggest, by Freud’s thinking on the death drive. As

⁶⁴ Compare p. 96, where the women’s behaviour is specifically linked to Prior’s father’s sense that ‘Armageddon had arrived’.

⁶⁵ Robert Louis Stevenson, *‘The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde’ and ‘Weir of Hermiston’* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 61, and Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, SE XXI (1961), pp. 57-145.

Jacqueline Rose has argued, Freud's attempts to explain the terrible destructiveness of the Great War, and the 'compulsion to repeat' their trauma demonstrated by patients with war neuroses, by reference not to eros but to a drive 'beyond the pleasure principle', only succeeds in entwining sexuality still more tightly with death and destruction. Moreover, in failing securely 'to locate death as an object'—Freud is uncertain whether death is something towards which all life tends, or an event imposed from without—the theory of the death drive introduces an 'outrageous oscillation' into our understanding of 'causality and the event', inside (i.e., inside the subject) and outside, the real event and fantasy—and victim and aggressor.⁶⁶

Barker's attempts to explain war and war neuroses in *The Eye in the Door*, too, could be described as enacting an 'outrageous oscillation' between society and instinct, inside and outside. The questions of duality and causality are posed with particular urgency for Rivers in his attempt to treat Prior's dissociative state. When Prior's 'co-consciousness' meets Rivers, it describes itself as having been 'born two years ago. In a shell-hole in France', and as having no father (240). Two years before was the summer of 1916; the monstrous birth of a new self that acknowledges no connection with England gives ghastly form to soldiers' growing feelings of estrangement after the Somme. It would seem, however, that Prior's split self has more than one possible origin: it can also be traced to Prior's childhood habit of dissociation during his parents' arguments, by going into the light reflecting off the barometer on the wall. In Rivers's discussions with both Priors about this habit, dissociation emerges as a way to renegotiate the boundary between inside and outside the self, dealing with unacceptable feelings or impulses by projecting them

⁶⁶ *Why War?*, pp. 95-98.

‘outside’. As a child, Prior feels murderous rage towards his father, but also fear at what this rage might prompt him to do, and disgust at his own weakness (247-48); as an adult, he conjures up an alternate self when he is feeling too much pain and fear to go on fighting (241-42), and when ‘the violence of his imaginings’—a tank crushing the ‘prosperous-looking men’ in the pub, for example—is too terrifying to bear (122).⁶⁷

After his encounter with the alternate Prior, Rivers dreams of France:

Craters, a waste of mud, splintered trees. [...] Nothing human could live here. Nothing human did. He was entirely alone, until, with a puckering of the surface, a belch of foul vapours, the mud began to move, to gather itself together, to rise and stand before him in the shape of a man. A man who turned and began striding towards England. (244)

Prior, he reflects,

had created a state whose freedom from fear and pain was persistent, encapsulated, inaccessible to normal consciousness. Almost as if his mind had created a warrior double, a creature formed out of Flanders clay, as his dream had suggested. And he had brought it home with him. (245)

Like Freud in ‘The “Uncanny”’, Rivers postulates the origin of the double as a defence against (the fear of) the destruction of the ego, against death. Like Freud’s doubles, however, Prior’s warrior self ‘reverses its aspect’, and ‘becomes the uncanny harbinger of death’.⁶⁸ But death for what, or for whom? The double is a threat to Prior, as the incident where it (he) burns his (own) hand demonstrates. But the above passage suggests that the monstrous double also spells death for ‘England’,

⁶⁷ Compare Sassoon’s ‘Blighters’, in *War Poems*, p. 57.

⁶⁸ ‘The “Uncanny”’, p. 235.

for 'home', for the bonds of the social order, by putting into crisis the exclusions on which they are founded. War, *The Eye in the Door* suggests, is the return from 'outside' of the violence within. Prior's split consciousness and paranoia, therefore, echo in miniature the psychic economy of a nation looking to blame its violence and disintegration on an external enemy, or an alien intruder within: Germany, or 'The First 47,000' of the Pemberton Billing affair. As Prior realises, however, 'whatever it was he needed to be afraid of, it was on this side of the door' (131).

War is represented in *The Eye in the Door* as a liminal space-time in which the relationship between fantasy and reality, the boundaries of the self, the nation and the human, and the problem of violence and sexuality, are put in question. In the final volume of the *Trilogy*, Barker gives this liminal zone a name: 'the ghost road'. The novel's epigraph, from Edward Thomas's 'Roads', suggests that the uncanniness of the ghost road is due to its two-way traffic:

Now all roads lead to France
And heavy is the tread
Of the living; but the dead
Returning lightly dance.⁶⁹

The road to France is trodden by those who feel themselves to be 'ghosts in the making' (46), or, as Sassoon puts it in *The Eye in the Door*, 'dead already' (223), for whom the Front is the only 'solution' to social and psychological splits, 'the only *clean* place to be' (*Eye*, 275).⁷⁰ Alive or dead, they are, Barker suggests, abjected reminders of the violence suffered and perpetrated in the name of England, and their

⁶⁹ Edward Thomas, 'Roads', in *Poems and Last Poems*, ed. by Edna Longley (London: Collins, 1973), pp. 102-04 (p. 104).

passages to and from France open England to the destabilising effects of this violence.

Working with psychologically traumatised and brain-damaged soldiers at the Empire Hospital for Officers, Rivers too is on the ghost road. His work at the imaginary boundary of England, and of life and death, prompts memories of his fieldwork on Eddystone Island in 1914, memories which, in Part Two of the novel, take on an almost hallucinatory intensity—and, for a time, take over Rivers's half of the text. In the division of labour agreed with his colleague Hocart at the beginning of their stay, Rivers was meant to work on 'ghosts, sex, marriage and kinship', and Hocart on 'death, funerary rites and skull houses', but they quickly find that 'no division really made sense'. Offering to reallocate ghosts to Hocart, Rivers reflects that 'on Eddystone ghosts and sex *did* go together'—as, for example, in the belief that men who fell asleep on a certain beach would fall victim to Ange Mate, the ghost of a woman who died in childbirth, who would force them to have sex with her and leave them with 'a long list of complaints, not the least of which was a disappearing penis' (132-33). This failure of attempts at 'division' marks the return of the questions raised in *The Eye in the Door* about the relationship between sexuality and death, eros and thanatos, and culture and violence.

This question arises most uncomfortably in relation to the practice of head-hunting. The British have banned head-hunting, and the absence of this 'aphrodisiac' (158) has, in Rivers's view, led to population decline—much of it 'deliberate'—and a general 'listlessness and lethargy':

⁷⁰ Compare Sassoon, *Memoirs*, pp. 549, 611 and 619, and Owen, *Collected Letters*, p. 571

Head-hunting was what they had lived for. Though it might seem callous or frivolous to say so, head-hunting had been the most tremendous *fun* and without it life lost almost all its zest.

This was a people perishing from the absence of war. (207)

This picture is reinforced by the preponderance of old people amongst those Rivers remembers from Eddystone: the only children who feature in his memories are Kwini, a baby whose mother has died and who is herself close to death from starvation, and the nameless boy taken from the neighbouring island of Ysabel as a captive 'head'. The concept that best describes the condition of the people on Eddystone after Britain's imposition of its own moral codes, Barker suggests, is the one that Rivers's informant and friend Njiru applies to some of his patients: *mate*, not dead, but in 'a state of which death was the appropriate outcome' (134).⁷¹

Rivers's musings reinforce *The Ghost Road's* questioning of whether *mate* also describes England as the war drags to its end. The 'fey' (258) state of the soldiers on the road to France, 'in the War' and therefore 'outside of life', as Sassoon puts it in *Sherston's Progress* (619), reflects a disintegration of the idea of the nation as much as of the self. This theme is explored in *The Ghost Road* through Prior, particularly in his role as an almost-double of Wilfred Owen, whose trajectory he shadows in the last months of the war, from his arrival at the Clarence Gardens Hotel in Scarborough to his death on the banks of the Sambre-Oise canal. During their stay in Amiens on the way to the Front, Prior and Owen '[exchange] secretive smiles' at the young Hallet's attempts to formulate patriotic justifications of the war 'that he

(31 August 1918).

⁷¹ This application of the concept of *mate* rather problematically echoes colonial views of the condition of colonised peoples in the late-nineteenth century. See M. P. K. Sorrenson, 'Māori and Pākehā', in *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, 2nd edn, ed. by Geoffrey W. Rice (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 141-66 (p. 162).

had hitherto assumed everybody shared' (143). Like the 'half-limbed' veterans in Owen's 'Smile, Smile, Smile', they '[smile] at one another curiously / Like secret men who know their secret safe'.⁷² 'Neither probably could have said of what the secret consisted', Barker writes, but the text suggests that it has to do with the meaning of the 'fallen petals' of the roses Owen had picked that afternoon: 'Pink, yellow, white roses, but no red roses, Prior saw.' (143) Owen's refusal of red roses both expresses a desire not to be reminded of the wounds that await them—red roses being traditionally associated with wounds, and with the presence of death in Arcadia—and refuses identification with the nation in the name of whose 'integrity', as 'Smile, Smile, Smile' has it, they are being sent to their death.⁷³

Outside the nation, in the liminal, formless zone of the Western Front, oppositions are reinforced, reversed and dissolved: the monstrous and the normal, dead and alive, inside and outside, victim and aggressor, sex and violence. 'By any proper civilized standard', Prior thinks, 'we are objects of horror.' But, as he also asks, 'what does *that* mean *now*?' (200). Reflecting on the emptying-out of meaning from words such as 'patriotism honour courage vomit vomit vomit', to the point that only the names of battles mean anything anymore, he realises 'there's another group of words that still mean something':

⁷² Owen, *Complete Poems*, p. 190.

⁷³ On roses, see Fussell, *Modern Memory*, pp. 243-46. On the Englishness of roses, compare Prior's response to Marshall-of-the-Ten-Wounds's tears over 'Rose of England': 'I looked along the row and there was Marshall with great big fat tears rolling down his cheeks. I envied him.' (219) Owen's soldiers in 'Smile, Smile, Smile' smile at the 'rulers' who arrogate to themselves the right to send men to their deaths to '[keep] this nation in integrity': 'This is the thing they know and never speak, / That England one by one had fled to France, / Not many elsewhere now, save under France.' (*Complete Poems*, p. 190)

Little words that trip through sentences unregarded: us, them, we, they, here, there. These are the words of power, and long after we're gone, they'll lie about in the language, like the unexploded grenades in these fields, and any one of them'll take your hand off. (257)

Prior's thoughts on the dichotomous 'words of power' are Barker's version of what Paul Fussell calls 'the modern *versus* habit': 'One of the legacies of the war', he writes, 'is just this habit of simple distinction, simplification, and opposition. If truth is the main casualty in war, ambiguity is another.'⁷⁴ Barker's text, however, suggests that ambiguity and adversarial thinking are intimately connected: that the latter is a defence against the former, and thus that war encourages 'the *versus* habit' precisely to the extent that it confounds oppositions.

It is in Prior's sexual encounters, with the prostitute Elinor and with the unnamed French farm boy, that the connection between adversarial thinking and the dissolution of boundaries can be seen most clearly. With Elinor, Prior is unable to get aroused until he notices the evidence of previous clients: then he feels 'excitement [...], no, more than that, the sober certainty of power'. His is the power of the payer over the one being paid, of a man over a woman, but also a power to communicate, through her body, with 'all the men who'd passed through, through Scarborough, through her, on their way to the Front'. It is an ambiguous power, too, because the communication takes the form of being inhabited by a throng of ghosts who, once the light is turned off, are 'free to enter' and to use his body—as he is to enter and use hers (40). But for Prior, it is all too easy to cross over from being the payer to being the one paid: he recognizes the 'shuttered' look on Elinor's face with the muscles of his own, and has to find a different array of identifications in order to

⁷⁴ Fussell, *Modern Memory*, p. 79.

ward off the recognition. 'The only way not to be her was to hate her', so he transforms Elinor into the 'snarling, baby-eating boche' they use for revolver practice (41). The ghosts inhabiting him do not want that; 'he [feels] them withdraw, like a wave falling back', but he keeps on, until Elinor makes him come by '[ramming her] finger hard up his arse'. He is 'hoist on his own petard. That had always been one of *his* tricks to speed the unreasonably lingering guest' (42).

Prior's conjuring of a German 'target' as a defence against his recognition of himself in Elinor is perhaps the simplest of the shifting identifications at work here. As he gets ready to leave, he decides that he will not break his own rule against paying for sex again:

It might work for some men, but ... not for him. For him, it was all slip and slither, running across shingle. He hadn't been sure at the end who was fucking who. Even the excitement he'd felt at the idea of sliding in on another man's spunk was ambiguous, to say the least. Not that he minded ambiguity—he couldn't have lived at all if he'd minded *that*—but this was the kind of ambiguity people hide behind. And he was too proud to hide. (42-43)

In its attempt to delineate ambiguity, this passage is itself ambiguous. Prior recognises uncertainty about 'who was fucking who', but is only partially conscious of the dissolution of his own identity in a ghostly possession. Indeed, he seems to be hiding from one ambiguity—his own proximity to death, his kinship with the ghosts—behind another—his kinship with Elinor, the prostitute, whom he can then forget (43). Sex and war, sex and death, sex and killing, sex and ghosts, all do go together here.

A week or so before he is killed, Prior has another sexual encounter which is governed by ambiguity and the crossing of a boundary between one identity and

another. The French boy asks for cigarettes in exchange for sex, ‘*in German*’, and once again, instead of being ‘disgusted’, Prior finds himself aroused, feeling both hostility— ‘My God. Have you really got your head stuck so deep in the fucking pig bucket you don’t know which army’s up the other end?’—and desire (247; emphasis in original). In entering the boy’s body, Prior imagines himself embracing his supposed enemy, ‘the shadowy figures one used to glimpse through periscopes in the trenches’, who are close now, just ‘on the other side of that tight French sphincter’ (248). That to embrace them is also to embrace his own death is suggested, moreover, by the intertextual presence not only of Owen’s ‘Strange Meeting’—what Prior is imagining is surely a ‘strange meeting’—but of Lawrence’s ‘Odour of Chrysanthemums’, in the ‘smell of chrysanths left too long in water’ of the boy’s arse (248), the ‘dank’, raw landscape and the ‘burnt-looking colour’ of the boy’s hair (247).⁷⁵

Barker uses similar colours in her descriptions of London in this final autumn of the war. In Westminster the leaves turn ‘not to the brilliant reds and golds of the countryside, but a shabby tarnished yellow’ (53-54), ‘golden leaves’ are (nonetheless) ‘trodden in the mud’ in Vincent Square (223), and a ‘brown fog’ with ‘coils of sulphurous vapour’ envelopes the Empire Hospital (259). But, as Rivers thinks of the waning of ‘beliefs’, ‘one must beware of attributing everything to the war’ (225). To do so would be to imply only a one-way relationship between the war and the condition of England, whereas war, as Elizabeth Bowen writes in *The Heat*

⁷⁵ Compare Owen, ‘Strange Meeting’, in *Complete Poems*, pp. 148-49, and the description of the winter setting and the ‘cold, deathly smell of chrysanthemums’ in Lawrence’s story of a woman’s confrontation with ‘death, her ultimate master’ (‘Odour of Chrysanthemums’, in *Collected Stories* (London: Everyman and Campbell, 1994), pp. 361-79 (pp. 361, 373 and 379)); see also Barker’s use of chrysanthemums in *Regeneration*, p. 163.

of the Day and Barker insistently suggests in *The Regeneration Trilogy*, does not start anything that was not there already (33). It is, rather, an uncanny return, opening up a space for other returns, other border crossings.⁷⁶

This dynamic of return might explain some of the formal repetition in *The Ghost Road*. Barker repeats herself almost verbatim on pages 63 and 236, in her accounts of Rivers's visit to the skull houses, and—the aspect of the text that puzzles Bergonzi—she often repeats other writers almost word for word. In a more obviously 'experimental' text, these echoes would perhaps be readily accepted as deliberate intertextuality, but in Barker's apparently realist novels they pose a critical problem: as already noted, Bergonzi can explain her repetition of Hemingway and Owen only in terms of unconscious 'lifting' on Barker's part. I would suggest, however, that textual repetition, in *The Ghost Road* in particular, marks the attempt to represent the war as a space of returns, of memories, including textual memories, that resurface unbidden, and of indeterminate textual as well as psychic and national boundaries.

In a moment that can be read as a comment on her own novelistic method, Barker has Rivers reflect, of the ghosts seen by Sassoon and by the Eddystone islanders, that

[they] were not an attempt at evasion [...]. Rather, the questions [asked by the ghosts] became more insistent, more powerful, for being projected into the mouths of the dead. (212)

⁷⁶ This is certainly how Freud saw it: see, for example, 'Thoughts for the Times on War and Death' (1915), *SE XIV* (1957), pp. 273-302, especially pp. 299-300.

This passage parallels Barker's assertion that the Great War has 'come to stand for the pain of all wars', and therefore that questions about that war's causes, meaning and effect have a universal application: they are present questions.⁷⁷ Projecting them into the mouths of the dead gives them an uncanny charge, making them less easily evaded or denied. But, as I have argued above, *The Regeneration Trilogy* asks a series of perhaps more disturbing questions, about war and sex, inside and outside, cause and effect, which disrupt any easy closure based on simple pity for the suffering caused by war, or on a straightforward linear relationship between past and present.

At this point, I would like to return to the question of how different *The Regeneration Trilogy*'s representation of the Great War really is from the dominant British cultural memory, the myth, of that event. Despite the over-inflated claims of some critics, Barker's perspective on gender, class and sexuality during the Great War is not radically new: she herself points her readers to sources—Showalter and Leed—on which her work is based. The power and interest of the *Trilogy* lies instead, I would suggest, in her 'regeneration' of the issues of violence, national identity, and sexuality in the work of the war poets, particularly Owen. Through this monstrous regeneration, she contests the "'Poppy Day" nationalism' that recuperates these poets for the nation in the pleurably melancholy, and very English, narrative of 'doomed youth'. In doing so, moreover, she explores in more depth than does Swift in *The Sweet Shop Owner* the idea that contemporary England is melancholically fixated on the trauma of the Great War: if melancholia, as Freud and others have argued, is an indication of ambivalence about the lost object, then *The*

⁷⁷ In Reusch.

Regeneration Trilogy interprets that postwar English melancholia as the marker of the class, gender and sexual conflicts that surfaced during the war but that were recorded only in encrypted form in the memory of an England lost on the Somme.

It is through Prior that these concerns are explored most insistently and explicitly. As I have already noted, aspects of his pre-war life, and his service history, parallel Wilfred Owen's. Like Owen, Prior is in the Second Manchester Battalion, and like him, he is sent to the 13th Casualty Clearing Station in April 1917, diagnosed neurasthenic, and sent to Craiglockhart. After their time in Scotland, their lives diverge until they attend a Medical Board in Scarborough and return to active service. They are both posted to France, to the Second Manchesters, and, as already noted, die together attempting to cross the Sambre-Oise canal in November 1918, a week before the Armistice. At least as significant, however, is the way that Barker constructs Prior from Owen's wartime letters and poems. The account Prior gives Rivers of going over the top in *Regeneration*, for example, when he speaks of '[keeping] up a kind of chanting. "Not so fast. Steady on the left!"', of feeling 'exultation' at exposing himself and surviving, of the ground covered with 'writhing' wounded, and of 'fluttering down' to earth after being blown into the air by a shell (79), is drawn from Owen's letter of 14 May 1917, and from his poem 'The Show', which expands on the imagery of the letter.⁷⁸ Prior borrows Owen's memory again in *The Eye in the Door* when, trying to inoculate himself against sympathy for his childhood friend William Roper, a conscientious objector held naked in Wandsworth Detention Centre, he remembers winter in the trenches. In 'The Show' and in his letters of 19 January and 4 February 1917, Owen describes what Prior remembers: a

⁷⁸ *Collected Letters*, p. 458, and *Complete Poems*, pp. 155-56.

lunar landscape, the trenches blown flat, water bottles frozen, and a hawk overhead the only sign of life in what he calls 'a frozen desert', 'like the face of the moon chaotic, crater-ridden, uninhabitable, awful, the abode of madness'.⁷⁹

It is in *The Ghost Road*, however, that Prior's role as something close to a double for Owen becomes central. Both the third- and first-person versions of his passage towards death are closely based on Owen's letters, from the interlude in Amiens, to the description of Marshall-of-the-Ten-Wounds and the 'sheer fighting' of the beginning of October 1918, to the final entry written in a cellar a few nights before the attack on the canal. At some points, this echoing enables Barker to describe *Owen's* last days from Prior's perspective. During the stay in Amiens, for example, Prior watches Owen 'looting for furniture', 'gathering roses from bewildered gardens', and finding a child's lace surplice in the rubble of the city, as he describes in his letters to Susan Owen of 9 to 12 September 1918 (142-45).⁸⁰ At other times, Prior himself voices or shares feelings drawn from Owen's letters and poems: the strange sense of being temporarily out of time at Amiens, for example, or the secret smile they exchange at Hallet's patriotism (see above). This sharing mutates into something stronger when Prior seems actually to stand in for Owen: for example, when he writes to Rivers that his 'nerves are in perfect working order' (254), or when his last journal entry describes the same scene in a smoky cellar as Owen's last letter, with the same affirmation of belonging to the nation that is now in France (257-58).⁸¹

⁷⁹ Compare *Ghost Road*, p. 54 with Owen, *Collected Letters*, pp. 429-30 and *Complete Poems*, p. 155.

⁸⁰ *Collected Letters*, pp. 574-75.

⁸¹ *Collected Letters* pp. 580-81 and 590-91.

Recognition of these parallels begs the question of what Barker gains by choosing to represent this experience through Prior rather than through Owen himself. Obviously, one clear advantage is the space it gives her to invent. This invention tends to work in a specific direction, however: in Prior, Barker explores and develops hints in the Owen material that echo her interest in the destabilisation of identity, time and place. Owen writes, for example, of 'bewildered gardens', and of feeling quite 'merry' about the destruction of Amiens, for all the houses were 'in bad style', and in any case 'probably by now the soldiers whose these houses were or were to have been are Unreturning', so 'no pity whatever for their destruction moves me'—a tacit statement that the nation of soldiers is the only nation worth caring about. Owen says that he '[kicks] joyfully about the debris, and only [feels] a twinge of sadness when a little child's copy-book or frock or crumpled little hat is laid bare'.⁸² Barker intensifies this into Prior's almost-sexual joy at the ruin of these 'solid bourgeois houses': a feeling that combines the soldier's hostility to civilians with his pre-existing affinity for violent assaults on the established order (140). Owen's melancholy awareness of the 'little child', meanwhile, becomes in Barker something close to a literal haunting: a rocking horse in the nursery of the abandoned house they are billeted in begins to rock, apparently set going by the wind, and continues to rumble in Prior's head all night (153-54).

This choice is not without its problems. Notably, Barker's exploration of sexuality is focused almost entirely on Prior. Sassoon, Rivers and Owen might all, in her view, be homosexuals, but they are not *actively* sexual in the *Trilogy*, whereas Prior is almost priapically so. It is 'uncharacteristic crudity' for Sassoon, for

⁸² To Susan Owen, 10 September 1918, *Collected Letters*, p. 575.

example, even to think ‘when did you two last get it up?’ of the old men in the club in Edinburgh (*Regeneration*, 114), but for Prior such thoughts are commonplace. The representation of sexuality almost entirely through the consciousness of a northern, working-class character risks reinforcing the association of the northern working classes with the body—a problematic aspect of Barker’s earlier work remarked on by Philip Dodd.⁸³ Without wishing to downplay this issue, I would nonetheless suggest that the most important thing about Prior is that his is a late-twentieth-century sensibility.⁸⁴ Bergonzi, Shephard and Löschnigg are, therefore, both right and wrong about him. He *is* a modern character—indeed, he is rather like Barker herself, a ‘confidently stropky’ product of the grammar schools of the 1950s.⁸⁵ Through him, Barker can raise *contemporary* questions about the Great War and therefore, in her view, about all wars, and about contemporary Britain. It is Prior who signals most clearly what is at stake in Barker’s late-twentieth-century, post-consensus reading of the Great War: the question of the roots of the violence that troubles Britain now, literally and discursively, and that is to a greater or lesser extent the subject of all of Barker’s fiction. As a ‘visitant’ from another time, as Bergonzi puts it, and as an outsider who is also an insider, Prior not only ‘pries’ open wartime English society along the faultlines of class, gender and sexuality, but also

⁸³ ‘Lowryscapes: Recent Writings about “the North”’, *Critical Quarterly*, 32.2 (Summer 1990), 17-28 (pp. 21 and 25-26).

⁸⁴ My understanding of Prior has been substantially enriched by discussions of *The Regeneration Trilogy* with Roberta Jackson, whose stimulating readings of Barker I would like to acknowledge here.

⁸⁵ Shephard, p. 13. Barker attended a local girls’ grammar school in Teesside (Westman, p. 9).

stands in for Barker and the reader.⁸⁶ He is our ghost in the text, and also the means by which the ghosts of that time can speak with us or even, more disturbingly, inhabit us, taking possession of our bodies as they do of Prior's when he has sex with Elinor. Moreover, he becomes a ghostly presence in Owen's writing too: returning to Owen's letters after reading *The Regeneration Trilogy*, one cannot help looking for him in Owen's references to the other officers at Scarborough or Amiens.

Contra Westman, therefore, I would argue that *The Regeneration Trilogy* does offer a retelling of Sassoon's and Owen's lives in 1917-18: not a faithful realist retelling, but a rewriting that aims to return to—and to return to us—that which, in their lives and in their work, cannot be incorporated within 'Poppy Day' nationalism.⁸⁷ The *Trilogy* refuses the consolations of an English melancholia which seeks to regenerate the nation around its lost, best self, by insisting on the ambivalent, violent underpinnings of that melancholia. To what extent, then, can these texts be understood as works of mourning? Barker's assertion that we must free ourselves from the disabling effects of 'distorted memory' suggests that confronting the full extent of the war's destabilisation of identities, national and individual, and of the boundary between the human and the monstrous, would make a kind of regeneration, or at least an escape from 'paranoia', possible. But it is less and less certain as the *Trilogy* progresses whether a 'clear' view of the past or the present would provide much consolation.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Bergonzi, 'Pat Barker's Trilogy', p. 8. See also Mark Sinker, 'Temporary Gentlemen', *Sight and Sound*, December 1997, pp. 22-24 (p. 24), where Barker asserts that Prior's 'perspective is our perspective because it's the perspective of the outsider—in class, in sexuality and in temperament. He is completely outside'. He is also, of course, completely *inside* the England that would treat him as other.

⁸⁷ Westman, p. 58.

⁸⁸ See Mackenzie, p. 31.

Arguably, of course, the failure or rejection of mourning is an important theme of Owen's mature work, and the last few pages of *The Ghost Road* invite comparison, above all, with Owen's 'Futility'. Prior, Owen, and many more of the Manchesters lie dead on the canal bank, their attack a failure. The sun has risen, and its first shaft '[discovers] here the back of a hand, there the side of a neck, lending a rosy glow to skin from which the blood has fled'. 'Finding nothing here that can respond to it', it passes on, to seep into the tall windows of the Empire Hospital ward where Rivers, having just arranged Hallet's body in death, 'struggles to stay awake'. There is no consolation in either place: we are left with death and with the ghost-ridden Rivers, pondering 'the fingerless, the crippled, the broken'—and we are unsure whether these are the dead, or those still living (275-76). Barker's refusal of consolation is, however, no more extreme than Owen's. The dead of 'Futility', as Jahan Ramazani notes, do not 'achieve apotheosis in the ideal of the state', or, indeed, in any other form of transcendence.⁸⁹ Owen mocks, with increasing anger, the tired and inadequate notion that the sun might know how to wake the dead soldier, and, indeed, the notion that the sun itself might be 'kind'. Unlike earlier elegists, he does not 'move from accusatory questions toward a comforting resolution', but in the other direction: 'the poem summons the traditional compensatory hopes of elegy but turns against them, transforming the sun from a parent with a gentle touch into inane rays of light. [...] Life reverts neither to the mystic One of Shelley nor to the benevolent deity of Milton and Tennyson but to the inert earth'.⁹⁰ Of another mature Owen poem, 'Exposure', Douglas Kerr writes that

⁸⁹ 'Futility', in *Complete Poems*, p. 158, Ramazani, pp. 70-71.

⁹⁰ Ramazani, p. 75.

it represents 'a dark, entropic, God-forsaken end-game of a world, from which energy, value, and life itself have all but completely leaked away', and in which the official values of nature, home and the nation are bankrupt.⁹¹ The disruption of traditional elegy is, moreover, intensified by the awareness in Owen's work of the poet's and the reader's complicity, even pleasure, in the suffering depicted in his work: a pleasure which raises similar questions about the ambiguous relationships between war and sex, suffering and inflicting suffering, and self and other, as does Barker's *Trilogy*.⁹²

It is odd, then, that Barker is so unforthcoming about, even seemingly unaware of, her texts' relationship with *literary* representations of the war. Perhaps it is a case of anxiety of influence—although Owen, Sassoon and Blunden, at least as war writers, are less problematic literary forebears for someone with Barker's political concerns than another male writer, Lawrence, whose influence she has explicitly denied.⁹³ Perhaps she considers the relationship too obvious to mention, taking the war poets' work for granted as the starting point of her writing. Or perhaps she sees herself as using their work to flesh out a verisimilitude understood primarily in *historical* terms, thus implicitly affirming the divide between 'history' and 'fiction' that, I have argued, her own texts disrupt, or collapsing 'fiction' into 'history'. Barker's silence on this point is intriguing, but does not, I would argue,

⁹¹ *Wilfred Owen's Voices: Language and Community* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 12.

⁹² See Sillars, pp. 85-92.

⁹³ As Michael Ross has shown, although Barker has publicly denied that Lawrence was 'helpful' to her as a writer, her novels seem to 'reflect a profound yet incompletely realized engagement with him', including in her representation of Prior ('Acts of Re-vision: Lawrence as Intertext in the Novels of Pat Barker', *D. H. Lawrence Review*, 26.1-3 (1995-96), 51-63 (pp. 52 and 58)).

detract from the impact of *The Regeneration Trilogy*.⁹⁴ On the contrary, the fact that the presence of the work of the war writers is unexplained strengthens the sense one has that the *Trilogy* enacts the legacy of the Great War as a form of haunting. The work of Owen, Sassoon, Blunden and others, acquiring renewed energy from its encounters with our own spectral representative in the liminal space of the ghost road, returns in monstrous form to disrupt not only the regenerative national remembrance in whose service it has been enlisted, but also the belief that the questions it raises are questions that can be dealt with, easily or adequately, by realism.

⁹⁴ Indeed, the example of *Another World* (London: Viking, 1998) would suggest that a more thoroughly thought-out approach to the dynamics of cultural and individual memory can make for a *less* interesting, because more programmatic, text.

CHAPTER FOUR

‘DYING OF ENGLAND’:

THE NOVELS OF ADAM THORPE

With Adam Thorpe’s novels, we turn away from Barker’s northern perspective on Englishness to an exploration of the South Country: the landscape which, as Barker suggests in *The Eye in the Door*, was the imagined opposite of the landscape of war and industrial modernity, and in search of which so many interwar journeys were made. This idea of England is powerful in Thorpe’s work; indeed, perhaps because he spent his childhood in India and Cameroon as well as England, and moved to France in the early 1990s, he draws attention more than either Swift or Barker do to England *as* an idea, and to Englishness as an identity both desired and rejected, but never simply or automatically possessed. His novels enact an agonised, ambivalent relationship to the English histories they tell, or, in the case of *Still* (1995) and to a lesser extent *Pieces of Light* (1998), are unable to tell. What troubles these narratives above all is the violent history hidden at the heart of the South Country, and their project, I will suggest, is to explore the relationship between this idea of England, memories of war, and what they represent as the melancholic paralysis—on occasion developing into disintegrative mania—of contemporary Englishness.¹

¹ This chapter deals with Thorpe’s first three novels, *Ulverton* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1992), *Still* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1995) and *Pieces of Light* (London: Cape, 1998), references to which will be given in parentheses. Thorpe’s most recent novel, *Nineteen Twenty-One* (London: Cape, 2001), seems to imagine a renewal of turn-of-the-millennium Englishness through a return to an earlier postwar moment of creative renewal, the mythical

In Thorpe's second novel, *Still*, the narrator Ricky Thornby—a failed film director who is obsessively reconstructing a period from his grandparents' lives just before the First World War—imagines his grandfather, Giles Trevelyan, standing on the swampy playing field of his second-rate boarding school, 'gazing at this scrappy little oak wood under drizzle and thinking how he might just spot Pan cavorting in there on his hairy goat-legs'. 'My grandfather's view of the world', Ricky comments,

is basically a lot of England divided between the shallow bits and the deep bits. The shallow bits can be anywhere and so can the deep bits, but generally the deep bits need to have trees or at least some kind of shady greenery except that there's a view of the downs near Hamilton Lodge with nothing but a few juniper bushes on it and a lot of sheep plus shepherd [...] of which the bottom has definitely not yet been sounded. (378-79)

Ricky's 'shallow' and 'deep' Englands are a fitting entry point into the imaginary geography of Thorpe's England, and the versions of Englishness that this geography sustains. Strongly influenced by the debates about Britain's 'heritage culture' that preoccupied many commentators in the 1980s and early 1990s, Thorpe's novels explore the structures of feeling that animate 'Deep England'.² They do not position

drought summer of 1921. It was published after this chapter was substantially completed, however, and so will not be discussed here.

² The influence of Patrick Wright's *On Living in an Old Country* is particularly marked: it is from Wright that Thorpe draws the notion of 'Deep England', as well as many of the general ideas about history and heritage that inform *Ulverton*. 'Deep England', according to Wright, is a 'merger of history and landscape' in which the essence of the nation can be experienced as an indefinable 'sacrament', and is a key element in the freezing and abstraction of history in contemporary Britain. Moreover, it is a sacrament in which only the elect can participate. To be a subject of Deep England one must have been there in childhood; the memory of this England and the memory of the time before the Fall into conscious memory and self-understanding must be intertwined (pp. 74 and 81-87). As we shall see, for the protagonists of *Still* and *Pieces of Light*, the desire to be subjects of Deep England is a form of melancholia, even of madness: a paralysing denial of their own and England's histories.

themselves as safely outside these structures of feeling, however. Rather, they work from the midst of an uneasy mix of nostalgia and critique, attempting to enact from within an anatomy of end-of-the-century English melancholia and a complicated, deeply ambivalent, work of mourning for ideas of England that they cannot not want. In the process, they return repeatedly to key memory-sites for contemporary Englishness—the English countryside and the country house, the trenches of Flanders—and to the historical moments in and around which the meaning of these sites was shaped.

Hamilton Lodge—the Trevelyan family’s country house—is in Fawholt, a few miles from the eponymous setting of Thorpe’s first novel, *Ulverton* (1992), and that of his third, *Pieces of Light*, and the description above situates these places firmly in the symbolically weighted landscape of the South Country. Popularised by Edward Thomas in his 1909 book, the South Country is central to the pastoral Englishness discussed in Chapter One. This landscape, wrote Thomas, includes

all that country which is dominated by the Downs or by the English Channel, or by both [...]. Roughly speaking, it is the country south of the Thames and Severn and east of Exmoor, and it includes, therefore, the counties of Kent, Sussex, Surrey, Hampshire, Berkshire, Wiltshire, Dorset, and part of Somerset.

It is recognisably that remembered by Giles in *Still*:

East and west across it go ranges of chalk hills, their sides smoothly hollowed by Nature and the marl-burner, or sharply scored by old roads. On their lower slopes they carry the chief woods of the south country, their coombes are often fully fledged with trees, and sometimes their high places are crowned with beech or fir; but they are most admirably themselves when they are bare of all but grass and a few bushes of gorse and juniper

and some yew, and their ridges make flowing but infinitely variable clear lines against the sky.³

Embedded in this landscape is a particular historical and social vision, of 'continuity, of community or harmony, and above all a special kind of classlessness', a vision embodied in the archetypal countryman such as Thomas's 'Lob', who may be 'poor Jack of every trade', but also 'Wedded the king's daughter of Canterbury', and as the twentieth century opens is 'a squire's son / Who loved wild bird and beast, and dog and gun'.⁴ And lest we should think that this vision of English society and landscape has vanished, here is a recent example, from Scruton's *England: An Elegy*. The English, Scruton writes,

remade the landscape as the outward sign of their inner unity, as a place that was a fitting home for their collective act of dwelling. And all that they most loved in their society—the permeable boundaries that kept them apart, the negotiations and compromises that healed the wounds of conflict, the overarching law-abidingness and the sense of belonging and ownership which redeemed the accidents of nature—they unconsciously imprinted on the face of England, to produce that inimitable patchwork which was one of the few things, besides the clouds and the climate, that their painters knew how to furnish with a soul.⁵

The 'inimitable patchwork' of the English landscape is here read as the sign of a consensus in which all social divisions are reconciled as 'internal to the English settlement'.⁶

³ *The South Country* (London: Hutchinson, 1984), pp. 1-2.

⁴ Howkins, 'Discovery of Rural England', pp. 75-76, Edward Thomas, 'Lob', in *Poems*, pp. 68-72, ll. 134, 106 and 43-44.

⁵ Scruton, p. 85.

⁶ Scruton, p. 148.

The choice of Ulverton for what Thorpe has described as ‘a crystallization of Englishness’, however, signals not the social harmony and historical continuity of the ‘English settlement’, but violent discontinuity.⁷ Although Ulverton cannot be found on any contemporary map, it would appear that this was, until the late eleventh century, the name of what is now Newbury, in Berkshire, which in *Ulverton* is nearby; after the Norman Conquest, the old settlement was replaced by a ‘new borough’ that was intended to be a focal point for trade in the area.⁸ Ulverton itself, therefore, inscribes at the heart of English history and of Englishness the violence that ‘Deep England’ obscures. As Auden put it in ‘In Praise of Limestone’, referring to both Italy and England, Rome and Britain,

this land is not the sweet home that it looks,
Nor its peace the historical calm of a site
Where something was settled once and for all.⁹

The unsettled nature of *Ulverton*’s pastoral was not widely recognised, in Britain at least, when it was first published, however. Most British critics seem to have read the novel as a fairly straightforward English pastoral: a celebration of changes ‘reconciled by continuity’, or a nostalgic lament for ‘the passing of the old ways (the blacksmith’s shop, the unfenced land, the horse and cart and the clop of

⁷ Sabine Hagenauer, “‘I Don’t See Much Point in Writing a Novel Unless the Reader Works.’ An Interview with Adam Thorpe”, http://www.pherfurt.de/~neumann/eese/artic96/hagenau/3_96.html [10 November 1998].

⁸ ‘Ulvritone’ is recorded in the Domesday Book as the name of the manor in which Newbury was founded by the Norman Arnulf de Hesdin: see Margaret Gelling, *The Place-Names of Berkshire: Part I*, English Place-Name Society, 49 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 257-59. Compare Silvia Mergenthal, ‘Englishness/Englishnesses in Contemporary Fiction’, in Korte and Müller, pp. 51-61 (p. 54).

⁹ W. H. Auden, ‘In Praise of Limestone’, in *Collected Poems*, ed. by Edward Mendelson (London: Faber, 1976), pp. 414-15 (p. 415).

croquet-mallets)' in the 'English pastoral/imperial tradition'.¹⁰ Thorpe's subversion of the pastoral seems to have been missed: an indication, perhaps, of a pervasive contemporary assumption that to write about the English countryside at all is to be a conservative nostalgist, and also of the difficulty of giving textual room to nostalgia without appearing uncritically to endorse it. This is particularly true in the case of a text that, like *Ulverton*, uses imitations of period styles in an attempt to evoke the 'mindset' of the times, because it is difficult to frame the imitation in such a way that the reader can confidently assess the text's attitude to this 'mindset'.¹¹ This uncertainty about the text's judgement on its proffered representations of England, however, gives an added, unsettling charge to *Ulverton*'s re-reading and re-writing of Englishness, by raising the question of the extent to which the novel's pasts inform and implicate the present.

As Thorpe recognises, the problem of the present's implication in the past surfaces with particular immediacy in two of the novel's twelve sections: 'Treasure: 1914' and 'Wing: 1953'.¹² 'Treasure' is ostensibly written by George Fergusson, who retired to Ulverton from the Indian Civil Service shortly before the First World

¹⁰ Nicholas Wollaston, 'Between the Furrows', *Observer*, 3 May 1992, p. 55, and John Bilston, 'Chronicles of Albion', *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 May 1992, p. 20. Thorpe suggests, slightly peevisly perhaps, that this misreading contributed to the novel's failure to win any major literary prizes, and that American, German and French critics were better able to grasp his attempt 'to do new things with the pastoral' (in Hagenauer; see also Tom Shone, 'The One That Got Away', *Sunday Times*, 27 December 1992, Section 4, p. 17). Not all British critics read *Ulverton* as a piece of pastoral nostalgia, however: see John Fowles, 'Thank the Gods for Bloody Mindedness', *Guardian*, 28 May 1992, 'Review', p. 25, and Hilary Mantel, 'Not Your Everyday Story of Country Folk', *Independent on Sunday*, 10 May 1992, 'Review', p. 33.

¹¹ Thorpe in Hagenauer.

¹² In Hagenauer.

War.¹³ Written from the vantage point of the mid- or late 1920s, it tells the story of the impact of the war on the village, through an account of Fergusson's involvement in an archaeological dig organised by the local squire in the summer and autumn of 1914. As the following passage shows, Fergusson's narrative echoes the lush cadences of interwar rural writers such as W. H. Hudson:

To breathe, to breathe deep of the biscuit scent of rain-swept barley, shuddering reluctantly at every gust! Or of the sweet richness of the vast hay-stack, thatched golden against the shadowy trees! What other sensations more likely to bring a fever of longing to the far-flung servant in some foul and sweaty imperial post, than these reminders of home, and of gentler seasons? For England is so very gentle, compared to the rest of her Empire. That is, the England of forest and stream, of meadow and vale and rolling downland. There her soft breath wafts over us, along with the tinkles of sheep and the high thudding bells of the ancient churches, marking a slower time than that of the outer world of power and striving: a slow pulse which seemed to me then, standing on that high place, eternally beating. (216)

At the end of the story, the church bell's tolling marks the deaths of one after another of the village's young men, who will not return 'to keep the heart of the village pumping strong' (249): the very sense of England as 'eternal', Fergusson suggests, is amongst those things 'withered and changed [...] for ever' by the war (214). Fergusson's nostalgia is representative of the common tendency after 1918 to see the war as bringing to an end a rural way of life unchanged for centuries, and of the more general nostalgia for a true, rural England that has been traced back at least as far as Wordsworth by David Gervais, and to the late seventeenth or early eighteenth

¹³ An earlier version of this story appears as 'The Squire's Treasure' in *New Writing 1*, ed. by Malcolm Bradbury and Judy Cooke (London: Minerva and British Council, 1992), pp. 338-54. In this version, the imitation of interwar rural writing is much fainter; Thorpe says that he made the story 'more authentic'—that is, a better copy of the work of writers like W. H. Hudson—when he rewrote it (in Hagenauer).

century by Raymond Williams.¹⁴ But the text undercuts Fergusson's attribution of this loss to the war, by showing that the Ulverton he mourns was never really there: it was a dream of 'home' that sustained him through years in the Indian Civil Service, a place to retire to with his wife, who died before they left India, and thus always absent or lost.¹⁵ 'Treasure' suggests, therefore, that the interwar evocation of a gentle and eternal, but threatened, England is an attempt to consolidate Englishness against the destabilising effects of colonialism and war. And *Ulverton* as a whole, with its insistence on violence and on the manifold political, economic, social and cultural connections between deep England and the 'outer world of power and striving', undercuts this idea of Englishness still further.

In the next section, 'Wing: 1953', a series of diary entries record the life of Violet Nightingale, the put-upon secretary of Mr Herbert Bradman, a pompous, reactionary cartoonist for *Punch* who, hoping to transcend 'the dross of our so-called "civilisation"' and 'the material shards of a lesser world', is writing his memoirs for burial in a time capsule on Coronation Day (299). There is much of Evelyn Waugh and his reaction to 'the age of Hooper' in Bradman, played for comic effect—as are the villagers' arguments over the appropriate way to celebrate what one of them calls 'our new Elizabethan era of streamlined speed & efficiency' (294) and, up to a point,

¹⁴ Gervais, pp. 1-27, Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973), p. 26. Donna Landry traces the invention of the English 'countryside' as an object of idealisation and nostalgia to the period between the Game Act of 1671 and its repeal in 1831 (*The Invention of the Countryside: Hunting, Walking and Ecology in English Literature 1671-1831* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 1-2). On the actual impact of the First World War on rural England, see Howkins, *Reshaping Rural England*, p. 272.

¹⁵ Michael Gorra comments that 'the Raj's fantasy of Englishness stressed the compensatory coziness of a country as unlike the empire as possible—an England all chintz and cottages and weathered Cotswold stone that seems to have been there always. It was the dream of "Home," the green and pleasant land, that district officers and their wives nourished around

Violet's misplaced faith in Bradman's genius, her dogged daily recording of the generally dismal weather and food ('Cold, sleety. Spam' (261)), and her fondness for 'Don Carlos & his Samba Orchestra' and Cherry Heering (259).¹⁶ But 'Wing' takes a darker turn as Violet's diary entries plot her psychological disintegration, a disintegration caused, on one level, by Bradman's affair with Miss Enid Walwyn, but more fundamentally by Violet's half-recognition that she has been misreading her place in the England with which she has identified so strongly.

Violet, a lower-middle-class northerner, grieving for a boyfriend who 'pranged on ops' (259), has attempted to displace her grief and make a place for herself in Ulverton not only by identifying herself with Bradman's 'Project', but also by adopting the South Country Englishness promoted by interwar countryside writing and the ideology of the People's War. She takes an earnest interest in the local flora and fauna and in the architecture of Ulverton House, which she sees as a 'huge sad temple' to a better past (285), echoing the contemporary habit of seeing 'the militarized country house [...] as a poignant neo-romantic symbol' of change and loss.¹⁷ Her cultural aspirations are both sad and comic: she does not know her T. S. Eliot or her Elgar (279, 297-98), and is given to second-hand, anodyne reflections on

the globe and then attempted to create when they retired to Cheltenham or Tunbridge Wells' (p. 165). See also Colls, *Identity of England*, p. 173.

¹⁶ Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited: The Sacred and Profane Memories of Captain Charles Ryder* (1945; London: Eyre Methuen, 1960), p. 380. After one encounter with Bradman's bad temper, Violet consoles herself with the thought that 'at least I'm not working for Mr Evelyn Waugh', whom she understands to be 'pure poison' (p. 262).

¹⁷ Wright, *Journey Through Ruins*, p. 75. James Lees-Milne, who ran the National Trust Country Houses Scheme from 1936 onward, mourned a 1946 acquisition in the following, floridly Bradmanesque, terms: 'This evening the whole tragedy of England impressed itself upon me. This small, not very important seat in the heart of our secluded country, is now deprived of its last squire. A whole social system has broken down. What will replace it beyond government by the masses, uncultivated, rancorous, savage, philistine, the enemies

eternity ('Makes you think' (280)), interspersed with comments on her bunions, her digestion and her circulation problems. But, looked at from another perspective, Violet is the embodiment of the English virtues as popularly constructed during the People's War: a belief in 'comradeship and cooperation, dedication to duty and self-sacrifice, a self-deprecating good humour and unselfconscious modesty'.¹⁸ If we are tempted, therefore, to dismiss Violet's modest cultural and social aspirations as only bathetically to be compared with the poet's flight 'on the viewless wings of Poesy', then the implication arises that we are siding with Bradman, for whom she represents 'the vulgus' (258) and 'that trivial and clogging stuff we call "daily life"' (299).¹⁹ The text positions her betrayal by Bradman, I would suggest, as paralleling the postwar abandonment of the more egalitarian hopes of the People's War, one of which was for an expanded cultural life for all the people of Britain.²⁰

Violet is sent mad by her confused apprehension that she has misread her relationship to Bradman's Project and to the centuries of labour and thwarted love, the 'long and systematic' process of 'exploitation and seizure', that created Ulverton House and the apparent 'settlement' of the English countryside.²¹ Her fate echoes

of all things beautiful? How I detest democracy. More and more I believe in benevolent autocracy.' (in Matless, p. 222)

¹⁸ Richards, *Films and British National Identity*, p. 106.

¹⁹ John Keats, 'Ode to a Nightingale', in *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. by Miriam Allott (London: Longman, 1970), pp. 523-32, l. 33.

²⁰ See Marwick, pp. 74-97. As Alan Sinfield points out, this vision of a more inclusive culture largely involved the extension of the old leisure class idea of 'good' culture to a wider section of society: it was therefore never truly inclusive (pp. 55-57). It was also undermined by the institutionalisation of the arts: see Hewison, *In Anger*.

²¹ Williams, *Country and the City*, p. 105. Bradman's effacement of her contribution to his work—he refers to her only as his nameless 'secretary', whose role is to drag him down from the 'glorious, potent mountain' of reverie with lemon barley water (295)—mirrors the '[dissolution of] the processes of rural exploitation [...] into a landscape' discussed by Williams (p. 46).

that of many of the characters in earlier sections of the novel whose stories end in violence, in murder or madness, which, the novel suggests, are the hidden meaning of English history. But in the final section, 'Here: 1988', this incipient awareness, and the rents it opens up in England's 'inimitable patchwork', are barely visible. Sentimental versions of the village's past, drawing on both the Georgianism of 'Treasure' and the preservationist declinism of 'Wing', inform struggles over the village's present and future, focused around the building of a new subdivision, but the long history of conflict over the land has been largely forgotten.²²

Attention to the problematic closure of the novel, however, suggests that we must read 'Here', too, as a period 'mindset' rather than a straightforward representation of the author's views.²³ This section turns on the discovery, during the building of the subdivision, of the skeleton of a soldier—probably Cromwellian, in the assessment of the local archaeological society, and clutching a bit of silk ('Ribbon?') (358-59). The discovery prompts an imaginative act of reworking *within* the text: 'Here' reveals that the first section of *Ulverton*, 'Return: 1650', is a fiction constructed around the skeleton by 'Adam Thorpe', a 'local author & performer' (330), and that it is at least partly a protest against the subdivision: 'Thorpe's' choice

²² Colls argues that after 1945, 'land became the forgotten war of English politics' (*Identity of England*, p. 224). 'Here' is set at the high point of the 1980s property boom, during which the ready market for housing for executive commuters turned many rural communities into the site of what the House Builders' Federation called 'a bloody battle' over development; Berkshire was particularly affected. Given the lack of economic incentives for developers to build low-cost housing, this battle was about the nature of rural communities in the future: whether they would become, in effect, wealthy suburbs of nearby cities, or would develop as demographically and economically mixed communities able to meet the employment and social needs of all their inhabitants, and in which growth was balanced with environmental objectives. See Peter Ambrose, 'The Rural/Urban Fringe as Battleground', in *The English Rural Community: Image and Analysis*, ed. by Brian Short (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 175-94 (pp. 178-79).

²³ In *Still*, Thorpe attempts retrospectively to distance himself from the views expressed in 'Here' by attributing the film, *Clive's Seasons*, to Ricky Thornby (p. 28).

to give the villain of the tale the same surname as the developer—a name he somewhat disingenuously claims simply to have taken from the oldest legible stone in the graveyard—is no accident (379-81). Read as a fiction written from ‘Here’, ‘Return’ poses the question of how past violence—as the novel’s opening words have it—might ‘[stand] up again to haunt us’ (3). But it poses this return as something other than a literal return of, or to, the truth of the past. Rather than ‘closing the circle of the book with a satisfying rattle of bones’, the effect of this revelation is to open up the question of the construction of history, and the interests which shape that construction.²⁴ History is not being unearthed here as much as imagined, but its effects in the present are no less insistent for that. The relationship between ‘Here’ and ‘Return’ shifts all twelve sections of the novel into this uncertain space of historical engagement, in which the task is not the recovery of the past as it ‘really’ was, but the ‘exhumation of lost (or murdered) possibilities’.²⁵

And indeed, on a closer reading one is struck not so much by the novel’s smooth achievement of period ‘mindsets’ but by the violence of the encounters with and between the textual fragments of the past. *Ulverton*’s is an aesthetic of violence and regeneration which makes visible, thematically and formally, what is often effaced in representations of England’s ‘national past’, and so opens the present to inscription in a new history, one that would live differently with the voices of the dead. Like Walter Benjamin’s historical materialism, the imprint of which it bears, *Ulverton* ‘[blasts specific eras] out of the homogeneous course of history’ in order, as

²⁴ John Banville, ‘Big News from Small Worlds’, *New York Review of Books*, 8 April 1993, (pp. 22-24), p. 24.

²⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, ‘Walter Benjamin, the Intellectual’, in *The Actuality of Walter Benjamin*, ed. by Laura Marcus and Lynda Nead (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1998), pp. 72-84 (p. 76).

Irving Wohlfarth puts it, ‘to expose the jagged edges by which we may clamber beyond the slippery blocks of a monumentalized past’.²⁶ Benjamin had a variety of names for this method—collecting, montage, quoting without quotation marks, rag-picking—but all are ways of expressing his intention not to ‘tell’ a history, thereby recuperating the past back into a continuous narrative and closing off its potential once more, but simply to ‘show’ it, allowing the disjunctions and tensions of particular constellations of past and present, contained in the material fragments of the past, to explode the experience of history as a continuum, as progress.²⁷

Ulverton’s demonumentalising of a completed, teleological national past reveals the violence underlying Scruton’s ‘inimitable patchwork’. It proceeds through an aesthetic of fragments, of the collage or patchwork: what Thorpe describes as ‘putting things up against each other’, making ‘a collage of things of the past or contemporary things’ so that ‘the two sort of jangle together’.²⁸ The novel’s twelve sections are themselves fragments or scraps, seemingly torn out of their era and reassembled in a temporary constellation. The holes in them, and their ragged edges, frustrate the reader’s attempts to produce from them a continuous, whole history. Each section, moreover, is itself a patchwork, quoting other texts, for the

²⁶ Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp. 245-55 (p. 254), Irving Wohlfarth, ‘The Measure of the Possible, the Weight of the Real and the Heat of the Moment: Benjamin’s Actuality Today’, in Marcus and Nead, pp. 13-39 (p. 19). Thorpe may well have been influenced by Benjamin through Patrick Wright’s *On Living in an Old Country*, which makes extensive use of Benjamin’s ‘Theses’ in developing its argument for the need for an ‘active historicity’ rather than the ‘abstraction’ of history (pp. 69-70).

²⁷ See Walter Benjamin, ‘Eduard Fuchs: Collector and Historian’, in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. by Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), pp. 225-53, Andrew Benjamin, ‘Time and Task: Benjamin and Heidegger Showing the Present’, in *Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 216-50, and Irving Wohlfarth, ‘Et Cetera? The Historian as *Chiffonier*’, *New German Critique*, 39 (1986), 143-68.

most part without quotation marks, in order to deploy them in a different collage of Englishness. 'Treasure', for example, embeds in the relatively straightforward pastoral tones of interwar evocations of pre-war England the bitter note of Sassoon's 'Memorial Tablet', from which the central recruitment rally is taken.²⁹ Similarly, 'Wing' uses Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale' to open up the confusion of the immediately postwar years, in which exhaustion and elegies for a dying civilisation competed with the legacy of the People's War in the construction of the 'New Elizabethan Age'.³⁰

Benjamin's rag-picking historical work is also evoked in the insistent presence of rags in the text. Their first appearance is as the 'ball of old ribbons that had long ago been red' that the soldier in 'Return' brings back for his wife (6); by the time they reappear in 'Here', in the hand of the nameless skeleton, they have become saturated with contradictory associations. They are the 'filthy rags of righteousnesses' that the Quaker curate Mr Kistle casts off (perhaps) in 'Friends' (40), and the discarded clothes of the London poor, stinking with 'smoke from the city, as well as [...] general poverty', that Farmer Plumm buys by the cartload to

²⁸ In Hagenauer.

²⁹ Sassoon, *War Poems*, p. 126. *Ulverton's* Cullerne, of course, refuses to enlist.

³⁰ Thorpe's self-confessed drift from imitation into parody in 'Treasure' and 'Wing' seems to be an attempt to draw attention to the ironising quotation marks around them, and so to place these constructions of the 'English countryside' as belonging to a specific historical moment: a strategy not needed in the earlier sections because they are much more clearly differentiated from contemporary ways of thinking. It has the effect, however, of appearing to endorse the declinist view that in the past genuine creation was possible, but in the twentieth century we are capable only of being 'ironic [...] about creation', and of reproducing a version of the very nostalgia for a better or more authentic rural England expressed in these sections. And indeed, Thorpe does advance a version of this position in response to the suggestion that 'reproduction dominates the first stories of the book which seem linked to creativity and myth-making, and archaeology dominates the last stories which convey self-consciousness, intrusion from the outside and also barrenness' (in Hagenauer).

improve his land (62). But they are also the 'crimson sattin' waistcoat that Lady Chalmers asks her lover to buy (89), the crimson silk wallpaper, 'cut [...] to ribbons in one place', that Violet discovers on her visit to Ulverton House (286), and the red ribbon that Clive Walters cuts to open his subdivision (366). The deterioration of cloth into rags is, to be sure, a metaphor for the movement towards oblivion that characterises history in general. But the proliferation of associations around the rags/ribbons motif, of which I have cited only a few examples here, generates tensions that prevent any recourse to consoling notions of the common fate of rich and poor: that, rather, tear English history apart. The violence of this process is expressed most directly in the way that people themselves are reduced—literally or symbolically—to rags or scraps that improve the land: John Pounds, the tailor, is 'claved into more bloody pieces nor be athin [a] peg-rug' and fattens the corn with his 'red juice' (208), while the blood-stained rags of London's poor, 'chopped to an inch square then scattered at the second ploughing', sweeten the soil in 'Improvements' (58).³¹

While *Ulverton's* rags figure the violence that is overlooked in idealising visions of England's countryside, another of its motifs, bedwine or old man's beard, seems to symbolise a Benjaminian sense of the unredeemed potential of the past. In 'Return', bedwine is associated with thwarted love and with missed opportunities to

³¹ Wohlfarth notes that 'today rag-collecting is no longer a metaphor for destructive, revolutionary activity. It is either (as in the case of third world countries, bag-ladies and *clochards*) a matter of sheer survival [as it surely also was in Benjamin's time?], or else (in affluent Western countries) synonymous with *la mode rétro*, the fashion for flea-markets, the nostalgia for quilts, the restoration of clutter' (p. 156). What saves *Ulverton* from being an exercise in *la mode rétro*—the risks of which aspects of 'Here' in particular suggest it is aware—is its insistence on the violence embedded in the relics of the past. Jonas Perry's account of John Pounds's death, for example (p. 208), is a subversive appropriation of Eliot's celebration of the 'Mirth of those long since under earth / Nourishing the corn' in 'East Coker' (*Collected Poems 1909-62* (London: Faber, 1974), pp. 196-204 (p. 197)).

break with the repetitive tearing of the village's history in the pursuit of 'improvement': when William wistfully calls the bedwine plumes falling in Anne's hair each autumn her 'crown of silver' (19), she does not respond, perhaps recalling her wish, years before, to adorn her hair with ribbons—a wish that sent Gabby away to war. It also stands for the possibility of resistance to exploitation, and of a future redemption of what has been lost. The 'wood [...] much given over to bramble and bedwine and pernicious shrubs' in which Farmer Plumm finds '[his] maid and a newish labourer [...] tugging as the beasts do' (61), for example, represents the propensity of those through whose bodies he wishes to consolidate his wealth—specifically, the maid he is paying to bear the heir his wife has not been able to provide—to subvert his schemes. Most notably, bedwine figures prominently in 'Deposition', where, as the nick-name (Captain Bedwine) given to John Oadam, the local leader of the machine-breakers, who wears 'a crown of Bedwine (meaning wild Clymatis) wound about his head' (164) it carries a strongly Benjaminian sense of the failed potential, and the possible future 'redemption', of the rebellion.³² Asked 'to remove his Crown of bedwine for it was unseemly, and he was no King, not even a Captain', Oadam answers: 'No it bee only plumes of seed that must be planted on the wind' (164). It is to all these moments, and to the dormant possibilities they contain, that we are referred by the 'bedraggled "old man's beard" in hedge' in 'Here' (372).

In rags and bedwine, then, are encoded both what lies beneath the slippery surface of deep England—a construct, the novel suggests, that came into being in the late nineteenth and early-to-mid twentieth centuries in a melancholic response to the multiple displacements of modernity, colonialism and war—and the possibility of

³² Benjamin, 'Theses', pp. 245-46.

mourning and transformation. To understand the nature and the necessity of this mourning work, we need to consider the novel's ninth section, 'Stitches: 1887', which is its conceptual and emotional heart. It is written as the interior monologue of Jonas 'Hoppetty' Perry, once a ploughman and now, in his old age, the part-time gardener for a Mrs Holland. It gradually becomes clear that Jonas is addressing Mrs Holland's son, Daniel, whom Jonas loved and who died of a 'dang flammation on the bellowses' in his first term at Eton (197), and that it traces a walk they used to take around the fields of Ulverton. Jonas's path includes places that are familiar from earlier and later stories, such as 'Little Hangy', 'Gore patch', 'Frum Down', and 'Bayleaze', and his monologue covers, as if in response to the boy's often-repeated questions, many of the events from the other sections of the novel: 'old Shepherd Willum' and the witch (or ewe) (203), the destruction of the labourers' cottages to make the 'bloody wilderness' around Ulverton House (201), and the Captain Swing machine-breaking riots and their aftermath. It also reveals the fates of some of the characters from the earlier stories: the photographer from 'Shutter' dies of a mysterious illness in 1859, while Mr Irvine Leslie B.A. and John Pounds, tailor, were murdered.

Jonas's tracing of the village's physical space, and the remembering it prompts, are obsessive, melancholic, acts. His narrative proceeds in a series of circles, which begin with a reference to the place through which he is passing, get drawn into harrowing remembrance, and then attempt to return to some emotional equilibrium as he registers his surroundings and exhorts himself, or Daniel, to keep moving. These circles are the path of his repeated approach towards and then evasion of the central cause of his grief: the extent of his responsibility for Daniel's

death. Mrs Holland believes that her son caught pneumonia because Jonas kept him out in the rain on the last walk they took together before he went away to school, and although Jonas says it was ‘that old Eton shop jus broke [Daniel] a-two nowt to do wi’ that laas stroll’ (204), there is a sense that he does not quite believe this himself, and is now repeating that ‘laas stroll’ as if to get Daniel home unharmed; the story ends with Jonas telling the dead boy, as he did not tell the living one, to get home quickly out of the rain:

don’t thee bide in the wet no longer Master Dannul nope nope maunt lope about wi’ this here cluttery weather an you lookin all peeky boy hup yea up bloody buggerin hell oh off wi’ thee back home dreckly minut boy yea up this here dreckly minut. (209)

Jonas’s sense of guilt is exacerbated by his knowledge that Daniel’s death has, in a sense, fulfilled his own wish. Had he gone to Eton, Daniel would have been transformed into a ‘scholard’ and a ‘toff’, after which there would have been no more ‘rollin no hoops athurt no peonies nor strollin athurt no coomb agin wi’ Hoppetty’—unless it is as ‘a cloud o’ bedwine plume’ Jonas might ‘catch in the corner o’ [his] optics now an agin’ (193). Because Daniel is dead, ‘them buggers’ won’t ever ‘cotch’ him: he is ‘old Hoppetty’s own now’ (203).

The circular narrative is also, however, the consequence of the impossibility of Jonas expressing his grief for Daniel and of it being recognised by others: his wife offers him ‘Dinneford’s Magnesia for the heartburn’ (193), while Mrs Holland won’t have him ‘blubberin’, for it ‘don’t look right wi’ a rake’, and burns the feathers the old man and the boy had collected together ‘like they was dirt’ (195). The combination of guilt and inarticulate grief mean that the loss cannot be purged

away—not by ‘no Dinneford’s bloody Magnesia nor no Cockle’s bloody Pills nor no patent bloody embocation [...] in the whole bloody Empire’ (195)—and can instead only be repeated, over and over. This repetition, moreover, calls up and repeats all the other cruelties of this ‘sturvin stinkin world’ (195): ‘winters wi’out a stick to rub’ (198), his cousin Littler Moses killed by a trap for poachers while acorning (200), dinners of ‘rooks corn fluff’ while the Chalmers-Laverys were ‘eatin their bloody heads off’ in Ulverton House (202). Jonas is unable to ‘disremimber’ any of this (201): his memories of his own and the village’s history inhabit and torment him, like his ‘dang rheumatics’, a ‘blasted gate hinge’, or the ‘wind pokin in an out o’ my hide like it were wantin to sew my shroud out o’ myself’, a wind which ‘en’t never blowed no remimberin off’ (208-09). And he is unable to translate this obsessive, painful, bodily remembering into anything that would redeem his or the other villagers’ past sufferings. The bedwine seeds set free by John Oadam in ‘Depositions’ have come to nothing: the rebellion was ‘all for nowt’ (203), and life, for everyone other than ‘they Lordyshits’, is ‘jus about a sop in sour grease’ (201), a repetitive cycle of labour in which one year is ‘stitched up an med be as the next year do be aready threddlin its bloody needle’ (207).

Jonas’s ‘remimberin’ is the shadow of Lob’s memory of rural England’s names and history: whereas Lob’s naming is a benediction calling England into being, Jonas’s is the muttered curse of the silent labouring figure so common in English landscape painting and poetry.³³ Under what circumstances, the text

³³ Thomas, ‘Lob’, ll.58-78. John Barrell observes that ‘of all the human figures in the poetry and painting of rural life, the ploughman is the original of the working countryman; we never see him portrayed at rest, as we do the shepherd or even the hay-maker—he ploughs a straight furrow towards an ever-receding horizon. We can never mistake him for anything but an image of what he is, a rural labourer’ (*The Dark Side of the Landscape: The*

implicitly asks, could this curse be heard, and Jonas's melancholia transformed into mourning? Martin Jay has argued that Walter Benjamin's rag-picking practice entails a systematic refusal to replace melancholia with mourning, because mourning would bring about a premature symbolic closure of the wounds of modernity. Benjamin, Jay suggests, wanted to keep the wound open in order to keep open the possibility of real awakening and transformation.³⁴ *Ulverton*, too, seems to distrust its own impulse to mourn, because too quick a movement towards mourning would perhaps reinstate the 'English settlement' naturalised in the landscape of the South Country. Thorpe is well aware of the appeal of this settlement. A large part of what *Ulverton* would mourn is the barring of an unproblematic attachment to the compromised 'cultural treasures' of England's heritage and its literary tradition; like Benjamin, Thorpe recognises that they 'have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror', owing their existence 'not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries'.³⁵ Simply to mourn the loss of the pleasure of unthinking enjoyment of the 'countryside', and of English literature, would be to betray the 'anonymous toil' which makes placid contemplation of England's beauties impossible. *Ulverton* adopts, therefore, a melancholic position, refusing to disavow its love for England's rural and literary heritage, but also refusing to complete or close its work of mourning. Opening up a gap between 'Here' and the reading present—even when the novel was first published, 'Here' was four years out of

Rural Poor in English Painting 1730-1840 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 50).

³⁴ 'Against Consolation: Walter Benjamin and the Refusal to Mourn', in Winter and Sivan, pp. 221-39.

date—and enacting a recycling movement from ‘Here’ to ‘Return’, *Ulverton* chooses to remain in a space of violence and ambivalence, and returns its broken texts to the fertile, and terrible, rag-and-bone yard of history.

In Thorpe’s second novel, *Still*, the present’s relationship to the past is still more melancholic: indeed, the novel represents postwar England as paralysed by a melancholic identification with the ‘doomed youth’ of the ‘Edwardian’ summer. *Still* is the narrative of a failed English film director, Ricky Thornby, now resident in Houston, and purports to be his life’s masterwork, a film consisting entirely of text that will be exhibited at his Thames-side sixtieth birthday party as the new millennium dawns—although as the novel goes on (‘progresses’ might be too strong a word) it becomes increasingly clear that this film is playing only in ‘the Enfield Ritz or maybe [...] the Biograph matinée of [Ricky’s] skull’ (77). Its subject, ostensibly, is his grandparents’, great aunt’s and great-uncle’s lives between 1913 and 1918, the period when, having started out with such promise, the twentieth century went wrong. But Ricky’s narrative is disrupted by the intrusion of his own life in the present of the ‘film’s’ composition, and indeed by his own reluctance, or inability, to get to the point, producing a text of rampant prolixity and incompleteness that left many reviewers cold. As Derwent May wrote, in one of the more balanced assessments:

Finally—after a long, long time—we realise that we have been given a deeply considered self-portrait of a man: his anguished, yearning inner life, his unhappy battles with the world as he found it in the late 20th century, and the ‘guilt at the bottom of the glass’, as he puts it. Every one of the book’s 250,000 words has been carefully chosen.

³⁵ ‘Theses’, p. 248.

Yet can it have been anything but a mistake for Thorpe to have selected as his subject such an insufferable talker? Can one believe that any but a few martyrs to literature will want to plough through his story?³⁶

Tom Shippey suggested that Ricky's problem might be the 'incurable inferiority complex' that afflicts 'so many characters of the English novel from Powell to Williamson' (surely not a particularly big range):

Why should a clever, tricky writer like the author of *Ulverton* spend so much time imagining such a dreary, introspective whinger as Thornby? There has to be a reason for it: something that haunts the English psyche still and makes its victims at once so arrogant and so insecure. An answer, I have no doubt, is buried somewhere in the 584 pages, though there is something characteristic in Thornby's final cry, 'You missed it.'³⁷

Something characteristic indeed, for I will argue that *Still*'s subject is precisely a late-twentieth-century Englishness unable to confront its relationship to its past, even at the cost of consigning itself to death. In this text, artistic failure is a marker of a refusal to mourn, of a thoroughly melancholic relationship to an encrypted history.

Ricky's life is a disaster. His career as a director went nowhere: Auberon Waugh, he tells us, called him 'the faintest hope of British film ever to have flickered out' (21). He is estranged from his family—although he 'had a family once [...] now [he] just [has] a kind of testical familiarity with various photos pinned up in [his] kitchen' (314)—and over the course of the novel his girlfriend Zelda dumps him and he is 'retired early without honours' from his job teaching European Cinema in

³⁶ Derwent May, 'And Thus Spake On that Ancient Film Buff', *The Times*, 27 April 1995, p. 35. Not all reviewers were as negative: see Nicola Barker, 'Speeding with Ricky', *Observer*, 23 April 1995, 'Review', p. 16, Sylvia Brownrigg, 'Birth of a Nation', *Guardian*, 25 April 1995, p. 6, and John Fowles, 'The Sound of a Voice that Continues', *Spectator*, 29 April 1995, p. 40.

³⁷ Tom Shippey, 'English Accents', *Times Literary Supplement*, 21 April 1995, p. 21.

Houston to students who write with their tongues sticking out and listen to their personal stereos in class (15). He is left ‘treading water in mid-Atlantic’ (29), suspended between an America he loathes and an England that ‘terrifies’ him (560). His life is a series of humiliations, but these are not his alone: they are the humiliations suffered by a ‘present-challenged’ Englishness (490) that is unable to articulate a relationship with the history of the twentieth century after 1914, and is therefore creatively paralysed. The project of the novel is to explore the dimensions and causes of this paralysis.

Ricky is haunted by his failure to reach the artistic heights attained by the masters of European cinema—Tarkovsky, Bresson, Godard, Eisenstein—and his narrative is full to overflowing with references to their work and that of the great modernist writers, particularly Eliot and Joyce. He attributes his own failure to the death of English modernism—and of a progressive English modernity—in World War One. Wyndham Lewis’s lament for the ““great age” that has not “come off”” sounds in Ricky’s evocation of the ‘really amazing things [that] are going on in the cultural milieu’ in 1913 (186), besides which the cultural upheaval of the 1960s was ‘a wash-out, [...] a fake’:

1968 is completely outrun by what’s happening around [his great-aunt] Agatha. These people are inventing things like Cubism and Old Age Pensions and Militant Feminism and National Insurance and the Modernist Novel. (280)³⁸

The family history that Ricky screens in his film personalises this catastrophe. His great-uncle Willo and great-aunt Agatha, who die within a week of each other in

³⁸ Lewis in Hynes, *A War Imagined*, p. 464.

November 1918 (Willo at the Front and Agatha of influenza) (559-60), represent, respectively, the English contribution to the future of twentieth-century European painting (449) and the New Woman: 'Her heroine is Sylvia Pankhurst. She's hung around at the back of two demonstrations for Women's Suffrage in Hyde Park.' (280) The Trevelyan family's response to their deaths is morbid in the extreme: the house is still in deep mourning in the mid-1940s when Ricky visits it as a child, dressed—he tells us—in knickerbockers and frilly collars and cuffs to impersonate Willo.

Like Swift and Barker, Thorpe presents a version of the mythic reading of post-First World War England as a deathly wasteland, in a state of 'utter dithering deliquescence', 'stuffy and comatose', 'dying'.³⁹ As the narrative proceeds, however, one cannot help feeling that Ricky's fascination with Agatha, Willo, Milly and Giles substitutes an obsession with the myth of the Great War for a coming to terms with his own history, and with his shame at his origins. The image of the lost innocence of the pre-1914 world is a seductive evasion of his own failures and his roots in Enfield, as the following description of his tea with Quentin Bell in 1968 reveals:

The teapot stood on a stand. Elms swayed. Roses bloomed. [...] There were just the two of us, by the way. Chatting idly under the swaying elms, in '68, in Sussex, deepest most profound and forgotten Sussex, the teapot on a stand and mauve cups Thomas Hardy handed on so the legend goes—and me in my leather jacket, the one with the biggest lapels in Christendom, still smelling of diesel and nicotine and BR lavatories, thinking how I might actually belong if I purchased a teapot with a stand and mauve cups Thomas Hardy handed on and a stand of elms and a sun-hat that once sheltered Saxon Sydney-Turner from the Dorset sun in 1910, my dear boy. (271)

³⁹ Ezra Pound, Cyril Connolly, and E. M. Forster in Fussell, *Abroad*, p. 16.

Willo and Agatha are particularly suitable subjects for Ricky's obsessive reconstruction because they died young, and because he knows almost nothing about them. The few photographs and other material traces of them that remain are therefore perfect screens on to which Ricky can project his own desires and fears. At this point it will, perhaps, be clear that *Still* is an extended play on the cinematic metaphors of projection and screening used in psychology and, in particular, in psychoanalysis.⁴⁰ Neurologists, psychologists and psychoanalysts use the term projection in slightly different ways, but the operative meaning in *Still* is the psychoanalytic sense of projection as a psychological mechanism whereby a person expels qualities, feelings, wishes or objects from the self and locates them in another person or thing.⁴¹ Ricky is uneasily aware that his 'masterwork' is a projection in this sense, an account of his dead relations' lives composed from aspects of his own. (The similarity between Agatha and his girlfriend Zelda is particularly telling (230-31).) He keeps 'screwing the action', he says, and recounts his analyst's opinion that he has a 'projective personality' (168). At crucial points in the narrative, such as when his mother is about to be conceived, he worries about his 'projector'

⁴⁰ These ideas of projection and screening are, in my view, at least as important in *Still*'s play with film as the century-long history of interaction between literature and film. For a reading of *Still* that emphasises the 'multiple crossings and translations' in the relations between film and the novel, see H. Martin Puchner, 'Textual Cinema and Cinematic Text: The Ekphrasis of Movement in Adam Thorpe and Samuel Beckett', *Erfurt Electronic Studies in English*, 1/99, http://webdoc.sub.gwdg.de/edoc/ia/eese/artic99/puchner/4_99.html [21 June 2002].

⁴¹ As Laplanche and Pontalis observe, Freud seems to have conceived of projection in both a 'cinematographic' sense, in which 'the subject sends out into the external world an image of something that exists in him in an unconscious way', and in the sense of 'a quasi-real process of expulsion', in which 'the subject ejects something he does not want and later rediscovers it in outside reality'. In both cases, however, the Freudian usage of projection 'is always a matter of throwing out what one refuses either to *recognise* in oneself or to *be* oneself' (J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Karnac and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1988), p. 354: emphasis in original).

overheating or blowing up (98, 525), and at the end of the novel he imagines his ‘audience’ tipping it over in its rush to leave (584). Ricky cannot quite allow himself to acknowledge how much of his narrative is projection, however, insisting ‘THIS IS THE TRUTH’ (375)—even if he has to ‘read between the lines’ (392).

Just as important as the literalised metaphor of projection is that of screening, as developed in Freud’s early paper ‘Screen Memories’ (1899).⁴² In this paper, Freud develops the argument that memories do not ‘arise simultaneously with an experience’, to be retrieved at a later date, but are *formed* through the operation of a range of ‘tendentious’ motives on unconscious ‘memory-traces’ at the time when they are apparently retrieved.⁴³ As Freud tells his imaginary patient in ‘Screen Memories’, all memories are subject to revision: ‘people often construct [their memories] unconsciously—almost like works of fiction’.⁴⁴ Most importantly for my purposes here, the particular type of memory he calls ‘screen memory’ is ‘one which owes its value as a memory not to its own content but to the relation existing between that content and some other, that has been suppressed’. The screen memory, therefore, is one that simultaneously screens-off the other content and screens or displays it in refracted, displaced form.⁴⁵

Understanding Ricky’s obsessive reconstruction of pre-1914 England as a projective ‘screen memory’ helps to illuminate the relationship between his ‘film’ and the histories he does not narrate but that haunt his film/text: his own, and that of England in his lifetime. His is the longing of the grammar school boy from Enfield,

⁴² ‘Screen Memories’, *SE* III (1962), pp. 301-22.

⁴³ ‘Screen Memories’, pp. 321-22.

⁴⁴ ‘Screen Memories’, p. 315. The ‘patient’ was, in fact, Freud himself: see the Editor’s Note, p. 302.

whose father was a Mosleyite (117-18) and whose mother grew up calling her own grandmother ‘ma’am’ (540), for—as he sees it—less shameful origins, for something that connects him not only with a romantic, lost England, but also with the epic sweep of twentieth-century history, and thus with the cinematic masters compared with whom he feels like a ‘fraud’ (170, 204). His mother’s near-total silence about her family background (33), and the very fragmentariness of the family archive to which he has limited access (if indeed it exists at all), give him the room to attempt to construct such a relationship, and the cultural myths of the Great War provide its content.

Towards the end of the novel, Ricky offers us a set of key traumatic memories that connect his failure with his periodic exposure as a child to the Great War-haunted and class-ridden Trevelyan household. This contact included the visits in which he was dressed as Willo, and annual trips to the cinema with his grandfather, whose sightless white eyes—he was blinded by gas in 1917—terrify him to the point that he wets his pants (533, 542). Almost as terrifying are his half-understood encounter with his grandmother Milly, who still lives with the family, and the revelation of his mother’s humiliatingly low status in her father’s house. It is impossible to determine to what extent Ricky’s account of these contacts is fabricated, or at least elaborated. His analyst suspects that it is taken from an Ealing chiller (536), and it seems to draw heavily on films that Ricky would have seen in the 1940s, particularly David Lean’s *Great Expectations* (1946), but also, perhaps,

⁴⁵ ‘Screen Memories’, p. 320.

Orson Welles's *Jane Eyre* (1943).⁴⁶ This permeability of memory to interference from sources such as film, however, is only one instance of the revision characteristic of screen memories. The 'phantoms' playing on Ricky's screen are the product not only of his own and his family's history, but also of cultural and social practices and pathologies.⁴⁷ Even as a fabrication, therefore, Ricky's 'primal scene' can be read as a symptomatic crystallisation of the novel's primary theme: a post-Second World War English consciousness mired in the memory of World War One.

But if Ricky's obsessive imagining of the pre-1914 world is screening or screening-off some other content, what might it be? As Tom Shippey complains, *Still* is maddeningly elusive on this point:

So what's the trauma that causes this inferiority still? Can it be the Great War? Thornby gives us a story about a great-uncle shot by a sniper, but this is pretty unconvincing [...]. Could it be the horrors of public school and university? As Orwell said, a few years in a warm bath of snobbery doesn't seem important enough for all this woe. Can it be the collapse of British hegemony and Standard English? Well, the latter hasn't happened, and the former feels like a great relief. [...]

I do not think that all Thorpe's archaeology has dug up this uneasy spirit's bones. It does need, somehow, to be laid to rest.⁴⁸

One possible response would be that Thorpe does not know himself. A more charitable reading would be that his project in *Still* is to sketch a contemporary condition rather than to diagnose an original trauma: indeed, the novel systematically throws doubt on the idea that there *is* an 'original' trauma, or at least one that could

⁴⁶ Milly appears at the top of the stairs looking like a 'witch' with 'black hair shooting out of her scalp and these stains on her apron and big jowls'—not unlike the degenerate Bertha Rochester (p. 538).

⁴⁷ Compare Abraham and Torok's account of psychic phantoms as forms not only of familial but of wider collective pathological (non-)mourning (*Shell and the Kernel*, p. 176).

⁴⁸ Shippey, *English Accents*. Willo is actually blown to pieces by a shell (p. 449).

be discovered, proposing instead the *nachträglich* activation of an earlier trauma by Ricky's later catastrophes.⁴⁹ An alternative, and more interesting, approach is to add to the filmic metaphors already discussed Abraham and Torok's theory of the phantom and of cryptic mourning, and to attend to the gaps in the text, reading it as a cryptophoric discourse, an 'arrangement invented so as to reveal nothing'.⁵⁰

The most significant omission in Ricky's narrative—particularly in comparison with the emphasis given to the First World War—is the scant attention paid to the Second. Mimicking the 'anaesthetized or evasive response' that Bergonzi argues was characteristic of early postwar English writing, Ricky scarcely mentions the Second World War.⁵¹ Apart from his birth in an Anderson Shelter during an air raid which killed the Thornbys' next door neighbours, his father's friend Cyril who was killed by a V2 rocket (23), and isolated references to Hiroshima and Dr Mengele (204, 124), it is almost entirely absent from Ricky's narrative.⁵² On one of the rare occasions where it is mentioned, in Ricky's description of his trip to see *The Third Man* with his grandfather, it is referred to minimally as 'the to-do that had recently finished' (533). This is despite the fact that, growing up as he did in London, the first four-and-a-half years of Ricky's life—not to mention 'the early fuck-all Fifties'

⁴⁹ See Lukacher on the indeterminate nature of primal scenes.

⁵⁰ *Shell and the Kernel*, p. 143.

⁵¹ *Wartime and Aftermath*, p. 206.

⁵² Ricky's account of his birth is suspect. He claims to have been born in a shelter during an air raid (p. 26), but if his sixtieth birthday is 1 January 2000, then he cannot have been, as there were no raids on London until August 1940. This could be a simple error, or a fantasy on Ricky's part—or perhaps a joke about when the new millennium properly begins.

of rationing and reconstruction (24)—would have been profoundly influenced by it, and the fact that his father might have been expected to have been fighting in it.⁵³

Echoing the mythic account of the Great War, Ricky repeatedly asserts that 1914 was *the* moment of catastrophe: ‘the tenth instalment’ of the millennium, he says, ‘went real hairy in the fourteenth minute and wasn’t just unsuitable for kids and dogs—it should never have been screened at all!’ (44). These assertions are undermined, however, by his recognition that the moment when ‘the old world was lost and the Shadow fell and so forth’ is not actually so easy to specify: Shadows do not ‘fall once only and only once for about ten minutes’ (202-04).⁵⁴ Like Tom Crick, Ricky recognises that the traumatic fall into history takes place at different moments for different people, but he himself is unable to articulate a relationship to any history after 1918.⁵⁵ Despite deriding those who say the shadow fell at ‘zero hour on 1 July 1916’—the beginning of the Battle of the Somme—as ‘bo-oring’ (202), he wants to explain his own failures as that of the ‘lost generation’, of Lewis’s ““great age” that has not “come off””. The irony is, of course, that the price of this adherence to myth is the very personal paralysis and artistic ‘insignificance’ (389) that makes the myth appealing to him. Instead of creation, Ricky’s ‘masterwork’ manages only the melancholic shoring up of other writers’ and directors’ fragments, indeed, of the myth of fragmentation, against his ruin.

⁵³ Ricky’s father is eight years old when he meets the ‘blind toff’ on Waterloo Bridge in 1921, which would make him around twenty-six in 1939 (pp. 531-32), but no mention is made of any service during World War Two.

⁵⁴ Ricky is referring to the fall of the Shadow in Eliot’s ‘The Hollow Men’ (*Collected Poems*, pp. 87-92).

⁵⁵ For his great-great-uncle Kenneth, for example, the Shadow falls at the moment that Agatha tells him of Willo’s expulsion from Randle College, but for the soldiers in his documentary about the Christmas Island nuclear tests, ‘the day the Shadow fell was August whatever 1958’ (pp. 202-04).

Ricky's vacillation about when, exactly, 'everyone's eyes changed' (122) is a telling indication of his problem. As Ricky says, 'there's a lot about eyes in this film' (60), and his description of a portrait of 'Honeydew' Philips—the housemaster who helped Willo down the school drive on the day of his expulsion—makes clear what is at stake in this preoccupation. According to Ricky, this 'posh portrait', circa 1910 (121), shows not only that Mr Philips's eyes are of different colours, but that they are different from people's eyes at the century's end: 'His eyeballs are kind of rubbed up, like they've been spat on and polished.' 'Maybe they cried more', Ricky speculates. 'Maybe for them the storms always cleared. There was a lustre to the grey light, the sun was out, their eyes were awash with rain but it was going to be a fine day.' He interprets this lustre as 'the kindness and civility [...] that went generally from the world', sometime after 1910 (123). But we could equally interpret the loss of 'lustre' as figuring the crisis of understanding, of the intelligibility and communicability of experience that, as Martin Jay has argued, is often represented in twentieth-century art and thought as a crisis of vision.⁵⁶ The blinded or mutilated eye in particular has been used extensively in twentieth-century visual art as a symbol of this crisis:

eyes are not moist or movable, they are not alive and do not suggest the power to look back and see. When the viewer looks at them, they do not have the power to look back and see. So the individual or divine spark of contact does not exist in the missing or mutilated eye. In place of contact there is rejection; instead of sight, there is complete blindness.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

⁵⁷ Gerald Eager, 'The Missing or Mutilated Eye in Contemporary Art', in Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, p. 260.

Mr Philips loses his green eye in the Great War, while Giles is blinded by gas. Ricky seems to want to argue that everyone's eyes changed between 1914 and 1918, but he goes on to say that 'between Mr Philips and us there's someone signalling he's really interested in this fact about [Mr Philips's] eyes. It's Dr Mengele'. Referring to Mengele's experiments on 'the Romany girl with eyes of a different hue in Birkenau', Ricky continues:

That's our century, for Christ's sake. It's not prehistory, it's not the time of the dinosaurs or the Crusades or the invention of the steam-press. I was alive, I was up and walking, I was arsing about with my mother's pinny as Dr Mengele padded up to her. The Romany girl, I mean. Whoever she was.

Hey, wake up. How do I talk to Mr Philips, Samaritan Man, about kindness and civility and oyster-coloured light after storms with that guy stood between us, waving his little cut-throat?

How do we talk to anyone after that?

Really, I'm serious. (123-24)

The shift from 1914-18 to 1939-45, and the nagging sense that he is being histrionic, encapsulate Ricky's problem. He wants to represent the Great War as the definitive end of 'kindness and civility', *the* moment the Shadow fell, but that adherence to myth both undermines his account of the Great War, and leaves him with no way of expressing the enormity, or the complexity, of the century's later history. As a consequence, his lingering on the '[crimes] without attenuating [sic] circumstances' of the past feels inauthentic, and like little more than voyeurism (511).⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Ricky's anxieties about visual pleasure—expressed above all in his choice of text over visual image for his 'masterwork'—also echo the repudiation of the pleasures of cinema and the desire to make explicit the violence of vision in Buñuel and Dali's *Un Chien Andalou* (1929): for a discussion see Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, pp. 257-61. Ricky seems to be thinking of *Un Chien Andalou* when he ends his 'trailer' with the invitation to 'splice it open and swallow' (p. 78).

Still suggests that contemporary Englishness, or at least Ricky's version of it, is hamstrung by a melancholic identification with the imagined England of the Edwardian—'OK Georgian' (280)—summer which blocks the working through of more recent history. The causality of this melancholia is difficult, if not impossible, to determine. The text encourages us to look for explanations for his obsession in Ricky's personal history or his relationships with his immediate family, while leaving open the possibility that his personal and professional disasters are indeed the product of the grand narrative he wishes, and refuses, to narrate. We might say, borrowing Jacqueline Rose's phrase, that *Still* proposes an 'outrageous oscillation' between a fixation with World War One and social and artistic paralysis in contemporary England.⁵⁹ Like *The Regeneration Trilogy*, although in a very different mode, moreover, *Still* makes explicit the melancholia expressed in the fable of 'doomed youth': a pleasurable dwelling on the fragmentary remains of England's lost, best self, on the innumerable 'holes in the world' that even Ricky's devoted projections cannot fill (486).

Ricky's choice of stills to 'illustrate' his film-text facilitates his refusal to mourn. For, as Barthes writes in *Camera Lucida*, photographs simultaneously confirm 'what *has been*'—as I have already discussed, an area of anxiety for Ricky—and confront us with 'flat Death'.⁶⁰ Martin Jay explains that, for Barthes, photographs do not allow us to put history back together or even to make it intelligible: they are the sign of a catastrophe that cannot be worked through.⁶¹ Film,

⁵⁹ *Why War?*, p. 97.

⁶⁰ *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 1993), pp. 85 and 92; emphasis Barthes's.

⁶¹ *Downcast Eyes*, pp. 454-56.

according to Barthes, flows past 'like life', but 'it does not cling to me: it is not a *specter*'. Photography breaks this flow: it is melancholia to film's process of introjection or mourning. In the photograph, 'death cannot "be contemplated," reflected and interiorized'. 'When it is painful,' Barthes writes, 'nothing in it can transform grief into mourning'.⁶²

Ricky's melancholia is ultimately more comfortable and more pleasurable than a confrontation with 'the Black Hole, a bunker in the shape of England'—that is, of his complicated, conflicted relationship with England as fact and as idea—which he claims to have narrowly avoided following a digression into an account of his afternoon with Quentin Bell (271). He wants to imagine himself as Hylas, the young boy kidnapped from Hercules by nymphs and dragged down to the bottom of their spring: 'dying of England', escaping from history in a reunion with the lost object(s) of his love (143; see also 136-37, 151, 583). Characteristically, he prolongs the weaving and unweaving of his film/text indefinitely, never reaching the 'Amazing Truth' that he promises will be revealed in the last few frames (530), and finally evading its ending. For an ending would require a kind of closure and a letting go. *Still* would need to allow 'stillness', to acknowledge the stillness—the persistence, the ambiguous, untameable and wounding presence—of the histories to which it testifies, in order to be 'significant', but this is precisely what Ricky cannot do. As Zelda the Zen devotee tries to tell Ricky, his inability to be still makes him blind (364).

It is instructive to compare *Still* with Beckett's late work 'Still' (1973), with which Thorpe's novel shares not only its name but its setting: that named in *Krapp's*

⁶² *Camera Lucida*, pp. 89-90.

Last Tape (1958) as ‘a late evening in the future’.⁶³ As Michael Wood explains, we are in ‘a spatialization of the unseeable mind’, a limbo-like ‘domain just off the edge of life’.⁶⁴ Beckett’s ‘Still’ allows only the slightest delay and digression on the way to its end, thus suggesting, as Michael Wood argues, ‘how little we can say, [...] since whatever we say turns out to be excessive, a form of hubris, an extravagant claim on the unclaimable’.⁶⁵ But if Beckett’s texts of stillness and silence could be read as situated *in* the abyss of twentieth-century history, Ricky’s avoids this ‘hole in the world’ through its rampant prolixity and its refusal to come to completion. *Still* is a comprehensively melancholic text, *all* retard, postponement, error, partial revelation and repetition: Beckett’s ‘all quite still head in hand listening for a sound’ becomes nearly six hundred pages that climax in ‘listen, dumbos. You missed it’ (583-84).⁶⁶ Ricky’s would-be millennial masterwork is an ‘arrangement invented so as to reveal nothing’, while appearing to have left nothing, even the most mundane detail, untold.⁶⁷

As will already be obvious, for many readers *Still*’s enactment of late-twentieth-century English melancholia did not, to put it mildly, make for a satisfying novel. Thorpe’s next work, *Pieces of Light*, was therefore greeted with something

⁶³ Samuel Beckett, ‘Still’, in *For To End Yet Again* (London: Calder, 1999), pp. 17-21, and ‘Krapp’s Last Tape’, in *Krapp’s Last Tape and Embers* (London: Faber, 1965), pp. 9-20 (p. 9).

⁶⁴ *Children of Silence: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* (London: Pimlico, 1998), pp. 33-44 (p. 34). Ricky’s ‘film’, as I have already noted, appears to be playing only in the ‘Biograph matinée of [his] skull’.

⁶⁵ Wood, p. 33.

⁶⁶ ‘Still’, p. 21. On the function of retard and repetition in narrative, see Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 92-93.

⁶⁷ Abraham and Torok, *Shell and the Kernel*, p. 143.

akin to relief.⁶⁸ After the maddening narrative style of *Still*, *Pieces of Light* seemed to be a return to the more certain pleasures of *Ulverton*. As Justine Jordan pointed out, however, *Pieces of Light* has strong similarities to *Still*. Both novels have narrators who, as '[archaeologists] of time', 'grapple with history inside their own lives', and both inscribe in their narrative style and structure the problems of understanding and representation that they explore: how, as Jordan puts it, 'the rummage through history' can be 'blinkerred by self-interest', as well as hampered by the partial—in both senses—nature of the evidence available.⁶⁹ In both novels, breaks in the narrative mark moments where, confronted with disturbing revelations or recollections, the narrator is unable to continue narrating. But whereas Ricky Thornby largely manages to maintain his balancing act above the abyss of his encrypted history, *Pieces of Light*'s Hugh Arkwright cannot, with catastrophic consequences: notably in the year-long gap between Parts Three and Four of the novel, during which he has perhaps committed a murder, and has certainly gone mad. Furthermore, because Hugh's four sections of *Pieces of Light* are composed over a much longer time period than *Still*'s film-text, with substantial gaps between them, we can see more clearly than in *Still* the workings of processes of repression and revision in the production of Hugh's Englishness. Indeed, the text invites the reader to reconstruct the history encrypted in the elderly Hugh's ultra-Englishness, so as to understand his madness and, perhaps, his violence as the return of a repressed history

⁶⁸ For a representative selection of responses, see Natasha Fairweather, 'Jungle Book', *The Times*, 22 August 1998, 'Metro', p. 21, Patrick Gale, 'Arts of Darkness', *Independent*, 5 September 1998, 'Weekend Review', p. 15, Tamsin Todd, 'Musing on the Millennium', *Times Literary Supplement*, 31 July 1998, p. 20, James Urquhart, 'The Juju Beneath Ulverton', *Independent on Sunday*, 16 August 1998, 'Culture', p. 11, and Nicholas Wroe, 'Africa Comes to Ulverton', *Guardian*, 15 August 1998, 'Saturday Review', p. 10.

of colonialism and war. As in Barker's *Regeneration Trilogy*, moreover, the preoccupation with the problem of the boundaries of self and nation is matched by a resort to certain of the conventions of Gothic. *Pieces of Light* is a ghost story, in which the revenants are the products of late-twentieth-century Englishness's disavowed history.

The first two sections of *Pieces of Light* are an account of the first eleven or so years of Hugh Arkwright's life, first in Bamakum in the Cameroon where his parents run a tiny administrative station, and then, from the age of seven, in England, at his Uncle Edward's house in Ulverton. The voice we encounter in these sections is the forty-year-old Hugh's, recreating his childhood, and his child self, and chronicling the gradual loss of Bamakum and of his mother, leading up to her disappearance in 1933. As we discover in Part Three, this narrative was written at the suggestion of Hugh's analyst at the time, a Dr Wolff (143), presumably to facilitate mourning for these losses: a process which, as we see at the end of Part Two, did not take place at the time because Hugh never accepted that his mother was dead.⁷⁰ It is therefore not an immediate account of Hugh's childhood, but one written after 'the Fall' (49), and infused with subsequent history, including Hugh's relationship with Rachael Katzen, his war service, and the beginning of his theatrical career, as well as whatever it was that made 'forty [...] such an awful age' for him

⁶⁹ 'I'm Not Turning the Clock Back, I'm Taking It Off the Wall and Mending It', *London Review of Books*, 29 October 1998, p. 25.

⁷⁰ 'Dr Wolff' is a knowing nod to Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, where 'Dr M. Wulff, of Odessa', 'later Dr M. Woolf of Tel-Aviv', appears as 'a writer who has studied the neuroses of childhood with great understanding', and who reported that 'phobias of [...] horses, dogs, cats, fowls and other domestic animals [...] almost invariably turn out to be a displacement on to the animals of the child's fear of one of his parents' (*SE XIII* (1953), pp. 1-161 (p. 128)). Hugh Arkwright had a childhood fear that his parents were 'imposters', that at any moment his mother would 'turn into a croc [...] and gulp me up' (278).

(143). This history is not related until Part Four, however, when Hugh, now the ‘dysfunctional’ inhabitant of a psychiatric hospital (180), begins telling his story in letters addressed to his mother.

Hugh’s account of his childhood in the Cameroon in the 1920s gives a defamiliarising twist to the invocation of childhood in *Pieces of Light*’s first epigraph, from Book XI of *The Prelude*.⁷¹ The structures of nostalgia both for childhood and for a vanishing England found in Wordsworth’s poetry were, as Baucom, Gervais and Lucas have argued, significant in shaping nineteenth-century and subsequent versions of Englishness and of childhood.⁷² Indeed, the two forms of nostalgic retrospection combine in what Scruton calls ‘the child’s England’, which, from late-Victorian times, ‘in some way fulfilled the dream of England, and therefore compensated for the disappointing reality’. This England, he writes,

was an Arcadian countryside, cleared of its industrial accretions, peopled by English eccentrics like Winnie-the-Pooh and Eeyore, Rat and Toad, the White Queen and the White Rabbit, the mice and moles of Beatrix Potter—all of them human beings concealed in animal skins, just as the English were concealed within their clothes: safe, quiet and untouchable.⁷³

If childhood is the ‘hiding-place of [Hugh’s] power, however, its contents are disturbing to this ‘safe’ and ‘untouchable’ England. In his childhood world human beings in animal skins are anything but safe: the sinister Leopard Society continues

⁷¹ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805 version), Book XI, ll.333-42, in *The Prelude: The Four Texts (1798, 1799, 1805, 1850)*, ed. by Jonathan Wordsworth (London: Penguin, 1995).

⁷² Baucom, pp. 30-36, Gervais, pp. 1-27, and John Lucas, *England and Englishness: Ideas of Nationhood in English Poetry 1688-1900* (London: Hogarth, 1991), pp. 89-118. On Wordsworth’s influence on understandings of childhood, see Colin Heywood, *A History of Childhood: Children and Childhood in the West from Medieval to Modern Times* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), p. 27.

to practice a form of ritual killing, despite the orders of the colonial authorities (98-102). His Englishness, moreover, makes him particularly vulnerable. He thinks of himself as 'a maggot, an albino, an outcast' (13), and is constantly on the lookout for fetishes stronger than the 'DO's [District Officer's] Catechism' (11) and a small picture of Jesus (14) to protect him against malign spirits. He has a recurring fantasy, stimulated by reading the Chambers Dictionary, of 'Normans' roaming the forest, 'waiting to murder those of the English race, then put the blame on the English race. I was one of the English race' (13).⁷⁴ Against this threat, which is embodied in a figure, half-knight and half-rhinoceros, from paintings by his father's predecessor Hargreaves, he invokes two of the 'core terms of Englishness' in the colonial encounter: Christianity and cricket.⁷⁵ The spirit of a young missionary, Herbert E. Standing, who had wanted to spread cricket as well as the word of God to the 'native populace', stands 'dressed all in white, very tall, [...] at the end of my bed with a straight bat all night and every night, in case Sir Steggie should come' (28).

More commonly, however, England represents a mortal threat to Hugh, particularly after he becomes aware of his parents' evasiveness about what will happen when he turns seven. He initially fears that they intend to sacrifice him, and when he is told that he is going to school in England, this fear does not entirely fade. He associates England with dying childless, and with his 'worst dreams of skeletons and ghosts': 'How was I going to survive a season when everything died, when the

⁷³ Scruton, p. 61.

⁷⁴ The entry concerns the 'Presentment of Englishry, the offering of proof that a person murdered belonged to the English race, to escape the fine levied on the hundred or township for the murder of a Norman' (p. 12).

⁷⁵ Gikandi, p. xviii. Gikandi includes Shakespeare among these core terms, and as we shall see, Shakespeare will also become crucial to Hugh's Englishness. On the importance of cricket as a mechanism of inculcating Englishness, see also Baucom, pp. 135-63.

branches were stripped of leaves and nothing grew at all?’ (47) This fear of losing the forest’s protective presence is exacerbated by what he has heard from his father about Flanders, where ‘there were no trees, and if there were trees they had no leaves on them. You were either frozen and miserable or wet and miserable’ (81). In the event, Hugh experiences his expulsion from Bamakum as something very much like a sacrifice, or a death. It is the first of the transformations he undergoes in the course of the novel, which leave him, as we shall see, increasingly hollowed out, like an apple, one half of which has ‘just two or three little withered seeds in it, while the other [is] crammed tight with fat ones’:

one half had all the seeds and lived in Africa, the other half was being ‘occupied’ by me in England, as Gauls ‘occupied’ forts. I didn’t think this at the time, exactly, but I knew that not all of me lived here. But this ‘here’ was too strong to unstick from, like this side of the mirror was too strong to unstick from. (121)

The England he comes to is engaged in a complex network of projections and identifications with the so-called ‘Dark Continent’. Regeneration and degeneration fantasies figure Africa alternately as Eden, ‘far from the teeming masses’ (434), where the war-exhausted Arkwrights go to do good in the spirit of Sir Frederick (later Lord) Lugard’s ‘dual mandate’, and as the heart of darkness.⁷⁶ In both England and Africa, fantasies about the forest are connected to the legacy of the Great War: the war-traumatised district officer Hargreaves, having experienced all seven deadly

⁷⁶ In *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (1922), Lugard argued that Britain had the dual role of developing its colonies for the benefit of the world economy, and administering them for the well-being of Africans, allowing Africans to develop along their own lines and manage their own affairs under British guardianship. See John W. Cell, ‘Colonial Rule’, in *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, ed. by Wm. Roger Louis and others (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), IV: *The Twentieth Century*, ed. by Judith M. Brown, Wm. Roger Louis and Alaine Low, pp. 232-54.

sins in Flanders—including sloth, which ‘let it carry on and on and on and on and on’—asserts that the world was always fallen, and that ‘everything else is icing on the cake’ (449-50), while Edward Arnold’s obsession with prehistory, and with the return of the wildwood to Britain, is explained by Hugh’s mother as the result of his suffering in the ‘blasted wasteland’ of the trenches (186). Both forms of regenerative mythologising, moreover, have uncomfortable affinities with the mythological interests of the Nazi-affiliated Thule Society, whose members visit Edward Arnold’s house in Ulverton in the 1920s and 30s.⁷⁷

When Hugh is eleven, his mother disappears into the jungle. He never accepts that she is dead, however, choosing to believe instead that she has gone to the crater lake they visited as a family shortly before he was exiled to England, and that she will soon come to take him there too. His description of his process of adjustment to her death is an exemplary account of melancholic encryption: there was, he says, ‘no official death and nothing to bury’, so they—or rather he—‘somehow never gave up hope and then forgot’ (156-57). This ‘forgetting’ allows him secretly to preserve the maternal idyll which he has now lost twice over, in his fantasy of the crater lake where they will ‘live together on the shore in perfect love and harmony’, where there are ‘no crocs in the deep, black water’, and ‘England [is] beyond imagining’ (136).

When we meet Hugh again at the opening of Part Three, however, the voice of the forty-year-old who wrote the first sections as part of his therapy has disappeared, replaced by that of a precious, sentimental and waspish old man. The older Hugh, who rediscovers his memoir as he packs up his London flat, has retired

⁷⁷ On the interwar interest in prehistoric England and the politics of the soil, and

from the theatre and is preparing to move to Ulverton to implement his Aunt Rachael's will, before settling down to write his autobiography. He claims not to understand the memoir, that 'it's all happened to someone else before recorded time' (143), and when he reaches Ulverton it is apparent that the England that once represented death and loss has now been invested with the 'radiance' of Wordsworthian 'remembrances'.⁷⁸ The beechwood he once saw as 'a rather empty, echoey place' (73) is now 'glorious in the setting light' (142), and autumn is now not a time of 'mortal danger' (83) but a time to indulge a pleasurable melancholy: a 'gorgeous, sad time of year' (147). It quickly becomes apparent, however, that Hugh's assertions that he is free of his past are no more than that. His plan to establish a Historical Performance Research Centre in the old house is revealed to be a form of revenge on his uncle, or perhaps on his aunt—for what, we do not yet know. The house and woods begin to trouble him, and soon he is excavating the layers of junk in the attic, 'not even sure what [he's] looking for, but you never know' (157). Gradually, the spirits of the past begin to resurface, not in Wordsworth's measured anamnesis, but in a bloodshot eye that Hugh imagines is watching him as he walks in the garden, and a ghostly Red Lady in whom memories of his mother and of his as-yet-unnamed 'one and only love' coalesce (168). Hugh starts to speculate that the story of his mother's disappearance might mask a more sinister truth: that she might have come to England in the mid-winter of 1933, and been sacrificed as part of Edward's elaborate plot to make the wildwood grow (a plot

connections with similar movements in Germany, see Matless, pp. 116-23.

⁷⁸ *The Prelude*, XI.323-24.

that Hugh believes might have involved taking advantage of a German nerve-gas attack to depopulate Britain) (324-28).

Part Three closes abruptly with Hugh's diary entry for Thursday 7 October, which says only 'Horrible. Absolutely horrible' (176). When Part Four begins a year later, we are dealing with a different Hugh again. Writing to his mother from a psychiatric hospital, he adopts a cheery, mid-twentieth-century adolescent style, telling her that he is 'doing jolly fine, on the whole', and that his 'spot of bother' is passing (179). He is suffering from memory lapses and has stopped speaking, worried that if he opens his mouth 'quite another sound will come out' (180). His letter writing is therefore intended as therapeutic anamnesis, although he hopes that 'nothing comes back that I don't want' (180).

His letters record the opening of the crypt in which his mother and his 'one and only love' Rachael, who later became Edward Arnold's second wife, have been preserved, the 'golden memories' of them separated from the time after 'the Fall' (168; see also 49), and the consequent disintegration of the Englishness founded on Hugh's denial of their loss. Pursuing the 'Red Lady', Hugh discovered that when he and Rachael were lovers in 1940, they were observed having sex in the wildwood, and he found letters from his mother to his uncle that tell him that he is, in fact, the child of a missionary's daughter and Mr Hargreaves. This second discovery retrospectively explains Charlotte Arkwright's reluctance to look directly at him, and indeed her apparent difficulty loving him, as due to his resemblance to Hargreaves, and so destroys even his remembered 'Golden Age'. His increasingly elaborate suspicions about his uncle, for which there is little evidence beyond Hugh's inferences, read as displaced rage arising from these repetitions of the earlier losses

of both his mother and Rachael. Melancholia becomes paranoia, and develops into what could be interpreted either as a dissociative state, with intermittent memory lapses and spates of frenzied activity, which he describes as having ‘no life, no core, sucked of one’s blood so one is undead but not alive’ (344), or as a form of lycanthropy. On the night after reading the letters, he dreams he is a cat, ‘padding about the pub [where he is staying], seeking all the sleeping faces and giving them a quick claw’, including his mother’s face (345). On the same night Frank Petty, or Muck, the man who told him about the Red Lady, and about he and Rachael having been seen in the wildwood, is murdered. After his body is discovered in a tree in the wildwood, Hugh is charged with murder, and spends some days in custody before another man confesses and he is released.

As it plots Hugh’s psychological disintegration, Part Four of *Pieces of Light* simultaneously traces the formation of the Englishness that this breakdown reveals to have been a melancholic defence against loss. Paralleling the process tentatively mapped in Chapter One, Thorpe suggests that Hugh’s Englishness is a product of the interwar years and the Second World War. Hugh describes his African beliefs being driven out by more ‘literary’ spirits (201), notably Shakespeare, firmly established after 1918 as the chief glory of England, the centrepiece of an Englishness no longer conceived in terms of military might or the empire.⁷⁹ After seeing a group of touring actors perform *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* at the village hall, Hugh improvises a stage in the beechwood and begins to act his way through the Complete Works, using the photographs in the old edition his uncle has lent him as his guide to posture, gesture and costume. It is this encounter with Shakespeare that transforms the

⁷⁹ Colls, *Identity of England*, pp. 315-16.

beechwood from a bare, empty place into Sicilia, Arden or Navarre, offering Hugh imaginative sustenance and consolation for his loneliness (127). As we shall see, however, it is a consolation that encrypts rather than mourns his losses.

At the beginning of the Second World War, Hugh volunteers for the Observer Corps—mysteriously, despite being blind in one eye from childhood malaria, he has depth of vision, and passes a cursory medical examination. His war service brings both more loneliness and further self-transformation as he becomes absorbed in the machines of war, and experiences during combat a quasi-mythological apocalypse of fire and ice: the Ragnarok that was anticipated by the Thule Society, but also by the Irish writer Shaw Desmond, in whose *Ragnarok* (1926) London is bombed and gassed by the French and surrounded by bestial African troops, who massacre women and children.⁸⁰ Hugh becomes first a ‘steel-eyed [angel], winged, in cricketing togs’ (216), manning a searchlight battery on Mam Tor through the winter of 1939-40. Then, in his first real action in May 1941, with an SL (searchlight) battery in Hull, he shoots the pilot of a stricken Junkers 88, becoming as he does so one with the bullets, ‘travelling up [...] and burying myself inside it, guiding myself in, jabbering and groaning and shrieking’. He looks back on this with ‘disgust’, feeling he ‘disgraced’ himself, but at the time he was ‘proud of what [he] had done’ (248-49). From Hull he moves to RAF Waddington, where, as ‘a hybrid, a sort of Air Army chap’, his job is to observe and record the enemy’s ground defences, while doubling as an air gunner (256). As in *Waterland*, the bombing of Hamburg marks the threatened collapse of the distinction between English and German violence: in the theatrical skies over Hamburg, Hugh imagines himself as ‘one-eyed Wotan,

⁸⁰ Shaw Desmond, *Ragnarok* (London: Duckworth, 1926).

Wotan the furious, the terrible, the wise—the little open-mouthed boy in England now the rider of the skies behind his twin guns' (262). The bombing also reveals the hollowness of Hugh's 'England'. In May 1940, Rachael tells him he is 'very English', a characterisation that encompasses his interest in 'apples and wild roses and the lane and so on', and his emotional repression. Hugh is 'discomfited' then by her sense of distance from the England that they are 'supposed to be defending from the barbarians', which she feels is only 'a sort of picture', not something inside her (253). He believes himself, at that moment, to be thoroughly English, but by 1943 he wonders, without answer,

What does this 'England' mean? What did Rachael mean by saying I was 'so English'? I never saw England until I was just seven. Everything I knew, everything I loved, was far away. Now I am encased in metal and bolted perspex, flying through the air to bomb a city, in the name of this England. How did I arrive by this? (260)

Hugh's decision to become an actor is cemented by the wartime transformations that culminate in this disconcerting 'image of [himself], / armed in another sky'.⁸¹ Acting is quite explicitly presented as a means of managing these transformations: an alternative to going mad (214). The association of Englishness with acting, moreover, implies that it is a mask for an encrypted loss, a reading strengthened by consideration of the particular style of acting that Hugh later pursues. His career is devoted to the restoration of the acting techniques of Shakespeare's day which, according to Joseph R. Roach, depended on a 'Galenic-Renaissance physiology of the passions', in which the 'animal spirits' permeated the body, 'working its muscles, literally animating it, commanding it to life and motion'.

These animal spirits were thought to have ‘a potency of movement and expression recalling the ancient Apollonian forces of inspiration and possession’, and the role of the actor was to call up and manage them in order to make dramatic physical transformations between passions and between roles.⁸² If this were done successfully, these emotions would transfer themselves to the audience: ‘the spirits, agitated by the passions of the imaginer, [would] generate a wave of physical force, rolling through the aether, powerful enough to influence the spirits of others at a distance’.⁸³ The actor was believed to have what, from a contemporary perspective, seem like magical powers:

His expressions could transform his physical identity, inwardly and outwardly and so thoroughly that at his best he was known as Proteus. His motions could transform the air through which he moved, animating it in waves of force rippling outward from a center in his soul. His passions, irradiating the bodies of spectators through their eyes and ears, could literally transfer the contents of his heart to theirs, altering their moral natures.⁸⁴

Like magic, these powers entailed dangers to both the audience and the actor himself, hence the emphasis on the discipline and inhibition of the body, especially in the regulation of gesture. In particular, there was a risk that counterfeit passions might become confused with real ones, the mask with the face. The figure of the Changeling exemplified the risks of habitual self-transformation: in general terms, he was ‘a person given to constant change, fickleness, unreliability’, but he was also ‘a

⁸¹ Geoffrey Matthews, ‘Night Piece for You’, in *Piette*, p. 224.

⁸² Joseph R. Roach, *The Player’s Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1985), pp. 40-41. Roach’s study is cited in the acknowledgements to *Pieces of Light*.

⁸³ Roach, p. 45.

⁸⁴ Roach, p. 27.

person or thing put in exchange for another, implying an irrevocable substitution, a confusion of identities', and 'an imbecile, particularly one whose idiocy took the form of a spiritless vacancy of mind and limp flexibility of body'.⁸⁵

This description suggests that the 'vital spirit' that Hugh claims to have pumped back into the old style of acting (140) is a disguised version of the animistic spirits that surrounded him in his youth. It also suggests, moreover, that his unimpeachably English devotion to 'apt' Shakespearean acting (312), with its techniques for managing shifting passions, and therefore self-transformation, offers him a way of dealing with his experience of successive dislocations of self, first in his move from Bamakum to England, and later in his war service. When Hugh is confronted with the Ulverton house and its contents, however, he cannot any longer maintain the split between the ideal moment before the Fall—the idylls with his mother and Rachael that offer a fantasy of unity and self-presence—and what came after. The contents of his crypt come to the surface: he starts to see rotting faces everywhere, and Rachael becomes confused with Muck (267, 289, 310-11). Nor can he control his multiple identities. In the cell of the police station, as he is being questioned about Muck's murder, Hugh mistakes his reflection in the window for Mr Hargreaves/Sir Steggie (405). He is no longer Hugh Arkwright, 'lion of theatre', but 'the Tate & Lyle lion, [...] with bees making a hive in my head' (408): the Changeling, whose 'spiritless vacancy of mind and limp flexibility of body' are the consequence of too many transformations.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Roach, pp. 49-50.

⁸⁶ Hugh's father, Hargreaves, killed a gorilla by staking it to the ground and covering it with Tate & Lyle golden syrup stolen from the Arkwrights' stores.

It is never finally clear whether Hugh, in the guise of a leopard man, killed Frank Petty, whether his mother did return to England when she disappeared from Bamakum, or whether his uncle really did plan to use mustard gas hidden in the wildwood to depopulate Britain. The explanation for Hugh's tale of lycanthropy, ghosts and conspiracies is finally left in suspension, between supernatural fact and psychological projection. It does seem clear, however, that Hugh's attribution to his uncle of his mother's letters revealing that he is Hargreaves's and Grace Tarbuck's son is a denial of the truth, enabling him to preserve, or return to, 'a certain long moment lost in Africa' (413). Charlotte Arkwright's letters, which make up Part Five of the novel, enact such a return, but it is a return that makes clear that Hugh's melancholic preservation of this 'moment', his denial of his mother's death, is an attempt to preserve, as Ned Lukacher puts it, 'an originary memory and presence that [...] never existed'.⁸⁷ This 'originary memory' or fantasy, Thorpe suggests, is what the Englishness constructed with 'such discipline, such stamina', from 'the jungliness of a life' (199), has attempted to hide and preserve for almost sixty years.

In Chapter One, I traced the legacy for postwar Englishness of the simultaneous investment in and destabilisation of Englishness that took place during the thirty years of 'war-climate' from 1914 to 1945. I noted there that the pacific Englishness which became dominant in the interwar years required the disavowal of an older style of British imperialism: an implicit renegotiation of the relationship between England and Britain, and between England and its others, which saw the elevation of Shakespeare over the empire as England's chief glory, and, as already noted, a redefinition of the colonial mandate. This renewed Englishness could not,

⁸⁷ Lukacher, p. 11.

however, entirely cover over the anxieties about national degeneration or disintegration opened up by the First World War. *Pieces of Light* positions Hugh's Englishness as the product of this period of loss and reassertion, using his marginal status to stress the permeability of the nation's imaginary borders and the confusing relations of identification and projection through which his English identity is constructed. In the Second World War, Hugh's confusion intensifies, as the pacific, pastoral Englishness with which he has so painstakingly identified is mobilised to underpin Britain's war effort and, at its most extreme, to legitimise the indiscriminate killing of German civilians. Hugh's way of managing this confusion is to become an actor: as in *The Sweet Shop Owner*, the theatrical manipulation of identity is a defence against the petrifying touch of history. But like Willy Chapman, Hugh Arkwright cannot escape forever from the history encrypted in his mask, or camouflage. Sir Steggie, the shadow-self of English colonialism, eventually catches up with him, and his ensuing breakdown sees the return from within of 'the unspoken [and] violent histories out of which [postwar Englishness] was made'.⁸⁸

Even more than *Ulverton*, *Still* and *Pieces of Light* enact a profoundly melancholic process of mourning for ideas of Englishness that, from the vantage point of the 1990s, are no longer viable. Thorpe is painfully aware that the pleasurable melancholic fantasy of 'dying of England' disavows the violence on which that England was built, and aware, too, of how easily it was mobilised to encourage dying, and killing, *for* England. In my discussion of *Ulverton*, I suggested that that novel's textual melancholia marks a desire on Thorpe's part to keep England's 'open wound' open, preventing premature closure of a violent history that

⁸⁸ Rose, *States of Fantasy*, p. 60.

is not over. The result is a text that interrogates and problematises, without denying, its own grief. With *Still* and *Pieces of Light*, however, Thorpe is less successful in achieving a critical mobilisation of melancholia. By constructing these two texts around the search for origins, he risks simply re-enacting the melancholia he wishes to critique. *Still* largely avoids this problem, satirising Ricky's search for 'THE TRUTH' (375) too insistently to allow the reader to indulge likewise in a longing for England's lost, best self, but the novel's self-consciousness enactment of paralysis threatens to completely obscure any mourning-work for a specific history that it might be attempting. *Pieces of Light*, on the other hand, makes clearer what it would mourn, but, once the reader has compliantly disentangled Hugh's story from its somewhat contrived layers of narration, the account of postwar Englishness it offers is too programmatic to gain any significant critical or affective purchase on that imaginary construction. Simply revealing identity to be a fantasy, a construction, a disavowal of loss, does not make it less experientially real.

The complementary shortcomings of *Still* and *Pieces of Light* highlight the difficulty of creating narratives that grapple with, without being transfixed by, the ambivalent sense of loss characteristic of postwar Englishness. Like Swift's early fiction and Barker's *The Regeneration Trilogy*, *Ulverton*, *Still*, and *Pieces of Light* are driven by the uncanny return of the disintegrative forces contained by postwar Englishness—more or less—for almost half a century. The power of these unhomely forces, the sheer weight and complexity of the history of which they are the trace, seem to leave little room for an alternative Englishness to come into being. The last

novel I will discuss, however, does begin, albeit tentatively, to imagine how such 'newness' might come into the postwar world.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ See Rushdie, p. 8.

CHAPTER FIVE

LAST ORDERS?

This study has suggested that postwar Englishness, as represented in the novels of Graham Swift, Pat Barker and Adam Thorpe, is characterised by a sense of melancholic paralysis that cannot be explained simply as a reaction to post-imperial decline. All three writers attempt to create fictional forms capable of representing the continuing, disturbing presence of war in late-twentieth-century Englishness, and, to a greater or lesser extent, also attempt to work through that legacy. This work has led to all of them, at different times, being accused of nostalgia, with Swift in particular dismissed as offering a ‘tranquillising image’ of England in place of an engagement with contemporary Britain.¹ In an especially direct attack, Kate Flint has compared the ‘narrow-minded parochialism’ of *Last Orders* with the ‘journey back into post-war Britain’ undertaken in Meera Syal’s *Anita and Me* (1996). Syal’s novel, Flint writes, demonstrates what *Last Orders* ‘resolutely refuses to acknowledge’: that “‘national history’” itself undergoes a continuing process of transformation, accommodating other histories which themselves—as in the case of Partition—may draw attention to the literal, as well as the figurative instability of national boundaries’.² As I will argue in this chapter, however, I believe that Swift is

¹ Tredell, p. 41. See also responses to Thorpe’s anti-pastoral in *Ulverton* (above, pp. 182-83), and the complaint of the chairman of the 1995 Booker Prize judges, awarding the prize to *The Ghost Road*, that nostalgia is becoming Britain’s, and British fiction’s, ‘heavy industry’ (in D. S., ‘N.B.’).

² Flint, p. 43.

centrally concerned, in *Last Orders* as in *Waterland*, with the ‘figurative instability of national boundaries’, and with the way in which Englishness as constructed in the twentieth century has depended on the exclusion of this ‘instability’. *Last Orders*, I will suggest, ‘[looks] backward’ just as Flint would wish: ‘not as an act of memorializing’, if memorialising is understood as an act that attempts to fix the image of the nation in place, ‘but as a part of understanding the process of becoming’—of understanding how contemporary Englishness came into being and how it might become more open to ‘other histories’.³ The expansive Englishness that Swift has described himself searching for in *Waterland* is not just a literary matter.⁴

This transformation requires mourning, and, as Wendy Wheeler and Adrian Poole have observed, in his work after *Waterland* Swift has been engaged quite explicitly in the attempt to find fictional forms adequate to work through what Wheeler calls ‘contemporary grief’.⁵ In *Out Of This World* (1988), his subject is the violence of the twentieth century, and our appalled fascination with its spectacle; in *Ever After* (1992), it is the work of consolation, the ‘tissue of substitutions’ in and through which we mourn personal and historical losses.⁶ It is not until *Last Orders*, however, that these concerns with war and mourning come together once more in a sustained way with Swift’s interest in Englishness. *Last Orders* is, moreover, the clearest example amongst Swift’s novels, and indeed amongst all the works

³ Flint, p. 48.

⁴ See ‘Throwing Off Our Inhibitions’.

⁵ Wheeler, ‘Melancholic Modernity’.

⁶ Graham Swift, *Out of this World* (London: Viking, 1988) and *Ever After* (London: Pan 1992), Sacks, p. 18.

considered in this study, of an attempt to enact a passage from melancholia to mourning. For these reasons, this final chapter will concentrate on this novel alone.

Last Orders is an explicitly memorial journey: a drive from Bermondsey to Margate undertaken on 2 April 1990 by three old men and one middle-aged one to scatter the ashes of their friend and adoptive father, Jack Dodds, off the end of the Pier.⁷ In generally short chapters, narrated in the first person, the seven main characters reflect on their past, on the ties between them, and on what their lives have meant: on what has, in one meaning of the novel's punning title, 'ordered' their lives. Ray's voice is heard most frequently (he has thirty-nine chapters), followed by those of Jack's son Vince (twelve), Lenny and Vic (eight each), Jack's wife Amy (six), Vince's wife Mandy (one), and Jack himself (one). Wendy Wheeler has noted the way in which this community of voices finally produces the collectivity necessary for 'cultural mourning as a [...] *communal*, not individualistic, labour in the world': a collectivity notably missing from *Waterland*, as well as from *Still* and *Pieces of Light*.⁸ In considering *Last Orders* as a work of mourning, however, we might also note how, on their way to Margate, the travellers make detours to a number of sites of personal and national significance, among them the naval memorial at Chatham, the valley in Kent where the dead man, Jack Dodds, met his wife Amy, and Canterbury Cathedral. These visits can, I would suggest, be understood in the terms proposed by Laplanche, Sacks, and Brooks: as necessary postponements that, while perhaps initially seeming to be melancholic, make time for remembrance and

⁷ Graham Swift, *Last Orders* (London: Picador, 1996). References will be given in parentheses.

⁸ 'Melancholic Modernity', pp. 65-66. See also Poole, pp. 150-52.

mourning to occur. Indeed, the novel itself proposes such a relationship between mourning and ‘detours’ when Vic suggests the visit to Chatham:

‘Don’t see why not,’ Vince says. [...] ‘That’s why we’re here, ain’t we? To remember the dead.’
 ‘It means a detour,’ Vic says.
 Vince blows out smoke, thinking. ‘We can do detours.’ (114-15)

Last Orders is also, of course, an *English* journey, but one that is comparable not so much with Priestley’s desire ‘to move across and grasp the social and cultural landscape of a whole nation’, as with the tradition of literary pilgrimages that begins with *The Canterbury Tales*.⁹ Swift’s characters, however, are making not for Canterbury but for Margate, not for the great shrine of English Anglicanism and, indeed, of English continuity, but for ‘an untended boil on the backside of Kent’: ‘Dole-on-sea’, ‘Poverty-on-sea’, ‘Refugees-on-sea’.¹⁰ Or, as the novel would have it, ‘Dreamland’ (273). If Margate represents the possibility of shedding the past and becoming ‘new people’ (15), as does Vince’s passion for motors and ‘mobility’ (105), the ‘poverty’ of this dream (281) reflects the constraints under which they have lived, ‘all bricked up and boxed in’ in Bermondsey (235).

Military service provided Ray, Jack, Lenny and to a lesser extent Vince not only with their only real opportunity to travel, but also with a form of order for their lives. Like Willy Chapman, however, they find that being part of ‘big history’ does not help them deal with their postwar lives (90). Having been at the battle of El Alamein is no use to Ray when his daughter emigrates and his wife leaves him (100),

⁹ Dodd, ‘Views of Travellers’, p. 128.

and Lenny remembers that although when he enlisted his being a boxer was seen as an advantage, he 'never saw how having a good left hook helped you dig a recoil pit' (44). What the war has left them is an immobilising sense of duty. Lenny reflects on Jack's life as a butcher in terms that recall Willy Chapman standing like a sentry behind his shop counter:

It's like Ray always said that Jack was a fine soldier, Jack should've got a medal, but when it came to being back in Civvy Street, he didn't know nothing better, like most of us, than to stick like glue to what he knew, like there was an order sent down from High Command that he couldn't ever be nothing else but a butcher. That shop was his bleeding billet, it's a fact. (132)

Swift's vision has become more compassionate between his first novel and his sixth, however. Whereas Willy is represented as having 'chosen' his shop-keeper's 'camouflage' as a way of trying to stay untouched by history, Jack and the others in *Last Orders* are much more openly admitted to have had only limited choice in how they lived. As Ray puts it towards the novel's end, imagining Jack addressing him from his death-bed: 'if we could all see and choose [...] you'd be riding Derby winners and Lenny'd be middleweight champ. And I'd be Doctor Kildare' (283-84). Instead, Ray became an insurance clerk, Lenny a fruit-and-veg seller, and Jack a butcher like his father. None of them, thinks Lenny, '[knows] who [they] really are' (209). Neither does Vince, orphaned by a doodlebug, forced to '[become] a different person' once as a baby and then 'choosing' to '[switch] right over' again as a squaddie in Aden (104), at home with motors because a car is 'somewhere you can

¹⁰ Neil Corcoran, *English Poetry since 1940* (London: Longman, 1993), p. 4, Fiachra Gibbons, 'Meet Me in Margate', *Guardian*, 9 March 2001, http://www.guardian.co.uk/friday_review/story/0,3605,448630,00.html [29 August 2002].

be and be who you are. If you aint got no place to call your own, you're okay in a motor' (73).

Lenny seems to feel that the desire to become 'new people' is a form of desertion. He draws a distinction between 'a soldier's duty', which 'aint duty so much as orders', and 'doing your duty in the ordinary course of life', which is 'harder'. He is convinced, however, that it is 'a question of paying your dues', and that 'there shouldn't ever be no running off, deserting' (132). There are clear instances of 'running off' in the novel, mostly by women: Ray's daughter Susie moves to Australia, his wife Carol leaves him for the sub-manager of a domestic appliance centre, Vince's wife Mandy runs away from her home in Blackburn at seventeen, only to be taken in within twenty-four hours by Jack and Amy, and Vince himself 'deserts' Jack by joining the army instead of going into the butchery trade (45). But staying put can also be a form of desertion: Amy refuses to accompany the others to Margate, just as Jack refused ever to visit his severely disabled daughter June, or, until the very end of his life, to 'give up being Jack Dodds, family butcher' (15) or 'Private Jack of the Cairo Camel Corps' and be just 'private Jack' (183), Lenny has turned his back on his daughter Sally since she became a prostitute, and Ray has not been in touch with Susie for nearly twenty-five years.

There is a lot, therefore, to mourn in *Last Orders*. But do memories of war and icons of England really work in the novel to consolidate a conservative Englishness, as Kate Flint and Nicholas Tredell insist? Or does *Last Orders* question the iconography of postwar Englishness, and seek to call last orders on it? In order to form a view on this question, I would suggest that we need to consider more carefully than either of these critics do the function of the places the mourners visit

on their journey: the Chatham Memorial, Wick's Farm, Canterbury Cathedral and Margate itself.

Vic Tucker, the undertaker, proposes the 'detour' to Chatham because he has never visited this memorial to the men he served with during World War Two. But the solemnity of commemoration is threatened by farce as the pilgrims drive round half of Chatham before they find the way to the memorial, and then nearly collapse climbing the hill. The difficulty of getting there, moreover, suggests that this memorial has not secured for those whose names are recorded on it a lasting place in the story of the nation. In 1990, fiftieth anniversary of Britain's 'finest hour', everyone in Chatham knows the memorial, over in the 'wilderness' on the edge of town (120), but no one seems to know how to get there. It is not so much in its power to evoke patriotic cultural consolidation as in its provisionality, its marginality to the ongoing narrative of the nation, that the Memorial is able to offer consolation to the travellers:

It's like it got built then forgotten. [...] It's like it was only half meant to be here and so were we, but here we are, together, on top of this hill. It's like an effort at dignity, that's what it is, it's like a big tall effort at dignity. (122)

Chatham, it is true, has a 'littling effect' (134). But this is due not to its subordinating integration of the individual into the monumentalised nation, but to its embodiment of what Ray calls 'the larger mathematics' (127): the impersonal, supra-national odds against 'surviving', the fact of the individual punter's utter insignificance compared with 'things that live longer, like armies and navies and insurance houses and the Horserace Totalisator Board' (128)—indeed, with the sea itself.

It is at this point in the novel that Vic's voice becomes more prominent. Vic is an important character, the only one of the men who does not want to be someone or somewhere else, the only one for whom military service was not defining, and the only one who has a close relationship with his wife and children. For him, the wartime encounter with death was different only in scale from his life on land. Faced with the superstitious fears of his fellow sailors at having an undertaker's assistant on board, he remembers wanting to tell them,

I know about this, in a small way, I know about what you fear. I don't know much about ships and signals and bearings and soundings, any more than a Chatham rating learns in two months. But I know about the dead, I know about dead people, and I know that the sea is all around us anyway. Even on land we're all at sea, even on this hill high above Chatham where I can read the names. All in our berths going to our deaths. (125)

Vic offers not only the memory behind the memorial, but an interpretation of what obligations that memory lays on the living. As he observes in a short chapter, which because of its importance I will cite almost in full:

But Jack's not special, he's not special at all. I'd just like to say that, please. I'd just like to point that out, as a professional and a friend. He's just one of the many now. In life there are differences, you make distinctions [...]. But the dead are the dead, I've watched them, they're equal. Either you think of them all or you forget them. It doesn't do in remembering one not to remember the others. Dempsey, Richards. And it doesn't do when you remember the others not to spare a thought for the ones you never knew. It's what makes all men equal for ever and always. There's only one sea. (143)¹¹

¹¹ Dempsey and Richards were two members of Vic's fire party killed by a shell just when, by chance, he had been sent aft for more hoses (125).

What consolation there is in the face of our shared mortality, Vic suggests, is not to be found in the nation, or in what Ray calls ‘big history’ (90), but from the mundane solidarity of ‘small men’—and, more problematically, women—on this ‘one sea’.

From Chatham, they take another detour to Wick’s Farm in Kent. Vince sets out to scatter some of Jack’s ashes there, which prompts a fight with Lenny, who thinks Vince plans to override Jack’s wishes, and who has a score to settle over Vince having got Sally pregnant years earlier. We see this visit through the eyes of Ray, who does not know the place’s significance, but Vince has already told us why it is important. This is where, on the way to the seaside, he was told the story of Jack and Amy and June, and his own parents. Looking down into the ‘Garden of England’, where Jack and Amy met hop-picking in the summer of 1938, Vince is struck by Jack’s fear, the sense that he is ‘teetering, toppling’, which communicates itself to him (65). Decades later, it is Vince, not Jack, who seems about to topple, looking for a moment, just before he starts to unscrew the cap from the plastic jar of ashes, ‘like a man perched on the edge of a cliff’ (147).

It might be tempting to read the acts of remembrance that take place at Chatham and Wick’s Farm, as Flint does, as a ‘bonding’ ritual ‘[involving] the affirmation of a certain view of England, both tacitly, between the men, and more generally, in its incorporation of the reader into a certain form of nostalgia for a fading way of life’.¹² But the very description of England that Flint cites in support of her argument suggests a very different reading. Ray watches Vince

walking across the field to where it starts to slope steeply [...]. It’s not so much a field as an open hillside. We can see the full sweep of the view,

¹² Flint, p. 40.

like we're standing on the rim of a big, crooked bowl. Down in the valley it's all green and brown and patchy, woods marked off with neat edges and corners, hedges like stitching. There's a splodge of red brick in the middle with a spire sticking up. It looks like England, that's what it looks like. (145)

After the scuffle between Vince and Lenny, Ray is conscious of their oddity, in this landscape: of the sheep staring at them, and of the fact that 'anyone looking up from down below at the four of us on the top of this hill must think we're stranger-looking than the sheep' (150). Ray's perceptions quite explicitly echo Vince's memory of 'fields and woods and hedges and orchards, a farmhouse, a church tower, a village [...] spread out in different patches like someone's pieced it together' (64), and his sense of exposure on the hill-top amongst the sheep who 'get chopped up and eaten. The view's all far-off and little and it's as though we're far-off and little too and someone could be looking at us like we're looking at the view' (65). These passages certainly evoke clichés of England—the 'Garden of England', the 'patchwork' emblematic of the 'English settlement', where as Jack says, 'you've got to have the country to have the town' (64)—but reality's momentary coincidence with national symbolism only highlights its stitched-together artificiality and the unhealed wound beneath the surface.¹³ Both Vince and Ray are aware of being outsiders here. The very forces that popularised the notion of the 'Garden of England' as the essence of the nation in the interwar years also, as David Matless has argued, produced an archetypal 'anti-citizen', incapable of appreciating the beauties of the countryside.

¹³ Compare Scruton, pp. 85 and 148. See also Heike Hartung-Brückner, 'History and "Englishness" in Graham Swift's *Last Orders*', <http://www.thecore.nus.edu.sg/landow/post/uk/gswift/lastorders/hhb1.html>, [hhb2.html](http://www.thecore.nus.edu.sg/landow/post/uk/gswift/lastorders/hhb2.html) and [hhb3.html](http://www.thecore.nus.edu.sg/landow/post/uk/gswift/lastorders/hhb3.html) [29 August 2002], and Ingelbein, p. 44.

‘The anti-citizen is labelled “Cockney”, regardless of his or her precise sound-of-Bow-Bells geographical origin’, writes Matless:

Cockneys in the country denote cultural transgression, although it is never conversely suggested that a rambler might be an offensive presence in a seaside resort. The encouragement of meaningful access to the country assumes an unbridgeable and hierarchical cultural geographical divide, whereby if one enjoyed, for example, loud music and saucy seaside humour, one could not and would not want to connect spiritually to a hill.¹⁴

At the precise point that Flint and Tredell see Swift asserting the symbolic coherence of ‘England’, therefore, the text points to the failure of the idea of the nation, and indeed of language, which can only gesture at a painful history of class division and exclusion: ‘This is where.’ (151)¹⁵

The same is true of their next visit—‘another fool’s errand, another detour’ (181)—to Canterbury Cathedral. As I have already noted, Canterbury is a symbol of English continuity, religious, political and cultural—hence its significance, in the twentieth century, for the likes of T. S. Eliot and Powell and Pressburger in *A Canterbury Tale* (1944).¹⁶ As at Wick’s Farm, however, the mourners feel belittled by the gaze of this symbol of nationhood: ‘it makes you feel sort of cheap and titchy’, thinks Ray, ‘like it’s looking down at you, saying, I’m Canterbury Cathedral, who the hell are you?’ (194). Neither the thoughts of transcendence that the cathedral’s pillars are supposed to incite (207), nor the England monumentalised in its ‘tombs, effigies, crypts, whole chapels’ (196), offer comfort in the face of the fact that

¹⁴ Matless, p. 68.

¹⁵ Amy echoes Vince’s truncated ‘This is where’ towards the end of the novel: ‘Yes it was here, Vince, here. This was where. Here, in the garden of.’ (p. 240)

‘Jack’s nothing’ (201): it is no ‘consolation’ to those who mourn him that they had Jack ‘rubbing shoulders, so to speak, with the Black Prince’ (206). Appropriately enough, it turns out that Lenny’s motivation in suggesting this detour was not to honour Jack at all, but to make use of the intimidating effect of the cathedral to give the survivors a ‘dose of holiness [...] to put us back on our best behaviour’ (210).

In any event, the end point of this pilgrimage is not Canterbury, but Margate, the place where Amy and Jack were to have bought a small bungalow and where, in the summer of 1939, they tried unsuccessfully to be ‘new people’ after June’s birth (19). Margate’s promise of innocent ‘seaside fun’ (19) has always been, as Ray reflects, ‘a poor dream’ (281), but in 1990, out of season, its ‘Golden Mile’ looks like a ‘frontage’ put up in a hurry to ‘outstare the greyness’ of the ‘grey thick sea’. ‘It doesn’t look like journey’s end,’ thinks Ray, ‘it doesn’t look like a final resting-place, where you’d want to come to finish your days and find peace and contentment for ever and ever.’ (269) It is, nonetheless, an appropriate site for the work of mourning that *Last Orders* enacts—not so much because it embodies what Wheeler rather dismissively refers to as the ‘tacky fantasy of the pleasures of mass consumption’ from which, ‘rather than from the cathedral mass at Canterbury, [...] symbolic salvation must be found’, but because it marks the place where the mourners’ ‘poor dream’ of England, and the history to which it testifies, begin to dissolve.¹⁷

¹⁶ For a discussion of Powell and Pressburger’s England, see Jeffrey Richards and Anthony Aldgate, ‘Why We Fight: *A Canterbury Tale*’, in *Best of British: Cinema and Society 1930-1970* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), pp. 43-59.

¹⁷ ‘Melancholic Modernity’, p. 77.

John Lloyd Marsden reads the seaside in Swift's fiction as 'the location where what is solid becomes fluid, where order turns to flux, and meaning to chaos'.¹⁸ This is true as far as it goes, but as I have already argued in my readings of *Shuttlecock* and *Waterland*, the seaside is more specifically the site where the boundary between England and its outside becomes fluid, and where history's revenants can be palpably felt. Margate, thinks Ray, 'smells like memory itself' (287). It is the place where England meets the 'one sea' already evoked by Vic, and especially through Ray's figuring of the sea as 'wet desert' (281; see also 128), it is also where the England of 1990 meets the memories of war that have shaped it. The experience of war in the desert, and its impact on the postwar English imagination, are part of what is being mourned at the end of Margate Pier.

This assertion requires, perhaps, its own explanatory detour. To the British army fighting there, the North African desert was an empty, inhuman landscape, the perfect stage for the campaigns that 'advanced [...] from Egypt into Libya and retreated [...] to Egypt and advanced again into Libya' (90). The belief that the desert was, in effect, *terra nullius*, as Rawlinson argues, allowed it to be 'considered, without irony, as a clear field for the play of military force and intelligence, uncomplicated by the (political) problems of occupation, or the "side-effects" of civilian death'.¹⁹ But at the same time, this landscape of 'pure' war presented problems to the individual soldier seeking to orient himself in relation to 'big history' (90). There was, one soldier wrote, 'nothing in the landscape to rest or distract the eye; nothing to hear but roaring truck engines; and nothing to smell but

¹⁸ Marsden, p. 17.

¹⁹ Rawlinson, p. 115.

carbon exhaust fumes and the reek of petrol. Even food [tasted] insipid, because of the heat, which stultifies appetite'.²⁰ In this respect, war in this 'illimitable ocean of rock and sand' was very like the war at sea, in which, as Vic remembers, 'what you saw were the giddy innards of a ship, and what you smelt wasn't the salt sea air but the smell of a ship's queasy stomach, oil and mess-fog and cook's latest apology and wet duffel and balaclavas and ether and rum and cordite and vomit' (123).²¹ The ever-present dust mired and coated men and vehicles, swallowing them up like the sea, '[preparing] their bodies', as the mud of Flanders had done for an earlier generation, 'for their transformation, in death, into dust and earth':

On the main tracks, marked with crude replicas of a hat, a bottle, and a boat, cut out of petrol tins, lorries appeared like ships, plunging their bows into drifts of dust and rearing up suddenly over crests like waves. Their wheels were continually hidden in dustclouds: the ordinary sand being pulverized by so much traffic into a substance almost liquid, sticky to the touch, into which the feet of men walking sank to the knee. Every man had a white mask of dust in which, if he wore no goggles, his eyes showed like a clown's eyes. Some did wear goggles, many more the celluloid eyeshields from their anti-gas equipments. Trucks and their loads became a uniform dust colour before they had travelled twenty yards: even with a handkerchief tied like a cowboy's over nose and mouth, it was difficult to breathe.²²

Disoriented by the desert's potentially fatal capacity to obscure distinctions between machine and nature, suffering from 'desert weariness', soldiers dreamed of 'Home', and so, Piette argues, were seduced into the insular perspective on the war that the island dream represents.²³ But the desert could also figure the dissolution of

²⁰ Private R. L. Crimp, diary entry for 18 October 1941, in *Private Words: Letters and Diaries from the Second World War*, ed. by Ronald Blythe (London: Viking, 1991), p. 192.

²¹ Arthur Bryant, *The Turn of the Tide 1939-1943* (London: Collins, 1957), p. 326.

²² Piette, p. 24, Keith Douglas, *Alamein to Zem Zem*, ed. by John Waller, G. S. Fraser and J. C. Hall (London: Faber, 1966), p. 17.

²³ Crimp in Blythe, *Private Words*, pp. 191-92, Piette, pp. 8-38 and 255-72.

national boundaries. As Hamish Henderson records in his foreword to his *Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica* (1948), ‘in the early stages of the desert war [the two armies] were to a large extent forced to live off each other. Motor transport, equipment of all kinds and even armoured fighting vehicles changed hands frequently’, producing ‘a curious “doppelgaenger” [*sic*] effect’.²⁴ The *Elegies* are dedicated to ‘our own and the others’, to ‘that eternally wronged proletariat of levelling death in which all the fallen are comrades’. They reject the ‘blah about their sacrifice’, and the ‘barriers’ that would distinguish ‘our own’ from ‘the others’, asserting that ‘This one beach where high seas have disgorged them like flotsam / reveals in its nakedness their ultimate alliance’.²⁵ Although—or perhaps partly because—Henderson himself is a Scot, his desert war elegies speak, as Piette has shown, to an Anglo-British imagining of the war, expressing a desire to move beyond ‘the alignments and alliances which we had come to accept as inevitable’.²⁶ In them, writes Piette, ‘the desert [becomes] the beach where [the lies of the culture that went to war are] purged, where elegy [frees] itself from history’.²⁷ The desert/beach in *Last Orders*, I would argue, is an equivalent space, where ‘desert weariness’ and its compensatory ‘island dream’ can be blown away like sand or ash on the wind (294-95), where the melancholic denial of the impact of two world wars

²⁴ Hamish Henderson, *Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica* (Edinburgh: EUSPB, [1979]), p. 59. According to Henderson’s preface, the *Elegies* were written between March 1943 and December 1947 (p. 59).

²⁵ Henderson, First and Sixth Elegies, pp. 17-18 and 33-34.

²⁶ Henderson, p. 59.

²⁷ Piette, p. 255.

through a fantasy of the 'Garden of England', of a 'Little England', can become mourning.²⁸

Amongst the things that *Last Orders* mourns, then, are the conscription of dreaming in the service of the nation, and the 'poor dream[s]' this wartime mind produced (281). What Wheeler calls the 'tired dream of England' in *Last Orders* testifies to lives—particularly men's lives—caught as Piette has suggested 'between a dream and mask', still following orders and still unable to step out from behind the roles that have chosen them.²⁹ Ideas of England cemented in the interwar period and reinforced during World War Two offer an escape or a 'palliative'.³⁰ But this threadbare 'dreamland', like Margate's, now 'looks more like the way into a prison than a funfair' (273). The mourners must, therefore, go on past the end of the Golden Mile, to the end of the Pier, where 'it's just open sea, North Sea, next stop Norway' (286).³¹ This is the appropriate place to mourn not just Jack, but, as Vic and Henderson argue, all 'the others' (143), and indeed to mourn the void, the 'wide world', at the heart of England. The traumas of 'big history' may be harder to mourn than a single death, Swift suggests, but they require the same kind of work: to the comrades in the 'eternally wronged proletariat of levelling death', there is, after all, 'only one sea'.

²⁸ See Crimp in Blythe, *Private Words*, pp. 191-92.

²⁹ 'Melancholic Modernity', p. 77, Piette, p. 262. Amy, too has been making her own 'fool's errands' for fifty years (p. 15), but the text suggests that her melancholia or mourning is in large part a product of Jack's refusal to acknowledge June, and after his death, she decides it is time 'to think of [her] own future' (p. 278).

³⁰ Ingelbein, p. 44.

³¹ Coincidentally, or not, on 2 April 1940 Germany was poised to invade Norway: as Jack says, of June's fiftieth birthday, 'fifty years is either special or it aint' (83).

In *Last Orders*, Swift has created an elegy that seeks to move postwar Englishness from melancholia towards mourning. He does so not by reasserting the coherence of the nation, but by enacting a communal movement beyond ‘the end’ of England towards the ‘one sea’, sedimenting—a very Swiftian word, after all—English mourning tasks in wider postmodern and postwar grief. This movement is supervised by Vic with a necessary mix of solemnity and humour, and makes a necessary number of digressions and ‘fool’s errands’ on the way to its end. At the end, the mourners are not ‘new people’: the past cannot be shed completely. Nor is this a comprehensive reckoning with England’s history or with the ‘wide world’. It is, however, a tentative move towards new and more expansive dreams. Once it took a war to make Ray travel, and then he saw the world without seeing it (54). But now, at the end of England, a wider vision seems possible. Reversing Stella Rodney’s declension from ‘living’ to ‘surviving’, Ray reckons he ‘could still turn [surviving] into living again’ (128): ‘I could see the world’, he thinks. ‘It can’t be all sea and desert.’ (281)

CONCLUSION

I began this study by noting that, despite the growing number of works published in the last two decades dealing with English and/or British identities, the significance of the two world wars, and of the Second World War in particular, to the contemporary crisis of Englishness has not been adequately discussed. I hope that my readings of Swift's, Barker's and Thorpe's fiction will, if nothing else, have demonstrated that this oversight impoverishes our understanding of why it is, apparently, so difficult to formulate a new sense of English national identity in response to more recent events such as increased immigration from Britain's former colonies, devolution, and progressive integration into Europe. Having articulated the problem of postwar Englishness in this way, I should perhaps reiterate that I do not see the specifically postwar condition of contemporary England as unrelated to its postcolonial, postmodern, or other 'postal' conditions. I believe, however, that the relative neglect of *postwar* Englishness justifies the attention I have given it here, with the proviso, and in the hope, that future work will look more closely at the interactions between the overlapping and complex histories of which late-twentieth-century Englishness is the product.¹

In articulating the postwar concerns of the three contemporary writers whose work is the focus of this study, I have become increasingly conscious that their interest is not in the specific material, political and social legacies of the two world

wars as much as in what, following Hynes and Calder, we might call the 'myths' of the wars, and in the relationship of these myths to the myth and the reality of the 'English settlement' that was renewed in 1945. At the crux of this relationship is a violence that war reveals to be within, not outside, Englishness, and that troubles both the imaginary borders of the nation and its internal coherence. What emerges as 'postwar' in Swift's, Barker's and Thorpe's fiction from the 1980s and 1990s, therefore, is a concerted questioning of the imaginary foundations of an Englishness that, in the wake of the break-up of the always-precarious social and political consensus of 1945, seemed increasingly unviable. In different ways, their texts enact the disintegration of this Englishness, and the return from within of an encrypted history that is experienced as an uncanny void or disorder.

Echoing, and in some cases anticipating, the readings of war and Englishness offered by critics like Light and Piette over the same period, these novelists collectively trace processes through which ideas of England and Englishness were (re)asserted and lost between 1914 and 1945. They suggest that the reformulation of Englishness in the 1920s and 30s was a melancholic denial of a loss of national confidence and perceived coherence during the First World War, and Barker and Thorpe in particular represent this melancholia as fuelled by pre-war conflicts, fears and 'unsettlement' within England, and within Englishness, intensified by the war and profoundly disruptive of what Freud would term 'normal' mourning. Thorpe's and Swift's novels, moreover, suggest that the mobilisation of an insular, domestic Englishness during the Second World War redoubled feelings of loss, ambivalence

¹ In a slightly different area, Paul Gilroy's *Between Camps: Race, Identity and Nationalism at the End of the Colour Line* (London: Allen Lane, 2000) is one example of the sort of work I have in mind.

and confusion at the very moment that 'England' seemed to be regenerated, and that this loss, too, was melancholically buried after 1945. This composite narrative of the wars' impact, like the contemporaneous narratives of scholars, should, of course, be understood as the product of a particular historical moment: the unsettled Britain, disturbed by violence both discursive and physical, of the late 1970s and 1980s. To recognise its historical locatedness is not to discount its truth, but to acknowledge the 'oscillation' and uncertainty as to causality that troubles Thorpe's *Still*, and that, as Rose argues, makes its definitive appearance in Freud's writing in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*—a work which itself, of course, bears the indelible mark of the First World War.

Swift's, Barker's and Thorpe's fiction suggests that the First and Second World Wars are powerful and disturbing presences in the late-twentieth-century English imaginary, presences that must be recognised and worked through. It is not, however, as clear as one might think—or as the strictures of some critics might suggest—that the goal of this fictional memory work should be the transformation of postwar melancholia into mourning—at least, not mourning as Freud understood it, as the cutting of all ties to the past. Barker has argued that 'what we learned about human beings on the battlefields of the First World War and in the death camps of the Second World War is something that we stop remembering at our peril—because we are the same people', and all three contemporary writers considered here suggest that the relationship between Englishness and the violence on which it is founded must likewise remain unforgotten.² Some of their novels—notably, Barker's *The Regeneration Trilogy*, Swift's *Shuttlecock*, and Thorpe's *Ulverton*—are deeply

² In D. S., 'N.B.'.

sceptical of too quick or easy a closure of England's 'open wound'. Others imply that, at the very least, the passage from melancholia to mourning must be a long and arduous one, and not one that would conclude with forgetting. There is, moreover, very little sense in Barker's or Thorpe's work of what a new Englishness might look like, and only the beginnings of such a vision in Swift's. That their mourning should be more or less ambivalent, more or less melancholic, is unsurprising, given the fact that the violence, discursive and real, that they represent both 'within' and 'outside' England and Englishness has not stopped. Perhaps the depth of this melancholia means that the critics who look to the influence of new Britons to bring about a renewal of Englishness are right to do so. But Swift's, Barker's, and Thorpe's novels surely suggest that the troubled memory of the two world wars in contemporary Britain must be addressed somehow, rather than dismissed as mere nostalgia or atavism. Like the experiences of postcolonial subjects, those of postwar subjects, if approached critically, have the potential to dissolve the walls around, and within, England's dream island.

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