Literary Evasions of the English Nation in the Twentieth Century

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LITERARY EVASIONS OF THE ENGLISH NATION IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

a dissertation

by

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Literary Evasions of the English Nation in the 20th Century

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation seeks to engage with some of the complex means by which English subjects in the twentieth century envisage their relationship with the concept of nation, and with their own nation in particular. These are deeply ambivalent relationships, which present simultaneously seemingly contradictory and irreconcilable characteristics. In some ways the nation seems hegemonic and repressively conditioning to many English writers over the last hundred years. It is also deeply embedded in our ways of conceiving of ourselves, and is an irresistibly enticing means of understanding the world around us. It pushes individuals towards resistance and yet strongly resists evasion. At times the nation enables the establishment of identity in opposition to other ideological forces; at other moments, it becomes the problematic ideological structure in itself. These and other dichotomies will be examined in the course of this study.

In chapter one I consider examples of writing between the wars, and comparable ways in which two authors render the subjectivity of the English individual as an untenable balancing act between living inside and outside the nation’s literal and metaphorical territory. Woolf and the little known C. E. Montague narrate their changing engagement with England during and between the World Wars. Wartime is a moment of profound reification of the nation, where failure to fully commit to support it is potentially punishable by death. Both Mrs. Dalloway and Montague’s Rough Justice narrate, in their differing ways, just such a death. Both authors share a developing sense of the frailty and decrepitude of England in the period, but both also develop a clear
model for the recasting, rather than the casting out, of England into more enduring and politically palatable terms.

In the second chapter I turn to the nation as it attempts to reproduce itself abroad. In the 1930s colonial English abroad are rendered in a state of dislocation from their home nation by Orwell and Mary O’Malley. They are cast as “ambassadors” for the English nation, proxies who are expected to prove themselves the most respectable of exemplars for their home. However, in the course of *Burmese Days* and O’Malley’s *Peking Picnic* these central characters prove unqualified to maintain the impossible ideals of the nation they are expected to represent. They are instead aliens, in relation to both their home nation and their new “home” abroad.

Chapter three ranges from the 1930s to 1960s, and to English regional narratives in which characters actively attempt to evade their nationality. The conceptual center of the chapter is the Angry Young Men movement of the 1950s, quintessentially represented by Alan Sillitoe and Keith Waterhouse. Beyond manifesting a rebelliousness towards the English nation in general, these two writers outline characters who employ a technique of fantasizing other lives as an attempt to liberate themselves from the pressures of an English nation with which they cannot, or will not, align themselves. They daydream visions of empowerment, glory and power. In so doing they momentarily disrupt the direct influence of the nation over them. Phyllis Bentley, a Northern English writer from an earlier decade, renders in her novel *Environment* a comparable desire to break from the influence of the English nation by dint of daydreaming another, independent existence. The relatively obscure Arthur Wise, writing in the late 1960s, enacts this fantasy in the most extreme terms in his 1968 novel *The Day the Queen Flew to Scotland*
for the Grouse Shooting, a text that depicts the dream of bloody revolution and complete fragmentation of England, North and South.

In my final chapter I turn to writing from later in the century, in which ambivalence about national affiliation leads to an extreme skepticism towards the nation as a concept in general, and to all other ideological constructs along with it. William Golding and Ian McEwan, in their novels Free Fall and Black Dogs, create willfully nihilistic characters that fear all hegemonic forces and struggle to gain and retain independence from investment in nation. Neither of these central protagonists can remain dislocated from allegiances for long however – the need for alignment with some form of collective construct outside themselves (like nation, personal love, theological values, etcetera) is overwhelming.

I conclude, on the basis of the work of these ten writers, that the English nation is in a deeply unstable position, its authority, and even its substantive existence, challenged in a variety of ways both from without and from within. Its external opponents, both in rival nation-states and sub-national ideological movements (a number of which are violently threatening) are largely manifest. Perhaps more dangerous still, for England’s continued endurance, are the threats which these writers suggest can come from national ‘insiders,’ who resist, evade, question, even attack, the nation from which they purportedly emerge.
# CONTENTS

## Acknowledgements

 iii

## Introduction

 1

### Chapter One: War, Nation and the Fantasy Space: Woolf and C. E. Montague

 14

- Virginia Woolf and *Mrs. Dalloway*
- A Shot in the Street
- A Ledge and a Cliff
- Woolf’s later national perspectives – *Between the Acts*
- Late Essays
- C. E. Montague and *Rough Justice*
- Montague’s Ambivalence
- Montague and Arnold
- Visions of North and South
- *Rough Justice*’s Notion of Nation
- Desertion and English Society
- Victor, from a Bygone Age
- The Fantasy Space

### Chapter Two: Ambassadors and Aliens: George Orwell, Mary O’Malley and England Abroad

 67

- Orwell and O’Malley
- Orwell’s thinking on Nation
- Laura and John as Ambassadors
- Laura Leroy as Alien
- John Flory as Alien
- Safe Spaces
- Conclusion

### Chapter Three: Dreaming Up the Northern Nation: Bentley, Sillitoe, Waterhouse, and Wise

 110

- Regional Angst
- The North
- The South
- Dream-States
- Failure to Escape
- Afterword
Chapter Four: Interminably Embroiled in Nation: Golding and McEwan

William Golding’s *Free Fall*

- Sammy’s Struggle
- The Cell
- Ian McEwan’s *Black* Dogs—Monumental Stories
- *National* Monuments
- *Jeremy* as Skeptic
- Jeremy as Storyteller
- The Majdanek story
- The Berlin story
- The Dogs' Story
- Conclusion

Appendix

- Figure 1.1
- Figure 1.2

Bibliography

Footnotes
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Above all, my wife Jill has been the motivation I have needed to complete this work, and pass through this often challenging period of my life. This dissertation is dedicated to her, and to our child, his name still unspoken, but his life to be our greatest project.
INTRODUCTION

This dissertation seeks to engage with some of the complex means by which English subjects in the twentieth century envisage their relationship with the concept of nation, and with their own nation in particular. These are deeply ambivalent relationships, which present simultaneously seemingly contradictory and irreconcilable characteristics. In some ways the nation seems hegemonic and repressively conditioning to many English writers over the last hundred years. It is also deeply embedded in our ways of conceiving of ourselves, and is an irresistibly enticing means of understanding the world around us. It pushes individuals towards resistance and yet strongly resists evasion. At times the nation enables the establishment of identity in opposition to other ideological forces; at other moments, it becomes the problematic ideological structure in itself. These and other dichotomies will be examined in the course of this study.

This entire study relies upon a certain understanding of the word ‘nation.’ Over the course of the last century ‘nation’ has been a much contested term. This semantic problem has filled a number of texts already, and given my own specific goals for this work I will rely upon a number of critical commentators. My own position in relation to these others writers and critical debates is largely one of co-opting and amalgamating strands from their arguments about the nation (both in general terms and in the case of England specifically), in the hopes of employing them to serve my own point about the fragility of the notion of “England” and its unraveling from the inside over the course of the last hundred years.
There are four central questions that inform my thinking about England and the definitional history of the term “nation” during the twentieth century. Is the nation a substantive historical entity or a fleeting performative contrivance? Is the nation founded on the basis of the “top-down” efforts of an educated and empowered elite, or from a groundswell of popular feeling? Should national affiliation be conflated with another vexed term: “race”? Finally, and perhaps most crucially, can the nation as a term be solidly defined, or is it in a constant state of slippage that will not be tied down?

Critical thinking about the notion of nation over the last century or more has been centrally concerned with disqualifying the assumption that the nation has an historic and substantive heritage. Ernest Renan’s seminal 1882 essay “What is a Nation?” articulates the first central debate surrounding the definition of “nation.” Renan considers it to be a construction dependent on a process of collective “forgetting” (11). This forgetting is a suppression of the past violence that, for Renan, necessarily underpins the nation’s formative processes. The implications of this assertion are profound. Renan begins a critical conversation about the true history behind any nation, since he argues that nations are formed not by progressive historical growth from ancient times, but by a consensus among the populace to invent a simple narrative of historical development in place of a more complex (and potentially sinister) one.

This idea of the nation as a narrative contrivance was given more weight by a number of later studies which offered detailed examples of the process of historical invention. Most notable among these texts was Eric Hobsbawm’s 1983 collection, The Invention of Tradition. Here Hobsbawm, David Cannadine and others expose a number of examples of historical mapping, such as the creation of Scots’ highland “tradition,”
which was in truth not nearly so ancient as it purported to be. Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, perhaps the best known of all recent studies on the nation, re-enforces claims of writers like Hobsbawm, that the nation is an imagined, ideological construct of modern times.

Revealing the constructed history which these writers suggest was crucial in the formation of nations like England leads to another central question: where was this drive to contrive the “nation” coming from? Whereas Renan wrote of the “fusion” of the mass of the populace at the point of the formation of the nation (*What is a Nation?* 10), Hobsbawm, Tom Nairn and Anderson all argue that England was formed by the active efforts of individuals in the ruling classes. Nairn’s 1977 study *The Break-up of Britain* argues that it was colonial, peripheral elites who pushed for the establishment of post-colonial nations for example, rather than a groundswell of popular resolve. Anderson also argues implicitly that the creation of nations, which were founded on literary histories more than historical facts, was a ‘top-down’ movement, since only those with full access to print media were in control of its development.

Anderson’s assertion of literary heritage as the roots of national cohesion engages with a further question about the nation in recent critical writing. For Anderson the terms “nation” and “race” cannot be conflated. For him, race denotes ethnicity, while nation is the construction of a reading and writing community. Nairn argues, on the other hand, that racism launches from national fervor. This debate is taken on in the most detailed terms by Paul Gilroy’s work over the last two decades. Gilroy feels that both left and right political wings in England have been party to the fusing together of these two terms. He criticizes Anderson’s elision of the complex interplay between race, nation and class,
the political right for its othering of racial groups, and even figures on the left like Raymond Williams, for their investment in ideas like the need for “long experience” in order to achieve inclusion in the national body (Ain’t no Black 49). At the same time, the nation is for Gilroy an inherently racist structural overhang from imperialism.

The attack on the function and form of nation – particularly the English nation – which writers like Nairn and Gilroy initiate, is approached from a different perspective by Homi Bhabha in his seminal 1990 article “DissemiNation.” Bhabha challenges “nation” not for its suppression of a violent past, contrived history, or politically corrupt roots in imperialism, but for its semantic fluidity. For Bhabha the notion of nation is mixed up with the metonymic function of terms like ‘the people’ or ‘minorities’ (DissemiNation 292). Its solidity is undermined by the divided nature of the national subject, on whom the nation is founded, but who is ultimately a product of various forces of culture and migration that do not necessarily respect national boundaries (298). Historian Norman Davies makes a comparable case in the introduction to his extensive study of The Isles. He points out that the region that includes England has numerous possible titles that make definition of an object of study extremely difficult. The slippage of the word that Bhabha cites in purely theoretical terms proves applicable to Davies’s historical study.

The crucial overarching point which I take from all these critical debates is that the nation has often been considered a politically, culturally, and even semantically oppressive force during the course of the last century. All these key theorists concur that certain empowered hegemonic forces assert that the nation has a progressive genealogy, one straightforward and ‘readable’ by, and to, national subjects. Individuals living within the nation find their specificity subsumed into this reductive model of them as first and
foremost defined by their national allegiance. In reality, as Bhabha, Hobsbawm, Anderson and others agree that this model of England as a simple narrative is contrived, and does not account for the true complexity of experience that individuals feel in relation to the communities in which they live. The authors I consider share a common inclination to complicate the relationship between nation and national subject in a variety of ways. They are driven to struggle against the tyrannical effects of this cohesive national narrative, which does not account for their, or their characters,’ specificity, and to attempt to forge a new and unique space beyond the grasp of the notion of “England.”

The period I am centrally concerned with in this study – from about the beginning of the First World War until the mid-1990s – is far from the first modern articulation of problematic issues related to English nationalism. The Victorian “condition of England” novel renders a divided nation and national consciousness, comparable to my selected texts. Novels like Gaskell’s *North and South* provide an earlier indication of deep-seated fragmentation in English society. Apparently simple representations of the nation, in which it is assumed to be unitary and cohesive, are shown by the newfound cultural sensitivity of heroines like Margaret Hale in *North and South*, to be in truth complex and intricate.

*North and South* though, ultimately resolves these social differences into a hopeful union between individuals with personal specificity, from different sides of the socio-cultural divide, like Margaret Hale and John Thornton. Closure like this elides the true complexity of the wider cultural state of the nation in a way that the material that I have selected from the twentieth century is generally unwilling to do. Explicit patriotism too, well exemplified by Brooke’s ubiquitous “The Soldier,” from just before my own
period of inquiry, emerges as is fundamentally problematic in these ten texts. Brooke’s poem is born of a different sensibility about national allegiance than the later work I consider. The texts considered here present English subjects variously unable or unwilling to reconcile themselves to any reductive image of the nation’s cohesion. In its place are a number of strategies of active and positive evasion from this holistic representation of the nation, which range from the creation of liminal fantasy spaces, to fragile safe spaces, to daydreams of other nations altogether, and to nihilistic, ‘post-national’ voids.

Over the course of the Twentieth Century generally, the most prominent national event in English history is undoubtedly the end of empire. Two of the most recent and prominent articulations of the debate about this collapse are Jed Esty’s *A Shrinking Island* and Simon Gikandi’s *Maps of Englishness*. Esty argues that the collapse of empire led to a reification of England as a nation-project (3). On the contrary, Gikandi argues that England could not survive without its Imperial infrastructure (“the crisis of Englishness in the present period is symptomatic of the incomplete project of colonialism” [9]). I look at this debate in another way, to ask a more underlying question: was the nation solidly defined ‘behind’ its colonial endeavors, so that, when the rug was pulled from under it, it could hope to stand? It is an older nation than its empire, but as the empire unraveled was England capable of consistently seeing itself as a coherent object ‘prior’ to its pursuits? Gikandi has pointed out that attempts to assert historically validated nationhood were as determined in England as in the newly emancipated colonial states (4) – did these efforts gain traction?
I speak to this debate about empire and the enduring nation somewhat implicitly then, by trying to hold the overwhelming question of empire in abeyance, in order to assess England’s validity, independent of its colonial relations. Critics like Edward Said have argued that such a separation is not tenable, and that England is entirely conditioned by its colonial relations. He would be of course, on many levels, correct. However, to never read England independently is to accept something about the locations that are assumed to demarcate the colonial structure, which should not be taken for granted. England should not be assumed so coherent and unitary a structure. When England is held up to the light without its colonial relations, even if doing so requires a sleight of hand, it is an object that proves difficult to locate unproblematically in either canonical or more obscure writing across the period of colonial collapse.

I redress what I see as a persistent inclination to read England as a cohesive center, which I feel needs to be complicated. Both Esty and Gikandi write about “England” largely unequivocally, reifying the object’s solidity even as they critique it. A little ironically, this has undoubtedly become even more pronounced in the postcolonial era, as liberated colonized nations seek to demarcate clearly their oppressive other. Fanon argues that “you do not show proof of your nation from its culture… you substantiate its existence in the fight which the people wage against the forces of occupation” (179). Ian Baucom’s very persuasive work on symbols of Imperial reproduction is also founded on the idea that such sites duplicate, while themselves also reifying, places and artifacts considered quintessentially English.

I should point out that I am not removed from this tendency – it is difficult to think outside this structure of meaning to reassess openly the substantive object whose
ideological contents, as Baucom demonstrates, seem to solidify so convincingly their source. The structure of my work here will help me to interrogate this tendency. I will move in each chapter chronologically through the century asking at each turn: Is there evidence in narratives here of feelings by ‘insiders’ akin to some of those felt by colonial ‘outsiders’ who are opposed to the hegemony of a center/periphery model? If so, that model is (not for the first time, but perhaps from a new perspective and to a new degree) drawn into question.

I will also contest another assumption that remains persistent, even in a post-Leavisite age. Despite their differing perspectives, both Esty and Gikandi are deeply invested in assessing English culture on the basis of highly canonical writing. Esty argues that Woolf and Eliot must form the basis of his study since they “exemplify the last ‘major’ generation of English writers” (5). Going further still, Gikandi writes:

I worry that a careless incorporation of the “other voice” into a literary tradition can, if it is only appendative, function simply as a mechanism of covert marginalization. But then the claim I make in this chapter – that the postcolonial reader needs to establish a certain affiliation with the texts of Englishness – may be seen in some literary quarters as a surreptitious subordination of various national literatures to the Great Tradition… This is a risk we must be willing to take. (5)

I cannot agree with Gikandi in this move. I have expanded the remit of my study to include more “minor” writing. I have several reasons for this. Most pointedly, I am concerned that purely canonical studies do not necessarily reflect the broader sense of any one cultural moment. Even if we presume that these texts present the qualitatively
best work of the period it seems to me less likely, not more so, that they can be taken to approximate the perhaps less idiosyncratic cultural context behind them. David Lloyd has argued persuasively against exclusive investment in “major” writing in our reading practices, though in defense of a “minor” literature that is defined by more profound radicalism than those that I will consider here (JanMohamed and Lloyd 380). More modestly but no less importantly, I am keen to widen the scope of reading of texts about England, so that we can be a little more confident that we are reading the location of a (supposedly concrete) culture, and not merely a text. At the same time these texts cannot be taken to exemplify English culture as a whole – nor could any other selection. Rather they offer complicated models of nation, models that refuse to allow us to presume even tacitly that English (or any other) nationalism is unitary, cohesive and knowable.

When I turn to this more “minor” literature I find intriguing approaches to issues of nationality that might otherwise be overlooked. Mary O’Malley’s *Peking Picnic* reflects on exile and the subject as a proxy for their nation in distinctive terms not reflected in any major literature of the period. This kind of text can also work in concert with more established ones, as is the case with C. E. Montague’s war narrative *Rough Justice*, a text which fits within a traditional genre while also narrating it in peculiar and particularly visceral terms. I do not dismiss the inclusion of more well known material, and will consider here writers like Woolf and Orwell along with the “minor” work, to present as full a picture as possible in a study of this length.

In each position on my conceptual and chronological map, I read a different type of national subject in crisis: a war veteran who breaks from his nation for a short period to reach a kind of liminal fantasy space; a dislocated subject abroad who appears to be an
“ambassador” for, but ultimately proves an alien from, his or her nation; a subject from
the regions trying to daydream his or her way out of the surrounding state; and a
nihilistically resistant subject who gets his wish of freedom from national hegemony,
only to discover that such an escape is both untenable and nightmarish.

In chapter one I consider examples of writing between the wars, and comparable
ways in which two authors render the subjectivity of the English individual as an
untenable balancing act between living inside and outside the nation’s literal and
metaphorical territory. Woolf and the little known C. E. Montague narrate their changing
engagement with England during and between the World Wars. Wartime is a moment of
profound reification of the nation, where failure to fully commit to support it is
potentially punishable by death. Both Mrs. Dalloway and Montague’s Rough Justice
narrate, in their differing ways, just such a death. The positions of the nation and the
individual are profoundly adversarial: the nation struggles reductively to force the
individual to locate himself as primarily a national subject, while the individual seeks to
dislocate himself from the nation, a structure with which he or she feels an uncomfortable
lack of alignment. Both characters’ struggles culminate in their deaths in the face of the
power of the nation, but both first achieve the creation of a liminal, dislocated space
which is, if only temporarily, outside the nation’s grasp. Septimus’s death is in itself a
defeat of his desire to break from the nation himself, but allows his wife Rezia to
envision, momentarily, a fantastic space outside the nation’s oppressively cohesive power
structure. Victor improbably comes across a farmhouse in the middle of the battlefield in
which he can live, beyond the nation’s grasp, for some time before he is captured and
executed. Both characters are to some extent proxies for their author’s own troubled
reflections on England, despite Woolf’s and Montague’s social positions, which appear to place them thoroughly ‘within’ the socio-cultural structure around them. Both authors share a developing sense of the frailty and decrepitude of England in the period, but both also develop a clear model for the recasting, rather than the casting out, of England into more enduring and politically palatable terms.

In the second chapter I turn to the nation as it attempts to reproduce itself abroad. In the 1930s colonial English abroad are rendered in a state of dislocation from their home nation by Orwell and Mary O’Malley. They are cast as “ambassadors” for the English nation, proxies who are expected to prove themselves the most respectable of exemplars for their home. The social structure that supports their role creates illusory “safe spaces” (the club and the picnic respectively) that these characters employ as grounding for their positions. However, in the course of *Burmese Days* and O’Malley’s *Peking Picnic* these safe spaces are challenged by threats of violence that undermine the notion of the irrepressible reproductive scope of the colonial nation abroad, and these central characters prove unqualified to maintain the impossible ideals of the nation they are expected to represent. They are instead aliens, in relation to both their home nation and their new “home” abroad.

Chapter three ranges from the 1930s to 1960s, and to English regional narratives in which characters actively attempt to evade their nationality. The conceptual center of the chapter is the Angry Young Men movement of the 1950s, quintessentially represented by Alan Sillitoe and Keith Waterhouse. The movement has commonly been documented as resistant to a wide variety of hegemonic societal structures. Beyond manifesting a rebelliousness towards the English nation in general, these two writers outline characters
who employ a technique of fantasizing other lives as an attempt to liberate themselves from the pressures of an English nation with which they cannot, or will not, align themselves. This is particularly pointed in terms of their regional roots, which they feel underline a distinctly “Northern” space in a nation they perceive to be principally “Southern.” They daydream visions of empowerment, glory and power. In so doing they momentarily disrupt the direct influence of the nation over them. Neither character can sustain this break for long. When they are given a choice to act in the real world to change their circumstances, one can only scupper his own chances of “working the system” to his advantage, while the other cannot seem to bring himself to break from the social structure and the future which that structure has set for him. There are examples of this move to desperate dreams of “escape” from other regional writers, not considered Angry Young Men. Phyllis Bentley, a Northern English writer from an earlier decade, renders in her novel *Environment* a comparable desire to break from the influence of the English nation by dint of daydreaming another, independent existence. The relatively obscure Arthur Wise, writing in the late 1960s, enacts this fantasy in the most extreme terms in his 1968 novel *The Day the Queen Flew to Scotland for the Grouse Shooting*, a text that depicts the dream of bloody revolution and complete fragmentation of England, North and South.

In my final chapter I turn to writing from later in the century, in which ambivalence about national affiliation leads to an extreme skepticism towards the nation as a concept in general, and to all other ideological constructs along with it. William Golding and Ian McEwan, in their novels *Free Fall* and *Black Dogs*, create willfully nihilistic characters that fear all hegemonic forces and struggle to gain and retain
independence from investment in nation. Neither of these central protagonists can remain dislocated from allegiances for long however – the need for alignment with some form of collective construct outside themselves (like nation, personal love, theological values, etcetera) is overwhelming. Thus these authors demonstrate the obligatory investment we must all concede to socio-cultural constructs like the nation. Golding himself shares Sammy’s politically resistant posture, but also, at times, concedes his need for a nation, for the love of another, and for an ethical grounding. McEwan also admits that we are compelled to make narrative patterns comparable to the nation's ideological constructions, and that thus the nation is closely aligned with our own meaning-making inclinations.

Ultimately this thesis tries to aid, in some small way, in a project of re-inscription of the meaning of the word “England” as we move into a new century. I conclude, on the basis of the work of these ten writers, that the English nation is in a deeply unstable position, its authority, and even its substantive existence, challenged in a variety of ways both from without and from within. Its external opponents, both in rival nation-states and sub-national ideological movements (a number of which are violently threatening) are largely manifest. Perhaps more dangerous still, for England’s continued endurance, are the threats which these writers suggest can come from national ‘insiders,’ who resist, evade, question, even attack, the nation from which they purportedly emerge.
CHAPTER ONE

War, Nation and the Fantasy Space: Woolf and C. E. Montague

During times of war, pressure for individuals to invest in support of their nation is most acute. Indeed, failure to do so can be (more or less directly) punishable by death. In the period just after the First World War, Virginia Woolf and C. E. Montague wrote novels of just such deaths at the hands of the English nation state. It should be immediately conceded that the more well known of these novels revolves around a suicide rather than an execution, and so my assertion that the nation had a hand in this death must be contentious. Nevertheless, I will argue here that Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* and Montague’s *Rough Justice* are parallel narratives on a number of levels, most pointedly in terms of the fate of their two central characters. The effects the English state authority has on the will, mental state, and allegiance of individuals who might otherwise be thought keen to support their nation is similar in both texts. The deaths of major protagonists in these two novels are, I will argue, the comparable result of the pressure to assimilate into the English nation, as their respective authors render it. The execution for desertion of Montague’s central character, Victor Nevin, in the rarely studied *Rough Justice*, helps to illuminate in a new way what I see as one of the causes for the suicide of Septimus Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Both my readings here are initiated by moments in these novels that seem out of place in surrounding texts. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, a short passage directly after Septimus' death hints at a counter-strain to the general tenor of the book’s prose. Reflecting on this passage has led me to believe that Rezia's brief recollection or envisaging of a place quite
distinct from the general environment in the book constitutes for her and her husband an empowering, creative act. In *Rough Justice*, the sheer implausibility of the protected farmhouse in which Victor conceals himself in the midst of the battlefields of France during the war stands out as a rather extreme act of improbable creation on his (and his author’s) part.

These are both fantastic creations, then: spaces which, within these diegeses, are more than merely out of place, but run counter to the tenor of texts around them. In *Rough Justice*, the farmhouse is a place in which Victor can hide close to the front, and indeed take on a completely different life for several years. Rezia, falling into sedated unconsciousness after her husband’s violent death in *Mrs. Dalloway*, thinks of running through cornfield in rural Italy, though the novel is otherwise firmly fixed as a quintessentially urban, English narrative. As well as fantasies these spaces that Montague and Woolf create for their characters, are liminal. They are so incongruous that they exist only in slight and fleeting terms – the farm is unreal and the cornfields are dreamlike – neither can sustain itself indefinitely.

What then drives these characters to these two out-of-place acts of invention? Both acts seem indicative of a character’s discomfort with their place in the society in which they live. Both seem the result of a desperate attempt to resolve this uncomfortable personal position. From this possibility – that these spaces exist as the result of the struggle with hegemonic forces – came for me the idea that these fantasy spaces are statements by Woolf and Montague of their own wider difficulties with England at the time.
The textual parallels between *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Rough Justice* are all the more plausible when these two author’s attitudes towards England are more broadly compared. Both writers held complex and deeply ambivalent feelings about England – its contemporary, hegemonic influence over its subjects, and its fading future prospects. Both construct rather forlorn characters, driven to struggle with the influence of their nation over them, capable for a moment of creating fantastic spaces conceptually “outside” the idea of the nation, but doomed to failure in their attempts to establish some sustainable independence from England. I will argue the liminal spaces that these two central characters generate are, after all, a theoretical dead-end to their problematic relations with England – They cannot hope to offer a long-term solution to the attempt to dislocate from nation. They do, however, help us to perceive the nature of the problem with national affiliation as Woolf and Montague saw it, and they can stand as nodal points in a course of thinking that would lead these writers to develop some form of resolution. Rezia and Victor’s fantasy spaces allow us, as they allowed their authors in a similar fashion, to plot a course through antagonistic national interactions with the individual, towards a structure of society that they might find more tolerable. Montague and Woolf thus have a further similarity. Neither is so unequivocally pessimistic as to merely anticipate Orwellian cynicism in their conclusions about this hopeless individual struggle with nation. Both writers share a comparable sense of the potential to recast the nation in a new, and more palatable, form. There remains hope in the long-term then, not so much for individuals who would seek to break absolutely from the influence of their nation over them, but for a tenable balance to be struck between England and the identities of those who live in it.
Virginia Woolf and Mrs. Dalloway

As Karen Levenback’s study of Virginia Woolf and the Great War has argued, Septimus Smith’s cry of “I’ll give it to you!” just before he “vigorously, violently” throws himself out of a window to his death, appears a direct challenge to those forces in post-war English society that would attempt to suppress his mental illness, and cast it as a more socially acceptable case of either pitiable “fatigue” or reprehensible cowardice following the war.¹ Thus, we can begin see something quite menacing in the tone of Septimus’ thoughts before he kills himself: “Holmes [Septimus’ doctor] was coming upstairs. Holmes would burst open the door. Holmes would say ‘In a funk, eh?’ Holmes would get him. But no; not Holmes; not Bradshaw [a consultant psychiatrist]” (Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway 149). Septimus immediately starts to ponder ways he might kill himself. As he sits on the window ledge, just before he shouts his final words, “an old man coming down the staircase opposite stopped and stared at him.” This outside observer of Septimus’s death draws into question the object of his death-cry. It seems possible that the challenge to “you” could encompass doctor Bradshaw’s direct repression of his troubled state, but it could also be directed at a wider community in London society, who (with this old man as its proxy) witnesses his death without comment or contestation.

Mrs. Dalloway as a whole can indeed be read more broadly as rendering a parallel struggle between opposing forces of suppression and resistance among nation and individual. The term suppression is an accurate but perhaps over-determined descriptor for the willful stifling of individualism enacted within the book. Woolf was no doubt aware that in response to the horrors of the war a community must at some point actively move beyond encircling trauma. Thus, early in the novel Woolf has Clarissa think about
the long term residual effects of the war on English society: “This late age of the World’s experience had bred in them all, all men and women, a well of tears. Tears and sorrows; courage and endurance; a perfectly upright and stoical bearing” (9). Dalloway articulates well the active containment of horror that is a sometimes crucial coping strategy for a community’s recovery from traumatic events, and the First World War is an unparalleled example of this collectively experienced ordeal. However, this suppressive mode also has for Woolf a negative implication: The communal impetus toward stifling what is considered unpleasant or objectionable drives a movement to more or less forcefully repress difference and normalize the aberrant. A nation in the throes of this coping strategy, Woolf argues in Mrs. Dalloway, is keen to heal all that appears outside its tranquil and composed functioning. In this struggle between the broadly constructive and more sinister implications of this coping with war, trauma, and sickness, Septimus stands as a lonely figure positioned in untenably antagonistic relation with the English nation around him, of which Clarissa is ultimately a constituent.

Thus, on one side, Woolf traces an English society that remains insistently cloistered and repressive, determined to put down individual thought and will under a blanket of passive, infantile, collective consciousness, just as it denies the trauma and violence of a war that has reified the nation.ii The First World War is certainly not absent from Mrs. Dalloway so much as it is repeatedly recalled and re-emergent, but is, each time it appears, actively suppressed by a narrator hostile to the disordered and violent national image it recalls. Clarissa is complicit with the suppressive mode in the novel, reveling in the feeling of assimilation within this society (“it was absolutely absorbing; all this; the cabs passing” [8]). With some satisfaction she thinks of her role in helping
this community to coalesce (“She must assemble” [186]) so as to participate in this societal drive to bring society together into one uniformly amorphous (and principally middle-class) whole, since, “somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home, of the house there, ugly, rambling all to bits and pieces as it was, part of people she had never met” (9). Most insidiously, even the novel’s narrator – flowing seamlessly and with only slight demarcation between individual consciousnesses in free indirect discourse (Phillips xxii) – is complicit in this onslaught on the notion that those individuals might be unique or even distinct.

Septimus enters this diegesis as a figure incapable of comfortably engaging with the amalgam that Woolf suggests constitutes English society of the time. In terms of his wartime experiences, his working class roots, and his origins outside the metropolis, but most of all his aberrant mental state, Septimus cannot be made to fit with this national being. He sees the society around him as oppositional, and is desperate to “get away from people – they [he and his wife Rezia] must get away from people” (Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway 25). He explains to Rezia “how wicked people were; he could see them making up lies as they passed in the street,” so that they must consider committing suicide together (66). His employer, Mr. Brewer, at the auctioneers Sibley and Arrowsmiths, has had high hopes for Septimus’ growth and successful future absorption into a comfortable and respectable social position in the firm. This prospect is dashed though when “something happened which threw away many of Mr. Brewer’s calculations, took away his ablest young fellows, and eventually, so prying and insidious were the fingers of the European War, smashed a plaster cast of Ceres, ploughed a hole in the geranium beds,
and utterly ruined the cook’s nerves at Mr. Brewer’s establishment at Muswell Hill” (85). The “something” which happened remains ambiguously poised between the possibility that Septimus smashed the plaster cast himself as a result of his deranged state, or that the European War was more directly responsible in some way. This vagueness underlines the proximity of these two topics for Woolf, so that Brewer’s desire to have Septimus succeed him into a position of some power is not feasible either because of the intrusion of political circumstance or because of mental illness which may or may not be the result of the trauma of those circumstances. In either case, Septimus’s failure to “keep his health” (85), despite Brewer’s best efforts to support him (he writes a supportive letter to Dr Holmes), disqualifies the possibility that Septimus can be made to fit with the society he lives in.

Although Woolf implies that Septimus’s fall from grace is connected to some instability which results from his wartime experiences (the insidious “fingers of the European War”), the nature of Septimus’s mental condition is imprecisely characterized as a combination of constituents of what would later come to be known as shell-shock, and a variety of conditions such as Schizo-affective disorder (characterized among other things by visions and paranoid delusions) and type I and II bi-polar disorder (which can be indicated by among other things major depressive episodes, manic episodes, violent mood swings and illusions of grandeur), some of which could be said to affect Woolf herself throughout her life (Lee 175), a parallel which draws Septimus and Woolf into a somewhat, but certainly not complete, analogous relation.

It is not enough to argue then that Septimus is merely a victim of the trauma of his past war experiences, as Levenback has done (60). Septimus’s position is questionable,
and this very ambiguity is, I will argue, highly problematic for the kind of English society Woolf characterizes in Mrs. Dalloway. Septimus’s status and, crucially, his liberty, are disputed by various characters in the text. The final arbiter is the consultant psychiatrist Dr Bradshaw. Bradshaw, as judge of Septimus’s right to personal freedom, acts as a central agent of the English nation state. We discover, as Clarissa hears of Septimus (and his death) for the first time at her dinner party, that Bradshaw discusses a parliamentary bill with Richard Dalloway (who is a Conservative MP) which must include some provision for “the deferred effects of shell shock” (183). We do not hear of Richard’s response, or of what Bradshaw feels those provisions might entail, but the reference makes clear both that Woolf felt her depiction of Septimus was a fair approximation of the condition (despite several anomalies in it), but more importantly that Bradshaw is deeply connected to the national reaction to individual cases of socially aberrant behavior like this.

Of course Bradshaw’s decision to detain Septimus is not simply a cynically repressive move to imprison an individual who does not comfortably fit with the perceived societal norms. Septimus is indeed, by our own standards of judgment, a sick individual. However, in the light of Woolf’s own numerous ‘treatment’ plans at the hands of various doctors of the time, it is not too much to speculate that she would have held a dim if not outright distrustful attitude towards the state’s designation of who constituted the unacceptably socially aberrant, and what should be done with them. Hermione Lee’s biography suggests that “there is no doubt that the development of [Woolf’s] political position, her intellectual resistance to tyranny and conventionality, derived to a great extent from her experiences as a woman patient” (184). As Foucault has argued in
Madness and Civilization, such societal designations, and the repercussions of the proposed incarceration which go along with them, are not capable of being entirely innocent of political implications for the power relations between nation and individual. Lee argues both that Woolf had an “unshakable conviction that… her doctors and nurses were conspiring against her” (179), and that her construction of Septimus was “a political reading, ahead of Foucault, of the conspiracy between social engineering, the restraint of the mentally ill, and the patriarchal self-protection of the establishment” (193).

It appears that Septimus could never establish a sustainable co-existence with this England – the forces ranged against him seem overwhelming. Levenback argues that “His own power, he sees, is no match for the collective in conscience and unconsciousness of the social order” (76). In such circumstances, his suicide seems an inevitable conclusion – a futile act of capitulation to the untenable nature of his position in relation to this societal structure. Thus, though “He did not want to die. Life was good,” he is forced to act out “their idea of tragedy” [my italics] (149) – another case of a statement with an ambiguous object which might refer merely to his doctor’s notion of a romantic fall, but might also encompass a wider community which the doctors represent.

The suicide and its immediate aftermath are worthy of some fresh and detailed reflection, for this moment in the text reveals more strenuous and profound strains on the hegemonic power of the nation, as Woolf characterizes it in Mrs. Dalloway, than might be assumed on the basis of the book’s overarching trajectory. The suicide prompts the creation of a fantastic space that is beyond the control and location of this model of England, as Septimus’s wife Rezia briefly envisions a foreign, rural, emancipatory place outside the nation’s grasp. This construction remains liminal, but nevertheless marks a
serious rupture in the narrator’s overarching control over anything this holistic nation might consider aberrant.

The novel culminates in a dinner party that seems to solidify the kind of national body Dalloway herself has sought: largely blinkered from wartime experience, consumed instead with societal gossip and romantic contemplations, determined to unite. Levenback puts this distinction in terms of the repression of wartime remembrance in particular: “the very life of Clarissa’s party reaffirms the chasm between civilians and combatants” (77). These two moments – the party and the suicide – represent the nodal points around which the novel’s power struggle takes place.

When Clarissa hears of Septimus death during her party her initial irritable reaction (“What business had the Bradshaws to talk of death at her party?” (184)) is indicative of her distinct, unifying role as opposed to Septimus’s disruptive one. Once she begins to reflect on the death in detail, she is drawn away from the party and thinks instead both of the violence of the act, and then with some empathy of the suicide as a politic act of resistance in the terms that I will indicate had motivated Septimus (at least in his more lucid moments). Thus Clarissa concedes that the suicide is an act of “defiance” (184), which attempted to actively “communicate” a resistant posture on behalf of “people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre” of the community around them. Clarissa then moves back in her mind to the profound happiness she feels, deeply embedded as she is in this socio-cultural community, so that she has “lost herself in the process of living” (185). She finds comfort and resolution to turn from her morbid reflections about Septimus’s death in the tolling of Big Ben: “The clock began striking. The young man had killed himself; but she did not pity him; with the clock striking the
hour, one, two, three, she did not pity him, with all this going on” (186). The chiming clock represents an overarching communal device in the England of Mrs. Dalloway which helps Clarissa to overcome the disruptive threat of Septimus’s death over her party. As the book closes the death is finally overcome with a statement of positive resolution – “He made her feel the beauty. He made her feel the fun… she must go back to them” (186) – and Clarissa re-emerges into her party, triumphantly taking on the position of central proxy for England’s unifying social scene, with all eyes upon her. Levenback cites one of Woolf’s notebooks on Mrs. Dalloway stating that “All must bear finally on the party in the end” (82). Woolf’s conclusions about nation seems manifest: it is tyrannical towards the individual, wherever possible is to be opposed, but will very likely win out.

Woolf’s perception of England is not so straightforward, so pessimistic or so constant as this kind of assessment may imply. Reflecting on Woolf’s writing at early and then late stages of her life, shows a number of significant points of transition in her thinking on England across the decades. Woolf shows profound distrust for England’s societal structure on a number of occasions. Sometimes she feels England cannot be readily distinguished from its enemies. At other times she sides with England against other nations. She sometimes suggests the power structures that sustain England are impenetrable and the nation will remain objectionable indefinitely. At still other points she argues for the potential to re-forge the nation, instead of concluding that it must be rebuffed. It is as complex a picture as we should expect from a lifetime of mature reflection on the topic, and it should not be reduced to a more digestible, simplified position, which has sometimes been the case.
A Shot in the Street

Woolf’s vision of the repressive nature of English society in the period is quickly apparent in *Mrs. Dalloway*. This repressive mode is so absolute that it embroils the narrator of the novel itself. There are only six breaks in the prose in *Mrs. Dalloway*. These breaks perform an overt function of course, to allow a change of focus from one position of free indirect discourse to another. There is also the possibility that these breaks perform a more complex and manipulative function in themselves though, which should not be overlooked. The first takes place just after the limousine back-fires in the street in the book’s opening scene. The break itself is suggestive of an active agency by the narrator of the text as a whole which is complicit with the repressive mode it goes on to depict.

Clarissa has been reflecting angrily on Miss Kilman and is now shopping for flowers. Dalloway’s perturbed state of mind is being quieted and drugged by communion with the retailer Miss Pym, over the scents of the flowers:

As she began to go with Miss Pym from jar to jar, choosing, nonsense, nonsense, she said to herself, more and more gently, as if this beauty, this scent, this colour, and Miss Pym liking her, trusting her, were a wave which she let flow over her and surmount that hatred, that monster, surmount it all; and lifted her up and up when – oh! a pistol shot in the street outside! (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 13)

It is a moment initially resonant of the lotus-eaters in *Ulysses*, seducing the aggravated consciousness of Miss Kilman’s “nonsense” into passive submission to the rapture that can “surmount it all,” when the smooth flow of the unitary consciousness is interrupted by the “pistol shot in the street outside!” The shot’s disruption of this sedated state has
violent over-tones at first, which seem completely out of place here, and which perhaps allude to a wartime environment – not far in time or space – where gunfire had been perpetual. The “shot” may be an early attempt to force a violent world onto this otherwise placid one.

The reaction of character and narrator is quick and resolute. Miss Pym states that the shot is no more than back-firing, and “smiles apologetically,” as if it were “all her fault.” Of course the regret is misplaced, implying that Miss Pym is perhaps not speaking entirely for herself. It is then followed immediately by the line break, giving the impression that the narrator herself feels she is working in concert with Miss Pym, and must intercede to rein-in an aberrant course of events and re-establish her composure. It does so, returning with an explanation of the “violent explosion” as innocent of its initial connotations, and then turning to the auspicious personage within the car.

The “face of the greatest importance,” seen momentarily by passers-by, is apparently a political or even monarchic figure who will lull the crowd into reverie. This agent of the nation-state has a profound engrossing effect on all the individuals in the streets around the car, taking hold of their attention effortlessly, so as to reduce them each to no more than constituents of a wider community:

Rumours were at once in circulation from the middle of Bond Street to Oxford Street on one side, to Atkinson’s scent shop on the other, passing invisibly, inaudibly, like a cloud, swift, veil-like upon hills, falling indeed with something of a cloud’s sudden sobriety and stillness upon faces which a second before had been utterly disorderly. But now mystery had brushed them with her wing; they
had heard the voice of authority; the spirit of religion was abroad with her eyes 
bandaged tight and her lips gaping wide. [My italics]. (14)

Like a virus spreading amongst the crowd, one by one characters become caught up in 
collective wonder. Even Septimus Smith stares with them, though he finds the gaze like 
“some horror [that] had almost come to the surface” (15). Even Rezia “could not help 
looking at the motor car and the tree pattern on the blinds. Was it the Queen in there – the 
Queen going shopping?” (15).

This intoxicating vision culminates some pages later as crowds stare up at a plane 
as it writes letters in smoke in the sky. It appears the crowd’s gaze is perpetually 
overwhelmed in Mrs. Dalloway by sights engineered to absorb them. This image gives 
the most clear sense of the tenor of many of the depictions of the English people in Mrs. 
Dalloway – Phillips labels them “babyish, uncritical, sleepwalking citizens” (4). Now far 
from a violent shot in the street, the narrator – an agent created by Woolf but quite 
contrary to her own political position on the independent will of the individual, as we 
shall see – has moved aggressively to suppress an element which had the potential to 
threaten its blinkered tranquility.

A Ledge and a Cliff

The textual break after the suicide offers an even more pointed example of this 
inclination on the part of the narrator of the novel to suppress the unpalatable. As 
Levenback has suggested, Holmes, Peter Walsh and the narrator of the text itself work 
more or less deliberately to assuage the full implication of Septimus’s violent death. In 
general Holmes appears unaware of the political nature of Septimus’s suicide, and
ignorant of the possibility that Septimus could need more than to play cricket to regain full health (25). Nevertheless, his reaction at this moment only helps to surreptitiously suppress recognition of the seriousness of Septimus’s illness, and the resistance implicit in his suicide. He first reductively labels Septimus “The coward!” (149). He immediately offers Rezia a sedative, implores her not to look at the body, so she can be “spared as much as possible,” and asserts “no one was to blame” for Septimus’s independent actions. The prose breaks, as it did after the shot in the street, and when it returns we have moved to Peter Walsh’s reflections on the wonders of English civilization. He watches an ambulance as it rushes to a hospital, carrying Septimus’s body:

One of the triumphs of civilization, Peter Walsh thought. It is one of the triumphs of civilization, as the light high bell of the ambulance sounded. Swiftly, cleanly the ambulance sped to the hospital, having picked up instantly, humanely, some poor devil; some one hit on the head, struck down by disease, knocked over perhaps a minute or so ago at one of the these crossings, as might happen to oneself. That was civilization. It struck him coming back from the East – the efficiency, the organization, the communal spirit of London. Every cart or carriage of its own accord drew aside to let the ambulance pass. (Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway 151)

It is an operation that smacks more of purging the unpleasantness inherent in human injury than of a support for the broken individual body, since it elides the horrors of Septimus’s fall, of which Walsh does not even conceive, to be replaced with more blameless and less sinister forms of harm. Walsh then turns his reflections towards the positive wonder of “the communal spirit of London.” In the light of Holmes’s and
Walsh’s thinking at the time of the suicide, the narrator’s textual break can again be seen as an agent complicit in the elision of Septimus’s attempted violent disruption of this community. The narrator’s break is a deliberate act which resets an unacceptable scene and re-establishes narrative hegemony, but even in needing to do so it reveals some of the pressure on this suppressive diegesis from forces of individualism which run counter to the nation’s unification. Woolf has meticulously engineered a telling example of this struggle between normative national order and individual aberrance that run throughout Mrs. Dalloway.

In the face of the scale of repression that Woolf depicts in Mrs. Dalloway, Septimus’s death seems a futile act of opposition. However, despite Holmes’s, Walsh’s and the narrator’s efforts, the suicide allows Rezia to envision a liminal space which appears outside their remit. It is easy to overlook this short passage in the text, and to dismiss it as little more than the mental ramblings of a wife drugged and distraught at her husband’s death. This kind of reading would seem to elide a crucial example of a contrary discourse intruding into this generally overwhelming narrative for a short time. In the face of such suppressive power on the part of Mrs. Dalloway, Peter, even the narrator of the novel itself, it is important to tread carefully when reflecting on even brief moments that run counter to the generally apparent, smooth and holistic, mode. Rezia moment of thought deserves detailed reflection:

It seemed to her as she drank the sweet stuff that she was opening long windows, stepping out into some garden. But where? The clock was striking – one, two three: how sensible the sound was; compared with all this thumping and whispering: like Septimus himself. She was falling asleep. But the clock went on
striking, four, five, six and Mrs. Filmer waving her apron (they wouldn’t bring the body in here, would they?) seemed part of that garden; or a flag. She had once seen a flag slowly rippling out from a mast when she stayed with her aunt in Venice. Men killed in battle were thus saluted, and Septimus had been through the War. Of her memories, most were happy. She put on her hat and ran through the cornfields – where could they have been? – on some hill, somewhere near the sea, for there were ships, gulls, butterflies, they sat on a cliff. In London too, there they sat , and, half dreaming, came to her through the bedroom door, rain falling, whisperings, stirrings among dry corn, the caress of the sea, as it seemed to her hollowing them in its arched shell and murmuring to her laid on shore, strewn she felt, like flying flowers over some tomb. “He is dead,” she said… (150)

It is never entirely clear where in time or space this passage that Rezia thinks of comes from. It is possible that the space is a mental creation of her own, but it could certainly also be a recollection of more happy, past times in Italy. In either case though, it is a radical act on Rezia’s part, to introduce an alien space, which in one way or another ‘belongs’ to her, into a diegesis that has consistently dictated the focus of attention.

In such a profoundly metropolitan society, Rezia’s rural visualization seems immediately out of place. Rezia imagines a literal liberation, “stepping out” of the current urban environment “into some garden.” Elsewhere in *Mrs. Dalloway*, the clock has often been read as indicative of the nation and its hegemonic control of its Empire, dictating a universal timeframe which conditions all those in its range. vi Here though, Rezia co-opts the chiming clock to pull herself from the increasing effects of Holmes’s sedative (“She was falling asleep. *But* the clock went on.” (my italics)). As she thinks, it is a clock that is
now, perhaps counter-intuitively, “like Septimus himself.” This is another indication that
the vision follows from Septimus’s death-cry, as an act of struggle against the nation’s
hegemony – an instrument of the nation is recast into a mechanism in his struggle with it.

Rezia similarly recasts Mrs. Filmer’s apron into a flag, another typically reifying
apparatus of the nation co-opted into a means by which she can recall Septimus’s status
as a war veteran. In doing so the World War – which has been largely elided by the text
up to this point – is recovered for a moment. The central statement of the vision, “Of her
memories, most were happy,” is an unexpected affirmation given the hardship she has
suffered from Septimus’s illness, but it is in keeping with the notion that this vision
forces a comprehensive break from Rezia’s previous position. Rezia embraces the fantasy
as she “put on her hat and ran through the cornfields.” She wonders where this fantasy
space is located. The use of “they” could imply Rezia and her Aunt in Venice, but there is
also the possibility that the unnamed other is Septimus. The cliff Rezia and the unnamed
other sit on seems an ironic parallel with the window ledge Septimus had sat on shortly
before. This possibility seems more plausible given her next statement, “In London too,
there they sat,” which suggests a link between the two shared moments. This kind of
recasting of elements from the initial scene into Rezia’s vision is even capable of
hollowing out the dense, tranquilizing narration that has often constituted the text. Thus,
despite Holmes insistence that she be shielded from the fact, Rezia can articulate the
statement that “He is dead,” “smiling” perhaps at the momentary empowerment that such
a statement confers. Though she does eventually succumb to the sedative, she has fought
to create a space that demonstrates some limitations to the narrator’s soporific hegemony.
The passage is a crucial, nodal point that betrays some of Woolf’s deeply ambivalent
feeling towards the nation, and her desire to find means by which this overwhelming power might be evaded.

This is the last time Rezia appears in *Mrs. Dalloway*. If the vision is not given careful consideration, the implications of Septimus’s death can appear unequivocally suppressed by the narrator, and Rezia’s disappearance might reasonably be assumed another suppression of the individual by the narrator’s rendering of that hegemonic nation. The emancipatory implications of Rezia’s construction of the garden allow for a quite different possibility though – that Rezia is absent from the narrator’s discourse after this point because she can no longer be contained by it. Her fantasy space exists outside the limits of the nation, and cannot be comfortably delineated by *Mrs. Dalloway*’s characters or narrator. Rezia’s departure from the narrative allows the repressive narrator to re-establish its supremacy, but it also demonstrates a limit to the narrator’s control over some of those individuals with which she comes into contact. Rezia can, with the help of her husband, “fly by those nets” of incorporation within Woolf’s construction of the English nation.

**Woolf’s later national perspectives – *Between the Acts***

The implications of Rezia’s vision on the power balance between England and England’s subjects in *Mrs. Dalloway* are suggestive of Woolf’s wider conception of the nation’s power. The full complexity of Woolf’s attitudes on the subject has sometimes been overlooked in critical writing on Woolf and England, where, as I have already indicated, a rather static picture of her thinking has occasionally been asserted. Placing *Mrs. Dalloway* in the context of Woolf’s wider perspective on England over the course of
her life allows us to trace the ebb and flow of what was her ever-shifting thought in the
subject. As Jed Esty argues, it is not enough to merely “repeat truisms about Woolf’s
ambivalence in the face of nationalism” (107). It is a subtle trajectory, and it comes into
focus best when nodal points like *Mrs. Dalloway* are compared with much later work,
such as *Between the Acts* and a number of her later essays. The comparison ultimately
suggests two principal shifts in Woolf’s thinking over the decades. Firstly, Woolf comes
to perceive another source of pressure on the nation, from overarching political
circumstances in the run up to the Second World War, whose effects demonstrate, in a
new way, the limits of England’s power. Second, Woolf tempers the degree of her
denigration of England in her late writing, perceiving a new possibility of recasting the
nation in a more palatable form, that might be adopted in place of outright rejection of all
that England entails.

Over the course of her life, Woolf consistently renders England as under pressure
from forces that challenge its hegemony. As I have already indicated in *Mrs. Dalloway*,
that pressure comes from an individual like Septimus who is both unable and unwilling to
define himself with the collective consciousness of national subjects. In *Between the Acts*,
this pressure remains, but has been transformed into a pressure not born from a micro
level circumstance, of a single resistant individual, but emanating from a macro level, of
a world political events, whose effects on the insular nation cannot be easily denied.

There are a number of aspects of the England that Woolf outlines in *Between the Acts* that remain largely consistent with the England of *Mrs. Dalloway*. *Between the Acts*
traces an insular and cloistered English community (though a rural rather than an urban one) that seeks to subsume all things into its model of the nation:

*Between the Acts* thematizes the problem of community self-representation more directly than earlier Woolf texts in part because it registers a new opportunity for the revival and redefinition of a broad national tradition. If the rituals invoked here are more nostalgic and Anglocentric than the corresponding myths of cosmopolitan high modernism, they are also more popular and communal.

(Esty 94)

The village of Bolney Minster is unchanging over the centuries (“The Guide Book still told the truth [about the village]. 1830 was true in 1939” (Woolf, *Between the Acts* 52)). This England is considered an ancient, independent state, an assertion that allows it to reinforce its separation from the world around it. It is so holistic a representation of England as to be personified by a single character in the play (76): “A child new born/
Sprung from the sea/ Whose billows blown by mighty storm/ cut off from France and Germany/ This isle” (77). In the middle of the play Elizabeth I is introduced with a speech that bears an all-consuming unity reminiscent of an estate poem:

Mistress of pinnacles, spires and palaces
(her arm swept towards the house)
For me Shakespeare sang –
(a cow mooed. A bird twittered)
The throstle, the mavis (she continued)
Carolled and sang, praising England, the Queen
Then there was heard too
On granite and cobble

From Windsor to Oxford

Loud laughter, low laughter

Of warrior and lover,

The fighter, the singer … (84).

In heavily ironic terms, as the Queen speaks of her England, all offer their assent: animals placidly act together in harmony; a map of a Southern homeland (from Windsor to Oxford) is traced; all types of people included in the call at the sweep of her arm. This village is a proxy for the nation in microcosm, ranging from the traditional English village cliché – the village idiot (27) – to the requisite catalogue of aristocratic and feudal roots for the community (74).

There are also several parallels in Woolf’s wholesale critique of this model of Englishness. Kathy Phillips sums up the similarities well: “Wasting their lives, the characters in Between the Acts are indicted as the walking dead as often as those in Mrs. Dalloway and The Years” (200). The attempt to subsume all time periods during the course of the play results in hollow parody and cliché. In the case of the Victorian era we are told: “Go to church on Sunday; on Monday, nine sharp, catch the City Bus. On Tuesday it may be, attend a meeting for the redemption of the sinner; at dinner on Wednesday attend another – turtle soup. Some bother it may be in Ireland; Famine. Fenians. What not” (Woolf, Between the Acts 162). Other usually relied upon nationalist proxies are placed by Woolf in ironic juxtaposition throughout the play: “Rule Britannia” is sung directly after “I’d be a butterfly” (170). It is, all in all, rather like a parodic version of the dinner party in Mrs. Dalloway, as the vicar interprets the play as asserting
that “we are all members one of another. Each is part of the whole” (192), just as
Dalloway’s party had asserted her function.vii

Despite these underlying similarities, Between the Acts’s vision of England is
fundamentally different from the one Woolf constructs in Mrs. Dalloway. This is because
it is founded upon an attempt by an English national establishment, not so much to deny
individual consciousness, as to repress a political climate that this cloistered state wishes
to locate as exterior to itself. Giles has one early epiphany about the suppression of the
political world that this English establishment enacts:

Giles nicked his chair into position with a jerk. Thus only could he show his
irritation, his rage with old fogies who sat and looked at views over coffee and
cream when the whole of Europe – over there – was bristling like… He had no
command of the metaphor. Only the ineffective “hedgehog” illustrated this vision
of Europe, bristling with guns, poised with planes. At any moment guns would
rake that land into furrows; planes splinter Bolney Minster into smithereens and
blast the Folly. (53).

Giles quickly admits though, that “he, too, loved the views,” suggesting that breaking
from this intoxicating national beauty, to recognize a wider political reality, represents a
real challenge.

The pseudo-feudal structure of the England sketched in Between the Acts cannot
sustain its attempt to force a division between itself and the supposedly ‘outside’ world,
which is on the brink of war.viii The pressure over the English village becomes more and
more acute as the novel, and the play within it, progress. The crowd stumbles feebly
through a rendition of God save the King (“The notes died away. Was that the end?”
(Woolf, *Between the Acts* 195)) and ultimately one of “the old cronies” is forced to admit that their idyllic national construct is about to crumble (“Things look worse than ever on the continent. And what’s the channel come to think of it, if they mean to invade us?” (199), as the gramophone is stuck reiterating the same ominous declaration – “Dispersed are we” (198) – which suggests the effort to establish a national cohesion is for naught. Phillips points out the generally negative tone of this England, “home of the dead, and an abode of darkness” (200).

The village also overreaches itself in its attempt to subsume “the present time” into its contained model of the nation during the play (178). The attempt ends up losing control of itself in little more than a chaotic cacophony: “What an awful show-up! ... The jangle and the din! The very cows joined in, walloping, tail lashing, the reticence of nature was undone and the barriers which should divide Man the Master from the Brute were dissolved” (184). Now the placid animals of the estate, once singing in unison, only contribute to the disharmony. The uproar only exposes the frailty of the nation in the face of a mutable and protean outside world, which cannot be contained. As the book comes to a close war planes overhead disturb the vicar’s speech, a final indication that the importance of the play which has tried to contain all of England’s meaning is silenced in favor of a more pressing present (193).

*Between the Acts* offers an unremitting picture of the frail state of the English nation as Woolf perceives it. The England which Woolf creates here is challenged in new terms from *Mrs. Dalloway*, and it is, to a much greater degree than the early novel, seemingly on the brink of losing its struggle with forces which it sees as oppositional. Esty argues that *Between the Acts* constitutes Woolf’s “prickly rapprochement” (87) with
England: “Woolf seems interested in trying to reclaim English tradition… from an Imperial Britishness that had appropriated the national past” (90). Woolf did want to reconnect with England, but it is the comprehensive failure of the old model of the nation that she depicts in *Between the Acts*, that actually lays the groundwork for a revised vision of England to come into view.

Jane Garrity’s study of *Step-Daughters of England* has already outlined Woolf’s determination to re-forg the nation in more inclusive and less repressive terms. Garrity is most concerned with Woolf’s recasting of the location of woman in Britain as “daughters of the nation” (2). Woolf did not want to challenge the notion of the English nation in its entirety, Garrity asserts, since she did feel affection for a vision of England, particularly a rural one: “A love of England sustains the core idea of national belonging and cultural redemption” in her work (6). This may make the parodic portrayal of a blinkered Bolney Minster in *Between the Acts* appear counterintuitive. Garrity suggests that this kind of ambivalence was not merely confusion, but was a part of the subtle negotiations necessary to “attempt to forge a new narrative of England, one that both critiques and expresses nostalgic desire for women’s rights to an imperial inheritance” [my italics] (12).ix The new notion of an England vulnerable to external political circumstance, as well as resistant individuals, which is presented in *Between the Acts*, is both a transformation and a conscious moderation on Woolf’s part. For Woolf the pressure applied to an old model of England cloistered from a wider outside world does not appear nearly so appetizing as the notion of an individual’s liberation from an oppressive England that threatens to overwhelm, which she presented in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Thus the critique of the strength of the nation, when threatened by an impending world war, draws
some sympathy from Woolf, who changes her perspective from one in many ways
disseminate of the England in the *Mrs. Dalloway* period to one advocating a recasting of
the nation in a new and more palatable form. Esty asserts that “The novel’s irony reflects
Woolf’s interest in redefining, not eschewing, national tradition” (93).

**Late Essays**

We see this sympathy outlined most pointedly in several of Woolf’s late essays.
“Royalty” consists of a pair of essays, both written in 1939. The first sketches what
Woolf perceives to be English society’s obsessive fascination en-mass with any and all
elements of the nation’s infrastructure, similar to the wonder at the “face of the greatest
importance” in the car, near the start of *Mrs. Dalloway* (14). The “pageantry” of royalty
and aristocracy bewitches the English, and Woolf along with them, since “there is no
denying it… we look at them, almost every day we look at them, because we too want to
see the Dukes and Kings” (Woolf, “Royalty” 229). The essay’s position initially seems
suggestive of a consistent attitude to the issue across Woolf’s life. Woolf argues that
recently this transfixing image has been damaged by publically exposed failings in the
Royals. In its place other sources of fixation and wonder have developed. The popularity
of narratives that laud the poor in modern fiction is said by Woolf to be “the most
insidious and dangerous of current snobberies” (233). It seems Woolf feels the English
public’s tendency to be captivated, even by narratives that promote seemingly antithetical
social elements, is perhaps its great failing. There are again parallels with the crowds in
*Mrs. Dalloway*, blinkered and awe-struck by the plane flying overhead, just after they
have been similarly impressed by the royal car. The damning critique of English society that Woolf outlined in the 20s seems to be unequivocally reiterated twenty years later.

The second of the essays though, a review of an autobiography by the Queen of Roumania, suggests a much more equivocal position. Woolf seems to bemoan this recently acquired awareness of the fallibility of the royals:

What will be the consequences if this familiarity between them and us increases? Can we go on bowing and curtseying to people who are just like ourselves? Are we not already a little ashamed of the pushing and the staring [of the masses watching the Royals] now that we know from these two stout volumes that one at least of the animals can talk? We begin to wish that the Zoo should be abolished; that the royal animals should be given the run of some wider pasturage... (240)

English society’s position, relative to the nation state’s infrastructure, is suddenly empowered, capable of choosing to abolish the current power structure and thus amend the societal one, while the object of our collective wonder is no more than a trapped animal. The essay ends with Woolf stating “a republic might be brought into being by a poem” (240), an assertion again of a new perspective, of a frail English social structure which might readily be re-cast by committed individuals.

This notion of re-inscribing the national being is pushed further the following year in a paper Woolf wrote for the Workers’ Education Association, called “The Leaning Tower.” The paper is largely concerned with asserting the politicization of writing in England during the period. The current climate has led a newly politicized generation of writers to emerge: “In 1930 it was impossible – if you were young, sensitive, imaginative – not to be interested in politics; not to find public causes of much more pressing interest
than philosophy” (Woolf, “Leaning Tower” 172). Post-war resistance towards and between totalitarian ideological constructs seems the principal motivation for the change that Woolf asserts in recent work, since “In 1930 young men in college were forced to be aware of what was happening in Russia, in Germany, in Italy, in Spain” (172). Perhaps Woolf had in mind works like C. E. Montague’s *Disenchantment* as a pointed example of the new ethos. There is no direct comment on whether Woolf figures herself in this newly-developed political drive, but by 1940 it does appear that she is keen to promote this direction in writing, saying that this generation of writers “became communists, they became anti-fascists. The tower [of the previous English social order] was built upon injustice and tyranny; it was wrong for a small class to possess an education that other people paid for; wrong to stand on the gold that a bourgeois father had made from his bourgeois profession. It was wrong” (172). The notion that Woolf had very contemporary socio-political concerns at the heart of her own writing has been firmly established in a large number of studies since the 1970s. What is less clear are the developing intricacies in these political positions, and “The Leaning Tower” is suggestive of some of them, for the essay outlines a new notion in Woolf’s thought: a balance between writing as an trans-national creative act (“Literature is no one’s private ground; literature is common ground. It is not cut up into nations; there are no wars there” (181)) and the potential to usefully co-opt that act for the sake of recasting England in a more palatable (but still national) form: “Let us trespass freely and fearlessly and find our own way for ourselves. It is thus that English literature will survive this war and cross the gulf – if commoners and outsiders like ourselves [i.e. English women] make that country our own country” (181). The profoundly negative impression of English society’s overwhelmingly
repressive and exclusionary culture, which *Mrs. Dalloway* had represented so persuasively, has by the writing of this essay nearly twenty years later been modified significantly: “Let us not be unfair; let us avoid if we can joining the embittered and futile tribe of scapegoat hunters. For some years now England has been making an effort – at last – to bridge the gulf between the two worlds [of those included and excluded]” (180). Woolf’s pessimistic portrayal of the oppressive nature of the community in *Mrs. Dalloway* has developed into a call on England’s part for even the excluded to engage with the nation (“If England is going to help us, we must help her” (180)). This latter position is in line with Garrity’s claim that although Woolf was “in general, overtly critical of imperialism, [she remained] nonetheless invested in an idea of nation” in her work, although in isolation it might seem to elide the change in Woolf’s thought between the early 1920s and 1941.

“Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid,” also written in 1940, seems to offer further evidence of the complex modification of Woolf’s thought over the course of her life. The essay appears to be primarily a re-statement of the gender exclusion inherent in wartime England, a position that she had stated at length in *Three Guineas* a few years earlier. War is, before a cause for reified affiliations within nations, a trans-national struggle among men that excludes women equally across national boundaries. This assertion would appear damning to the notion that England can be considered a cohesive whole, and it differs markedly from the implications of *Mrs. Dalloway*, that the English community of the time was actually oppressive cohesive, employing a female agent in Clarissa as readily as it co-opts the will of its male subjects. The hypothetical “if” (173) with which Woolf prefaces a suggestion early in the essay that women *might* consciously
choose to invest in support of their nation (“If she believes that the fight going on up in the sky is a fight by the English to protect freedom, by the Germans to destroy freedom, she must fight so far as she can, on the side of the English” (173)) seems to be taken on as a positive recommendation by Woolf for the remainder of the essay, on the basis of an opposition to Germany’s destructive will. The critique of the oppressive England from Mrs. Dalloway has become a call to defend this nation against the aggression of another, an assertion that has the effect of reifying both, suggesting a new investment in England specifically and the nation as a concept in general.

Woolf’s position as it is implied by Mrs. Dalloway then – that the English nation subsumes all and that this enforced affiliation should be resisted to the point of complete societal rejection of the nation – is thus consistently undermined in a number of her later writings. The fantasy space which Septimus and Rezia create in Mrs. Dalloway is not, Woolf seems to conclude later in her life, the only possible answer to the objectionable aspects of England in the first half of the twentieth century.

Woolf seems to align herself on a number of levels with another writer of the period: C. E. Montague. Montague’s life is little known or studied, but the similarities between his work and Woolf’s helps to underline the case about her developing sense of the sum and substance of England. It also allows us to speculate a little more widely on the perspectives on nation across a certain tranche of English society that is broader and less particular than that implied by the canonical Woolf alone. Woolf and Montague share several key ideas about England. There is the notion, for example, that some individuals’ struggle with what they perceive to be an oppressive nation results in the creation of spaces outside the nation’s purview. Both writers also have an increasing
sense of the frailty of England’s national cohesion, faced with the comtemporary
historical circumstance. Perhaps the most telling of these similarities sees the creation, on
a battlefield, of another fantastic, liminal space.

C. E. Montague and Rough Justice

Montague is now usually considered a minor figure writing on and involved in
World War One. His engagement with the war though, and his broader perspectives on
nationalism, are worthy of some fresh reflection, because Montague’s life appears to
make him an emblematic Southern, upper-middle class subject in England located, on
many levels, at the central hub of the nation. Montague was born in London in 1867. He
grew up on the Thames, was educated at the exclusive City of London Public School and
then at Oxford. He then turned down a colonial posting to take up the position of assistant
editor of the newspaper the Manchester Guardian, based in Manchester, the largest city in
Northern England. When war broke out Montague was forty-seven, but he dyed his hair
from grey to blonde in order to convince recruiters he was young enough to be sent to the
front. Injured in training, he was eventually to take a post with the War Office as a
propaganda officer, vetting dispatches from English and American correspondents, and
writing articles in support of the English war effort. Montague’s patriotism may seem
manifest then, but underlying this, Montague’s position on England is complex and
ambivalent. The complexity is made all the more intriguing by his overt patriotism.

Montague’s 1917 commentary on The Western Front, published alongside
illustrations by Murhead Bone, provides good evidence of his support for war, and for his
projection of the nation’s united ethical and political stance in relation to it. He begins
with an essay entitled “War as it is” in which he defends the English war effort at length:

…war is a thing to be first avoided by every honourable means and then to
be won by every honourable means. Of avoiding this war there is no question
now. All that ended in 1914. Since then the only option has been between
fighting it with more resolution or less, with more national comradeship or with
less, with more or with less of moral and physical force behind every blow that
we strike. (4)

That Montague should have been involved in *The Western Front* at all is
suggestive of the side of him that was keen to invest in nation. The book itself, an
authorized War Office publication, is an instrument intended to strike blows against
enemies of the nation by promoting “national comradeship” at home. It advocates
English investment in the war partly by eliding its horrors, which are replaced instead
with harmless imagery and commentary. These only incidentally allow images of
violence through. Of Bone’s hundred images in the book, only one depicts an injured
soldier, and it is distant and indistinct (figure 1.1) Instead, the violence depicted is against
structures and not people. Any wrongdoing is predictably attributed to the Germans,
responsible for “the base spite which systematically destroys little household ornaments
and cottage gardens.” (commentary with plate 8). Montague also makes the case that
horrors were already so public as to be superfluous: “Some of the weapons have changed,
but the pangs of death and mutilation and all other hard things that have to be borne, for
war to be won, do not change much, and they are no mystery” (3). Montague is acting as
an agent of English war effort to reinforce popular support and make concrete the
nation’s solidity. He seems to have little doubt about England’s strength asserting, “when
the storm came the nation’s spirit was found so perfect that nothing was left to wish for
except that it should last at that height and heat of sane exaltation” (4).

Reflecting on the details of this patriotic biography, which has been recounted a
number of times in the same light (and usually from the same initial source—Oliver
Elton’s 1929 C. E. Montague: A Memoir), gives a largely consistent and rather two-
dimensional impression of Montague as standing for quiet English heroism and
conviction. This notion of Montague as merely typical may help to explain Montague’s
demotion from mainstream critical consideration (his name yields only two hits in the
MLA bibliography), but Montague’s underlying perception of the nation he was overtly
so invested in seems more problematic than this initial biography might suggest.

Montague’s Ambivalence

The complex conception of the validity and cohesiveness of nation, which he
would come to articulate most pointedly in his 1926 novel Rough Justice, is evident in
Montague’s letters, his essays and his most well known text, his memoir of wartime,
Disenchantment. Unlike The Western Front, these sources suggest that in Montague’s
opinion the English nation was not consistently unified in national investment, but
struggled to balance various competing allegiances. Montague based this claim on his
own model of various levels of personal investment, from the essay “Little England” in
his collection The Right Place:

You are sitting, all your days, at the centre or hub of several successive rings or
concentric zones of demand upon your natural affection. Smallest and nearest and
pressing in around you come the exigent of your family. Next beyond it, the call of your country. Then the call, it may be, of some fraternity of comrade countries, of which your own is a member—the British Empire, perhaps, or a league of Latin American States. Lastly, the outermost circle of all, the call of human brotherhood. (106)

These levels struggle for ascendancy in each subject, and at times any one of them might hold sway: “from any one of these concentric circles of appeal to your affection there may come a kind of vampire shriek that will derange and disable you past all power of making a decent response to the other appeals” (107). The clash of competing metanarratives presents a challenge to a patriotic notion that nation holds overarching influence on the English subject, and in a letter to his wife, Madeline, in 1917, Montague writes of the possible result of this threat. Madeline had evidently written to him of a woman who spoke against the English war effort, and in his reply Montague draws the same structure of allegiances, but here diagrammatically in a series of rings (figure 1.2). He denotes the central ring, of national investment, as broken:

I mean that the central dot being say, say, [unnamed woman], she has the first, or inmost circle, i.e. family affection, all right, and also the third of outermost circle, i.e. affection for humanity; but the middle circle, i.e. affection for the family, or company, of friends and comrades composed of one’s own nation, is somehow fainter than the others, like the dotted line; and people who are at all short of this affection often cannot believe that for other people to feel it passionately is anything more than a mistake or a prejudice or a disability of the soul.

(Elton, 171)
English subjects like the unnamed woman with whom the letter is concerned lack the necessary investment in this metanarrative of national affiliation, and Montague feels she is not alone in her point of view, since he begins his response with the general association of “people like miss [unnamed woman]” (Elton, 170).

Montague’s suspicions about the investment of many English people in the war were articulated at length in the 1922 memoir, *Disenchantment*. Here, the nation’s cohesion is most pointedly conflated with its wartime state. He writes of the slow disillusionment of troops, and the inept command of officers treating initially patriotic volunteers so carelessly as to undermine the solidity of the nation at war. At the outset, each volunteer “quite seriously thought of himself as a molecule in the body of a nation that was really, and not just figuratively, straining every nerve to discharge an obligation of honour” (3). Montague personifies the nation in this way in many of his descriptions of it. This has the effect first of solidifying the nation as a coherent object, and as such seems to reinforce its validity. At the same moment Montague’s substantive vision of the body of the nation leads to a subject much more capable of being beaten and battered by war. Thus the troops’ struggle is also the nation’s. The troops come to consider if they would “ever get to the other side of this bog through which poor old England was wading” (25). England is embodied, but it is quickly apparent that the nation’s body is a frail one.

Montague’s ambivalence endures though, and later, in *Disenchantment*, he attempts to deny that the troops were disheartened about their nation’s involvement in the war: “Heaven forbid that I should impute any melodious Swinburnian melancholy, or any other form of luxurious self-pity, to millions of good fellows still fighting the good fight
against circumstance. They would hoot at the notion” (65). But England, now the concrete body under attack, is ultimately undermined by the individuals who constitute it: “If you bored deeper and deeper still into this amazing Regular Army would you ever strike the good firm stone of English decency and sense again?” (25). The apparent solidity of the national body is established by Montague only so that it can be shown struggling on limply, and deficient in both decency and sense. Montague attempts to retain a sense of the general infantry’s determination, but ultimately he is unable to repress the feeling that they are profoundly disillusioned, largely by the complacency and ineptitude of their English commanders:

Most of our N.C.O.’s and men in the field had come to feel that it was left to them… to pull the foundering rulers of England and heads of the army through the scrape. They assumed now that while they were doing this they must expect to be crawled upon by all the vermin bred in the dark places of a rich country vulgarly governed. (46).

For Montague, war had shown England to be worryingly close to moral bankruptcy and dissolution.

**Montague and Arnold**

It appears that assumptions about Montague’s seemingly straightforward attitudes to his nation need to be revised. He has considerable doubt about both England’s determination to unify in the face of war, and English subjects' ability to maintain a balance in their alignments that would allow the nation to cohere. Montague found an archetype for his attitudes to the nation in Matthew Arnold. In Montague's *A Writer’s*
Notes on His Trade, his article on Arnold is close to hagiography. Montague writes that, on passing Arnold on the street while Montague was a student at Oxford (and Arnold was an Oxford Don), he was tempted to kneel before the “Olympian” (Writer’s Notes 151). With such enthusiasm for Arnold, we can reasonably assume that Montague shared some of the fundamentally qualified attitudes in his own thoughts on England. Montague is quick to point out that Arnold was “the tireless critic of his country and his age, the lifelong arraigner of British limitedness and complacency” (Writer’s Notes 158). Indeed, in Culture and Anarchy, Arnold repeatedly chastises the English for, among other things, their selfish individualism (Arnold 63), their inclination to personal liberty at the cost of social order (83), and their “staunch adherence to some fixed law of doing,” which limits their spontaneity (138).

What Montague found most engaging about Arnold’s work was the balance Arnold sought to strike between allegiance to the English nation and his critique of it. As Montague put it, Arnold “kept in with the world he chid” (Writer’s Notes 159). Though neither Arnold nor Montague were extremists in their attitude to the nation-state’s usefulness as an institution, both held that the English nation as it stood was a fundamentally flawed version of the ideal.

Montague extracts eleven lines from Arnold’s “Dover Beach” in his essay, with Arnold’s challenges to nation in mind. The extract ends:

The sea of faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth’s shore
Lay like the folds of bright girdle furl’d.
But now I only hear
Could Arnold’s critique of the faithlessness of the beach as “melancholy” waters recede have parallels with Montague’s sense of the lack of investment in the nation-project by the melancholy troops he had depicted in *Disenchantment* – a “faith” of another sort now moving off from English shores? Montague does not reflect further in the essay, but in the light of his published commentary from “Little England” and elsewhere it does not seem too much to hypothesize.

**Visions of North and South**

Montague’s ambivalence about national integrity is also expressed in the contrast in his work between the values of the Southern and Northern counties. Much of the praise for Arnold in Montague’s essay on him is reserved for his poetic depictions of the Southern counties: “From the Cotswolds to Dover, England shines with an increase of beauty that is of his giving” (163). But at some points there is another strand to Montague’s perception of the nation that asserts a nationalism of the North alone. This complicates the construction of him as being simply patriotic. Returning to “Little England” it is striking that ‘England’ does not appear to constitute the entire nation. Montague begins the article with the complaint that English subjects cannot physically conceive of their entire nation, another suggestion of their failure to truly fulfill their obligations to patriotism:

> What sort of love could a mother expect from a son who had never yet got a good sight of her face, although he had seen, shall we say, the tips of a few of her nails, or perhaps a square inch of her skin? ... As with your mother, so with your
country. An Englishman who has never seen England full face may certainly find much about her for gratitude, goodwill and pride to linger upon. … But this is not love. (100)

With this analogy, we return to Montague’s interest in the nation as a body. In this case though, the embodiment of the nation as related to the national subject has been transposed from one of particles constituent of the whole to the offspring of an overarching maternal force. It would appear that this more independent nation could stand up to any shortcomings on the part of its subjects—in this case the lack of knowledge of the whole national being.

When Montague himself attempts to present a narrative journey of locations across the country however, those he picks seem to comprise places heavily slanted towards the South of the country. This elision becomes crucial to Montague’s vision of the nation, for, like Arnold again, Montague views it as beginning metaphorically close to Dover Beach (in the South East, central to the commonly labeled ‘home counties’) and spiraling out, taking greater and greater leaps (eventually from mountain-top to mountain-top) as he moves from ‘centre’ to ‘periphery.’ Envisioning this journey from Southern metropolis to Northern mountain-top is, Montague claims, a means by which the English subject can “render all England impossibly and beautifully small” since “you have made her almost as practicable an object of sense, and of sensuous love, as some garden in which you played as a boy” (104). This journey though, entails what Montague referred to, in one manuscript version of the essay “An English Road” (239), as a “long oblique journey ahead” – a commonly reproduced notion of the protean haze of the northern counties. The body of maternal England depends upon the vision of its subjects
to make it “an object of sense,” most particularly the vision of someone like Montague who seeks to write the nation in a narrative vision like ‘Little England.’ Instead of this complete vision of the body of England, Montague centers his perception of England around the river Thames that runs through its capital, and on the banks of which he grew up. As we will see, the whole narrative of *Rough Justice* launches from, and eventually returns to, these same banks. Of course, we know that Montague spent much of his life in the North, working for the Manchester Guardian. How can we explain this omission of the industrial North as another nodal point on his map of “Little England?” It is necessary to envision two competing Englands, in Montague’s mind, to make sense of this dichotomy. The first is an England of ancient, Southern upper-class gentility, the second the England of Northern industrial might.

So how does this complex set of sometimes contrary opinions about the nation, North and South, culminate in Montague’s later conclusions about England and his relationship to it? *Rough Justice* provides a useful measure of Montague’s considered thinking about nation, both content and dissatisfied by it, both hopeful and doubting of its future prospects.

**Rough Justice’s Notion of Nation**

*Rough Justice* is a bildungsroman of the lives of Auberon (Bron) Garth and Victor Nevin, who grow up together, both in London’s upper-class suburbs and at Oxford, and then join up together when the war begins. They are separated at the front, and while Victor deserts, Bron goes on to great heroism. Though Bron survives, he returns home to
discover his estate sold (his father has been supporting the war efforts so keenly that he has bankrupted the family), so that he must begin his life from scratch.

In Victor’s strand of the narrative, there is a clear trajectory that leads to his desertion. He joins the army with a dream of “the true life of war, the real historic thing, known and attested by all generations” (271). Victor envisions a “glamorous life of the thrilled imagination, the passionate heart and the unjaded body.” This vision is permanently shattered when, soon after he reaches France, Victor is ordered to help a mule transport carrying supplies to the front. He struggles fiercely with the petulant animal. His resulting humiliation is exacerbated when he concludes that the other soldiers thought him cowardly:

Victor caught his own name. So! They were talking about him? He thought “How could they not be?” Had he not mulled his first job at the front? [...] He knew the others had held on more dourly than he and had taken more risks from the mad lunging heels of the beast [...] He trailed along, a battered mind in a quelled body, almost led by the meek mule (270).

A profound dislocation develops between Victor and the other troops. This dislocation becomes a crucial factor in his eventual desertion. Almost discovered after he is separated from his troop, the narrator tells us that Victor does not trust his comrades: “He was not sure of them. What would they say if they saw him skulking about in the rear of the line…? You see, he did not know them – had never really fraternized with his fellows” (281). It appears that it is Victor’s dislocation, literal and metaphorical, that leads him to a farmhouse in the midst of the battlefield, where he conceals himself for much of the rest of the war, until he is captured and executed for desertion. Just as
Victor's distance from his comrades imbues the farm with an allegorical function, it is also representative of a potential fate that C. E. Montague felt threatened many in English society of the time. The farm's role is crucial in Rough Justice, in Montague's work and thinking about nation, and by implication in the thinking of others in English society who shared Montague's profile. This modest setting stands as a complex nodal point around which debates about nation, from Victor's own mind to Montague's, can be brought into focus.

Rough Justice as a whole centers around Victor’s desertion and execution, which are rendered in terms that remain in many ways sympathetic to his plight, from the title Rough Justice onwards. One officer, Immals, who is characterized by the narrator in grotesque terms, retells the execution with relish: “His face looked fouler than ever—more pouchy under the eyes, more blackish-green…befouling the air.” (344). Immals goes into progressively more and more graphic detail in his description of the execution, explaining, “we find it best in this Army to use a small cobble-paved yard that I struck, with a good high wall round it. Keeps ‘em [the condemned] more quiet—to feel they’re shut in see?” (345), and that “We keep the sun out, in this Army. Makes ‘em jib [grimace], to see it—they don’t want to leave it,” and, finally, that cotton-wool is put in the prisoner’s mouth to stop them from crying out (347). One central character in the book, Auberon, is horrified by this supposedly clinical procedure, which ended in this case with Immals “finishing off” the accused with a pistol: “Just for an instant Auberon closed his eyes, to see the brains that had spun Victor’s delicate fabrics of fancy and wit bespatter the wall of the slaughterer’s yard” (348).
Montague would have been aware that Victor had some cause to call for leniency, since the Manual of Military Law stated, “The offence of desertion…implies an intention on the part of the offender either not to return to his Majesty’s service at all, or to escape some particularly important service” (qtd. in Corns and Hughes-Wilson 45, emphasis added). Under these criteria Victor’s case, like many, is highly debatable, since Victor wanders to the farmhouse not to avoid direct military confrontation, nor to avoid service permanently.xii

Desertion and English Society

Desertion, and the subsequent execution for the crime, are central points around which ambivalent feelings about the nation are brought home, in Montague’s work as in wider English society. In Rough Justice, the parallels between the state of war and one of national fragility are immediately emphasized at the outbreak of war. Montague suggests in the book that the onset of war is, in some non-disclosed way, the death of the nation: “England, the one that was still feudal at heart, had come to her death bed at last. Only six or seven hours now until all her ancient belfries…would be tolling their twelve strokes apiece for her passing. She died hard, the glorious old jade” (184). This melancholic prognosis, from the omniscient narrator, stands in sharp contrast to one minor character’s almost hysterical tone in suggesting that the nation would be solidified by war: “The fumes of war were welled up in her head; her heels—to speak in a figure—were flying in the air. She positively shouted about all the good things that the war would bring back to old England—the social health, the true British grit, the discipline of the
nation” (197). In *Rough Justice*, Montague is keen to articulate a profoundly ambivalent model of the state of England in wartime.

Some critics of the War have suggested that writing like Montague’s was too liberal in its depiction of war and military justice, and that it misrepresents wider public opinion on these subjects. Cathryn Corns’ and John Hughes-Wilson’s lengthy study of British military executions in the Great War contest “the outpourings of ex-public school subalterns, who effectively hijacked the experience of the Western front for their own memoirs, leaving us a literary memory rather than a cold historical analysis” (19). There can be little doubt that here, Corns and Hughes-Wilson are referring to, among others, Montague, one of the most well known ex-public school subalterns to write a wartime memoir.

The War Office, of which Montague was a part for some time, also argued in a report in 1918 that low morale and desertion were exaggerated problems. John Ellis points out, “In July 1918 the British Censorship Department sent a report to Haig trying to analyze the state of the men’s morale through their letters home. The Report was fairly emphatic that the great majority of letters revealed no real sense of defeatism or despair” (177). However, cases of desertion increased dramatically over the course of the war, and there were occasions in which whole battalions would desert (181). Dealing with such widespread desertions led to practices that indicated some real alarm on the part of the War Office, who ordered that one member of each deserting company be randomly selected for execution. This concern runs counter to the proclamation of good morale, and adds weight to Montague’s implicit argument that desertion was worth serious consideration in *Rough Justice*. 
In the wider public in England there did remain a good deal of patriotic feeling: “Victorian and Edwardian education and propaganda, the whole ideology of the age, inculcated both officers and men with a real sense of being duty-bound to come forward in the defense of their family, their country, even their country’s allies” (Ellis 162). In general, soldiers in the field did not simply refuse to support their nation during the war out of hand, but their opinion was tempered with ambivalence about whether desertion could really be judged as harshly as the War Office would have it. Military authorities complained that officers in charge of sentencing were often too lenient on the convicted. The proportion of those executed for desertion was a tiny fraction of those convicted of the crime (Ellis 185).

Beyond the attitude of British troops in France, the detailed study of one particular case, that of Sub. Lt. Edwin Dyett, by Leonard Sellers, articulates the doubts about desertion as a punishable offense in wider English society. Even the highly patriotic John Bull newspaper, its namesake co-opted at times in recruitment campaigns for the war, published an eyewitness account of the execution of Dyett that was sympathetic:

Can you picture the final scene? The prisoner tied to a stake; there was no need—he faced death fearlessly, but the cords cut him and he protested—his eyes bandaged, his identification disc suspended just over his left breast. The firing party, half-hidden in a trench. No time is wasted. And yet there comes the cry: “For God’s sake put me out of my misery—this suspense is killing me.” And, as the rifles made their first click, “Well boys, good-bye! For God’s sake, shoot straight” (qtd. in Sellers 79).
In Victor’s case they did not do so, and we can wonder if this well-publicized case and Dyett’s plea reached Montague while he was constructing the execution scene, allowing him to use the device to underline his aversion to the practice. There were also common parallels with other cases in the desertion in *Rough Justice*. One notable case was that of Cpl. Frederick Ives, who Corns and Hughes-Wilson suggest “like so many other deserters” must have “found some lonely French woman to take him in, whose husband may have been away at the front, or dead” (219). There are a number of parallels then with Victor’s case, which perhaps implies that Montague took this element of the narrative from a real example.

**Victor, from a Bygone Age**

Victor is perhaps destined to die in *Rough Justice* because of his roots in a Southern version of England that cannot sustain itself through a world war. In the South, as Montague sees it, reside the aristocratic, Tory values, intellectual and honorable. This is Montague’s ‘little England,’ of the home counties and Oxford, and Victor Nevin can be taken as a proxy for the national subject as it is formed by this model: “The Nevins were elect; children of light… The Nevins grew up… into bishops, deans, head-masters, heads of houses at Oxford and Cambridge… they acted as standing counsel for culture and conservators of serious critical standards” (38). England is being overwhelmed though, by another nation within English shores, which cannot coexist with the first. Bron’s father, Thomas Garth, speaks at length of the lethargic and failing state of Oxford University (131). Chantry, the house on the Thames where Bron grows up, is lost at the end of the novel. The “Tudor mansion” had stood as another proxy for England as a
whole (“As the house melted into garden, the garden melted into wide England beyond” (2)), but now there will be “no more Chantry for us, I’m afraid” (365), for the Thames is now a “faint pageant of sunken warmth and spent energies” (378). Victor’s failure of courage and allegiance, of course, leads to his demise. He stands for the profound frailty of this national ideal, and the untenable farm he deserts to, the impossibility of its continued survival.

The decline of this old, Southern England is perhaps the most prominent downfall of a construction of the English nation in *Rough Justice*. The pressure these nodal points of Southern England feel is from the developing industrial North, which presents a new vision of non-intellectual, work-a-day industrial power. Bron considers this struggle to conserve or to recast England near the close of the novel:

His journey north… had, in fact, done away with the notion, in Auberon’s mind, that there ever was a time when England was not fighting a life-or-death war against something which threatened the precarious life of this odd island workshop. In this more durable war the front line had looks that were curiously like those of the other, by day and by night – barrages of smoke and poisonous gas that rolled across blighted Lancashire fields, flames from Midland furnace chimneys that leapt and winked in the dark like the expanding and contracting flashes of so many guns on the horizon. (372)

The analogy with the war demonstrates the fractious nature of the relationship between North and South as Montague saw it. Another impression the passage gives is that the North is being wrought before Auberon’s eyes, as the busy factories labor and generate.
The river in the South seems rather staid in comparison. The North is the active heart of the nation then, while the South now appears peripheral.

The novel has a seemingly digressive chapter where Bron’s father, Thomas Garth, goes to watch a football match with a friend. In the narrative of the build-up to and enactment of war this episode seems strangely out of place, but in this section Montague is beginning to render the Northern nation he feels is in the ascendant. Northern fans’ heavily inflected dialect underlines this oddly distinct status from the Southern, aristocratic characters we have engaged with up to this point in the novel. Thomas has enormous admiration for the fans, who seem playful yet keenly fair in their judgment of the game as it progresses:

Garth listened. He liked the yarn and the quick laugh that received it. He liked these men. At sunset yesterday they must have been standing at work in the electrically lighted mist of some reeking factory, two hundred miles away; all night they would have traveled in their boots by slow ‘trip train;’ to-night they would do it again; they would reach their beloved, unlovely town among the Pennine moors in the haggard November dawn, still looking out on life and its humours with amused, unjaded eyes. That was our strength and our hope – the hardiness of the common man’s unfastidious gusto; these were England’s artesian wells of vitality. (55)

In these moments, Montague’s developing support for the Northern English nation becomes apparent. Elton writes that Montague “honestly loved the North, and hated to leave it when the time came” (40). He was a determined advocate for a permanent commemoration of Mancunian casualties of the War in 1923, saying that it
should replace a statue of Prince Albert who (unlike the Northern soldiers) was “no maker of England” (Grieves, 90). This perception of the Northerner persists in Bron’s view of them in his battalion, as they march to the trenches and he is recuperating from his injury: “‘Would that I were with them, whether in Heaven or Hell,’ he felt when he thought of Cart and the rest… Wherever they were was the centre of life; it was mid-stream; all other places were backwaters” (300). This bears a great similarity to Montague’s own comments, in a letter to a friend in 1918, on the resilience of Northern troops:

You know what our men are, especially the Scotsmen and the Lancastrians. It was almost lovelier to see them jogging back unconcerned from St. Quentin, after three or four nights without sleep, than to see them advancing on the Somme, or, last year, in Flanders. One feels that such people can never really be beaten.

(Elton, 216)

Bron’s admiration proves a crucial distinction between Victor and himself. While Victor seems dislocated from the ordinary troops, the physicality and unassuming nature of Bron, which had alienated him from others at Oxford, now allows him to adapt to the changing nature of England as Montague saw it. Though the family home is lost, we discover Bron will travel North to find work, joining this new nation (just as Montague did in 1890, when he joined the staff at the Manchester Guardian). Returning to his comments on the journey North, the narrator writes that Bron:

…was drawn to these newly discovered firing-lines where a shortage of one hand need not utterly disqualify a man. To get a niche there, to be a N.C.O. in that more regular army of England’s defense, had lately become the thing supremely worth
doing; there was the centre of things; the place where the fun was; the only spot
where you could feel you belonged. (372)

If Victor is the death of the old nation, then Bron offers some hope for its endurance in a new form, as long as it is willing to adjust to the terms of the new one.

As one nation falls away then, another version of England comes to replace it. Montague is more than simply a patriotic nationalist, anxiously narrating the decrepitude and demise of the English nation as he sees it. Across his works we have a balanced narrative of transition, and at its center the farm, a space that is liminal, unsustainable, and for a moment entirely outside the nation.

Montague’s papers (held at the John Rylands Library at the University of Manchester) include a short synopsis of Rough Justice produced for Montague’s publishers. The document is revealing of several of Montague’s underlying goals in the novel, and they bear out the assertion that Montague felt the old order of Southern England was decent but failing, and also implies that Victor’s desertion is a conscious avoidance of this fact:

Dick [who was ultimately renamed Auberon] and Joan [who became his sister Molly], an infant Adam and Eve, were by descent and rearing, two atoms of the old formal English core. Their father and mother, their home and their youth, all incorrigibly English of the prime [sic], amidst an England overblown and spilling [sic] itself to seed…Relatively Victor was a good boy of a decadent civilization. (Montague, “The Argument” 1).

The summary ends: “Then She [Joan], on the decks of the sinking ship of old England, declared herself to him [Dick] and they joined forces for a course of courage
without hope.” (5). The document renders well Montague’s divided consciousness on the issue of England and its future. On one side, the respectable South is falling to the point of what Montague calls, in the same synopsis, Victor’s “skulking” (4). Montague laments this situation, and sees a future “without hope.” On the other hand though, the north offers a new national vision in which Montague personally find much to support, and which seems an image which, if confronted with “courage,” might offer renewed vitality.

The Fantasy Space

Victor’s experience seems to fit a common profile of the deserter. In many ways though, Victor’s particular circumstance remains implausible, to the point of being fantastic. Victor’s desertion seems unbelievable partly because Corns and Hughes-Wilson argue that the real case of Drummer Rose, absent for two years, was “some kind of record” (217). Victor’s three-year desertion is therefore highly improbable.

In the midst of a battlefield in France during the First World War, Private Victor Nevin comes upon a farmhouse which seems shielded from the surrounding violence of the warring nations:

He struggled to his feet and looked around. In the east the line of the front was marked by an endless succession of rocket-like lights. In the west and the south was absolute darkness. But in the north there was something amazing. Not more than 400 yards off, a light burned dull but steady. It had irregular edges; it looked turbid – just like the light of some window screened with ragged curtain stuff or sacking. Perhaps with one candle within. A window? A house, a fire perhaps…
and time to think about the right thing to do, like a man and not a frozen worm.

(282)

The farm is an unreal space, divided improbably from the shelling though it is purportedly positioned near its epicenter: “The outline of the house was dim against some other and larger dark bulk behind it and east of it—the cliff-like side…of some great quarry. Ah! that, no doubt, was why this one house was not smashed by enemy shells: it was screened” (283).

Here Victor is able to enter into an alternate life—as a French farmer disqualified from military service—for three years before he is discovered and forced to return to face his punishment. Victor’s is a narrative of the failure to remain invested in nation, even during wartime, when such investment is under greatest scrutiny, and aberrance is punishable by death.

It is clear that the narrator’s commentary on Victor’s first encounter with the farmhouse in Rough Justice is a fantastic allegory of the only contrived version of the North that Victor can adopt. Perhaps we can speculate that when the narrator writes that “In the west and the south was absolute darkness. But in the north there was something amazing” (282), his comment is surreptitiously loaded with a judgment about the burgeoning Northern nation. Montague seems to construct Victor as a statement of one potential path the author might have taken – a nihilistic turn based on nostalgia for the old England, away from any engagement with the nation at all, and towards the impossible isolation that such a move demands. Instead, Montague went north, rather as he had Bron do, and articulated his ambivalence towards England by aligning himself with a distinct collective community in that region.
On his first night at the farm, Victor asserts the separation directly—his division from the outside world, and from the unfamiliar and unpalatable transformation of the nation he knew: “He put his head under the clothes and tucked them tightly round it; he felt exultantly cunning, like one shrewdly shutting out enemies. All life had contracted into a passionate sense of that glowing cavity where he lay curled up in the dark, with all the world’s evils outside” (287). Victor’s struggle with an England with which he cannot align himself ends with his death, but Montague seems to feel that it is not a lost cause, and, like Woolf’s increasing sense of the potential to re-formulate England in more sustainable terms, Victor’s impossible space is not the rather pessimistic end of the negotiations between nation and individual. Neither Montague nor Woolf go very far into the longer-term implications and formulations of their own understanding of the newly emerging nation, but there remains hope for more sustainable coexistence between individual and collective even in their assertion that such a new England might be actively forged.
CHAPTER 2

Ambassadors and Aliens: George Orwell, Mary O’Malley and England Abroad

From the concerns of subjects dealing with the repercussions of the European war on their national subjectivity, I will now turn my attention to the effects on these subjects of living abroad, in a context of English colonial decline. In the early 1930s the two writers I will consider centrally in this chapter constructed narratives about the experience of the English subjects living in unfamiliar lands. The sense which they have of their position abroad in these novels ultimately helps to shine some light on the state of the home nation itself.

England, most pointedly when it was the center of a colonial enterprise, put forward perhaps its most self-assured face in its dealings abroad. Orwell introduces for us, in *Burmese Days*, his construction of the pukka sahib’s code: “Keeping up our prestige./ The firm hand (without the velvet glove)./ We white men must hang together./ Give them an inch and they’ll take an ell, and/ Esprit de corps” (191). The code was intended to dictate the behavior of English subjects living abroad in the period. They must first of all present a moral rectitude commonly associated with the English in the wider world at the time, and retain a meticulous presentation of English manners and social graces – the collective “prestige” of the English. They must retain a paternal relationship with the local population – a firmly directing hand. There must be an ethnically unified front presented to ‘outsiders.’ There should be a limit to the amount to which the local population should be trusted with liberty. Finally, the English must support one another before they support other nationalities. Above all, the code
demonstrates the pressure on the subject living abroad in the period to stand as a surrogate for national virtues.

Another, lesser known, writer of the 1930s – Lady Mary Dolling Sanders O’Malley (who wrote under the pseudonym Ann Bridge) – offers a different aspect of the demands on English subjects living abroad. While maintaining something akin to the pukka sahib code which Orwell characterizes, they must also demonstrate a detailed awareness of the minutiae of their new home abroad, and be able to translate foreign experiences into a form that could be understood by more transient visitors and tourists from England. In O’Malley’s 1932 novel Peking Picnic, the central protagonist, Laura Leroy, tells an English visitor to her home in Peking: “The best foreign policy in the world will be wrong in China […] if it is consistent, just because it is consistent. To-day you must offer the bludgeon, tomorrow you offer the gift” (32). Here the patronizing and paternal aspects of the pukka sahib’s code is translated into a diplomatic discourse which suggests foreigners be ‘handled’ by the English with a play between carrot and stick.

The English subject living abroad then, can often usefully be considered an ‘ambassador’ for his or her nation – a person who presents key aspects of the home nation to the ‘outside,’ stands as an intermediary between that home nation and the wider world, and, in so doing, acts on the notion that individuals can be characterized first and foremost in terms of their national affiliations. Broadly speaking, ambassadors are the guardians of what it means to use the terms ‘England’ and ‘the English’ when outside the nation-state.

Exporting England to foreign lands requires a two-fold reproduction of the home nation. There must be these ambassador figures, who move and live abroad to represent
both the will and the values of England, but there must also be established physical ‘safe spaces’ that can stand as tangible proxies for the nation itself. These safe spaces are also reflections of the home nation – like the colonial club in *Burmese Days* – established by the nation-state and by these ambassadors themselves as physical places that reflect English values and lifestyles, and can cloister the English abroad in a world which is familiar and protected from the exotic and sometimes seemingly hostile environment around them.

The intricacies (and limitations) of this model of England represented in foreign lands are the subject of the two novels of the 1930s that I will consider here. Orwell’s *Burmese Days* and O’Malley’s *Peking Picnic* are both concerned with these notions of ambassadors and their safe spaces. I will engage in this chapter with the play between the notion of the English subject abroad as an exemplar projecting the nation ‘at its best,’ or as an alien, both to home nation and to foreign culture, who does not measure up to the expected ideological standards.

In these two novels apparent ambassador figures and the supposed safe spaces that support their exploits are tested. These central characters prove homesick, extremely ambivalent in their feelings about their new home nation, and yet disillusioned with their role in the project of exporting England abroad. The safe spaces are also shaken by attacks on them that expose their true fragility. What is revealed by these challenges is that to attach the status of ambassador and safe spaces to these English nationals is inaccurate. In reality these characters are not proxies for their nation, but aliens dislocated, literally and otherwise, from genuine inclusion in ‘England.’ As aliens who only appear to be ambassadors, they are ultimately disqualified by questionable moral
conduct. Their irreconcilable differences with the positions imposed on them makes their implicit assertion of being concrete extensions of England seem tenuous.

John Rossi, writing in the *Cambridge Companion to George Orwell*, suggests that Orwell was “still searching for a political voice in 1933,” particularly when compared to the better-known, later works (89). This chapter should go some way in supporting the implication that in the early works Orwell’s political thought was more ambivalent and complex. As for O’Malley, I aim to draw others to recognize that this dismissed writer can offer us useful insights into the state of mind of a certain type of English writer during this period of England’s waning international status.

There is of course a more celebrated textual example from the period, of the English subject living abroad. Forster’s 1924 novel *A Passage to India* provides a vital textual framework for both of the lesser-known works I will be concentrating on here. There are a number of key similarities between Forster’s, Orwell’s and O’Malley’s texts. Fielding, like Flory and Laura Leroy, tries to negotiate the complex play of political and social allegiances that surround him, positioned as he is between English and Indian cultures. There is also the central social institution of the colonial club, like the one depicted in *Burmese Days*, access to which is limited, and which stands as the bastion of English values abroad. The trip to the Marabar caves seems to bear some similarity to Laura’s “Peking Picnic” in the countryside, particularly in that a threatening force from this alien environment disrupts what is intended to be an innocuous daytrip. The “ou-boum” of the caves however, which so disturbs Mrs. Moore and is later wrapped up in Adela’s panic in *A Passage to India*, acts as a complex metaphysical node which is far
more ambiguous than the actions of the bandits who threaten Laura’s party

(Passage 165).

This is where A Passage to India seems to become less pertinent to my concerns here, for the novel raises existential issues about faith, colonialism and liberal humanism (among other things) which are far more intellectually complex and theoretically abstract than the two fabular texts I will explore here. Forster’s text also makes Aziz, an Indian, its central fulcrum. In this way A Passage to India ultimately argues that it is more Aziz’s contempt, and less Fielding’s, which suggests a deep sense of the problematic position of the Anglo-Indian subject (361). Thus while issues of nationality are rife in all three books, in Forster’s the perspective is complicated by multiple, often conflicting perspectives, while Burmese Days and Peking Picnic are largely single character studies.

**Orwell and O’Malley**

Readers may think Orwell’s and O’Malley’s perspectives on England share very little on the basis of their social positions and life stories. While Orwell was well known as one of England’s most vociferous public critics for much of his life – a social outsider – Lady Mary Dolling Sanders O’Malley was the aristocratic wife of a foreign diplomat in service of the Empire, and indicated in her private writings a profound support for king and country.

Born in 1889 of an aristocratic family living in Southern England, Mary O’Malley was educated at the London School of Economics. She married Owen St. Clair O’Malley, a foreign office diplomat, in 1913. After some years living in the home counties area of rural, southern England, they would together spend much of their lives living abroad, as
Owen took on various diplomatic posts around the world, the first of which was in
Peking, between 1925 and 1927. She was to write a number of novels based on her
experiences abroad, the first being *Peking Picnic* (1932).\textsuperscript{xv}

O’Malley does not seem initially a personality likely to draw England’s foreign
exploits and colonial projects into question on any level. As Donald Lammers puts it, in
the only article ever published on *Peking Picnic*:

> Without conveying even the slightest hint of moral discomfort about the means
> used historically to secure Britain’s present ascendency, they [O’Malley and two
> other writers of diplomatic fiction in the period] seem fully satisfied with the
> existing territorial extent of British possessions and understood \textit{au fond} that
> their country had a vested interest in the maintenance of the international \textit{status
> quo}. (405)

The O’Malleys lived a life of luxury in Peking, as described by her husband in his
memoirs, *The Phantom Caravan*. The family kept eighteen servants at their Peking home
(96), and Owen recounts with some satisfaction the opulence of their life there:

> I was soon to discover that all the practical arrangements for life in our Far
> Eastern colonies and dependencies were similarly conceived on what, if it was in
> England, would seem a princely scale. This endeared the Far East to me at once,
> for I like prodigality and luxury and convenience, and innumerable perfectly
> behaved and very efficient servants. (92)

Mary also recounts with enjoyment various trappings of the English subject abroad in the
closely autobiographical *Peking Picnic*,\textsuperscript{xvi} which suggests she was unquestioningly
content with this type of empowered (and oppressive) lifestyle:
The ricksha is the most delightfully civilized form of locomotion. Seated in a well-sprung bath-chair, the passenger bowls along on pneumatic tires at a surprising speed; he is alone, for it only holds one; his view is unimpeded by anything but the lowered head and shoulders of the trotting coolie. (Peking 15)

Mary’s roots in the English nation are so deep that in her autobiography Facts and Fictions she writes of her gratitude to King George V for asking for a copy of her novel Four-Part Setting on his death-bed, calling him, with much affection, a “gruff but delicate old monarch” (23).

Orwell’s life experience could hardly be more dissimilar from O’Malley’s. His modest middle class upbringing and scholarship admission to Eton only underlined for him his status as a social outsider in England of the time. Rodden and Rossi write that during his years at Eton “Orwell first began to carve out for himself the persona of the outsider, a role he would play for the rest of his life” (1). His junior colonial position in the Indian police in Burma between 1922 and 1927 must also be assumed a significantly different experience from O’Malley’s life of luxury in Peking in the same period. As Peking Picnic has a closely autobiographical basis in O’Malley’s time in China, Burmese Days is in many ways an account of Orwell’s sense of his time in Burma, and the novel could hardly appear more pessimistic in its tone or conclusions about living abroad.

Orwell’s Thinking on Nation

While there is little or no commentary by O’Malley that might reveal her thinking about nation as a concept, Orwell was prolific on the subject. Several key writings by Orwell give us a good framework to read his general thinking on England, English
nationalism, and nations more broadly. In *The Lion and the Unicorn* (1941) Orwell suggests that the numerous names given to the region that includes England (i.e. Britain, the British Isles, the United Kingdom, etc.) are indicative of some slippage in its unity (21). England is also fragmented in class terms (21). He writes elsewhere of divisions between the North and South of the country that make the unfamiliar portion seem like an alien world (*The Road to Wigan Pier* 15). England is not, for Orwell, a solidly unified and ‘single-minded’ entity. His most fundamental attack is on the notion that the nation of England exists coherently to begin with.

Despite these contestations of the idea of a substantive ‘England,’ Orwell is certainly not dismissive of the enduring influence of nationalism over the individual. His definition of nationalism here is characteristically elliptical. He begins his essay “Notes on Nationalism” by explaining that “a nationalist is one who thinks solely, or mainly, in terms of competitive prestige” (363). This use of “competitive prestige” suggests the connection between the English nation-state as a political entity, seeking to impose its will on others, and the overt presentation of unified national cultural characteristics necessary to achieve this goal, which we have already seen in the pukka sahib’s code. Thus, though England’s solidity is drawn into question by Orwell, he is aware that the convincing illusion of national solidity is a prerequisite of the nation-state’s broader nationalist agenda.

Orwell complicates things further by adding that nationalism can be considered a broad-ranging term for almost any act of ideological imposition: “the emotion I am talking about does not always attach itself to a nation – that is, a single race or a geographical area. It can attach itself to a church or a class, or it may work in a merely
negative sense, *against* something or other and without the need for any positive object of loyalty” (362).

The oppressive English nationalist must then be distinguished for Orwell from a patriot, whom Orwell feels holds a comparatively laudable degree of support for his nation, without outward comparison:

Nationalism is not to be confused with patriotism. Both words are normally used in so vague a way that any definition is liable to be challenged, but one must draw a distinction between them, since two different and even opposed ideas are involved. By “Patriotism” I mean devotion to a particular place and a particular way of life, which one believes to be the best in the world but has no wish to force upon other people. Nationalism, on the other hand, is inseparable from the desire for power. The abiding purpose of every nationalist is to secure more power and more prestige, *not* for himself, but for the nation or other unit for which he has chosen to sink his own individuality. (362)

Thus Rossi can argue plausibly that “Orwell was an internationalist while at the same time a fervent patriot” (Rossi, 87). The distinction has parallels with the class divisions which Orwell claims fragment English society, since he feels it must be “admitted that the [nationalist] habit of mind I am talking about is widespread among the English intelligentsia, and more widespread there than among the mass of the people,” who are more commonly simply patriotic (“Nationalism” 363).

All this indicates a profoundly negative perspective, on Orwell’s part, on the function of nations and nationalism in general, and of the propagation of the English
nation-project and English nationalism in particular. In a further turn however, Orwell is quick to concede that his model of nationalism is in some ways reductive and cynical:

In the classification I have attempted above, it will seem that I have often exaggerated, oversimplified, made unwarranted assumptions and have left out of account the existence of ordinary decent motives. This was inevitable, because in this essay I am trying to isolate and identify tendencies which exist in all our minds and pervert our thinking, without necessarily occurring in a pure state or operating continuously. (377)

The real goal of “Notes on Nationalism” then, is not merely to chastise the nationalist elements of English society external to us, but to articulate a complex play between positive patriotic feeling and complicity with nationalist intents with which we must all struggle. His 1939 essay “Marrakesh” renders well this insidious nationalist feeling (as he has defined the term), while showing his discomfort with his position:

When you see how the people live, and still more how easily they die, it is always difficult to believe that you are walking among human beings. All colonial empires are in reality founded upon that fact. The people have brown faces – besides, there are so many of them! Are they really the same flesh as yourself? Do they even have names? (181)

Orwell’s view of nation is overtly complex then, where O’Malley’s appears straightforward. Despite apparent discrepancies between their positions and thinking, these writers are drawn closer together in their comparable thinking about the vexed issue of the national subject abroad, and the attempt to propagate a little “corner of a foreign field/that is forever England.” When we turn to Peking Picnic and Burmese Days in
particular, we find that both writers render central characters torn between their purported position as exemplars of England abroad, and a life in their new home which forces us and them to question their qualification for the role. We also, therefore, question the solidity of the safe spaces erected by the home nation to support their exploits and, more or less explicitly, the wider project of national reproduction.

**Laura and John as Ambassadors**

At first the status of Laura Leroy and John Flory as what I have termed ambassadors seems manifest. They present themselves as part and parcel of England’s imperial power structure, both implicitly and explicitly. They hold rigidly to a number of aspects of their original English identity. They articulate a detailed and critical sensitivity to the foreign culture that surrounds them. All interactions between individuals are, for them, first and foremost to be read in terms of national affiliations.

*Peking Picnic* concerns a weekend trip taken by Laura Leroy, the wife of an English legate in Peking, with a group of visitors to China from Europe and America. The group includes Vinstead, a Cambridge college professor who becomes close to Laura as she introduces him to Chinese culture and countryside. The group stays in a local Chinese temple, and then travels on to another ancient site, Tan Chueh Ssu, for a day trip. While there, the group witnesses the arrival of a gang of local bandits, who murder one of the temple’s monks, and take the group hostage. Laura makes a determined stand against the threats of violence from the bandits, at one point daring them to bayonet her and then see the repercussions that will follow from English forces. Just as the group is about to be moved from the temple by the bandits, English troops arrive from the legation and rescue
them. Laura and the others return to the original encampment, and subsequently to the Peking legation. At the close of the novel, Prof. Vinstead and Laura decide to start an affair, but Laura insists she will stay with her husband, since she remains “fond” of him (218).

In Orwell’s *Burmese Days* junior colonial official John Flory, living in a small town in rural Burma, meets Elizabeth Lackersteen, a new arrival from England who has for some time been living with her mother in Paris. Flory sees a potential marriage prospect in Elizabeth and tries to become close to her, showing her various sights in the region. Elizabeth is unimpressed (even repelled) by the reality of Burmese life for the expatriate, and finds Flory’s knowledge of local custom and culture shocking. Flory also comes under pressure from a close friend, Burmese Doctor Veraswami, to aid in his admission into the local colonial English club, much to the dismay of the other English members. One of these members injures a local boy, which causes a riot and an attack on the club. Flory’s attempts to get help (by swimming the river on one side of the club), along with his hunting prowess, again lead Elizabeth to consider marrying him. One of Veraswami’s enemies in the local community employs Flory’s long-time mistress, Ma Hla May, to disgrace Flory in front of Elizabeth and the other English club members. Veraswami’s hopes of achieving club membership are ruined; Elizabeth leaves Flory and will marry the vacuous colonial officer Macgregor. The book closes with Flory’s suicide.

In *Peking Picnic* Laura remains on many levels untouched by the foreign environment around her: “Mrs. Leroy’s drawing room [was] so English, and so unusual in Peking. There was not a single Chinese thing in it except the earthenware bowls in which the freesias stood blooming everywhere” (34). O’Malley suggests then, that Laura
remains a bastion of Englishness even while in China. Laura also remains aware that her role as wife of an English legate in Peking is to facilitate, through social engagements, the functioning of the nation’s diplomatic mission: “It seems so awfully insincere!” [Judith said]. She paused. “It isn’t like you, Laura!” she burst out. “It isn’t like anyone,” Laura answered, wondering what idea the girl had been forming of her. “It’s just part of the job. This entertaining is simply a system” (21). The “job,” it appears then, is to remain connected to England and to assert its interests in China, as a figure on the boundary between the two nations. Laura remains deeply connected to her Englishness, and affirms her role as part of the nation’s socio-cultural power structure.

Flory makes clear comparably that he is deeply caught up in England’s economic goals in the region: “I don’t want the Burmans to drive us out of this country. God forbid! I’m here to make money, like everyone else” (39). Flory sees the mission of the English abroad in the region as one of overt exploitation, and himself as part of this project. When the smear campaign against him and his Burmese friend Veraswami begins, Flory remains convinced that his Englishness will shield him from repercussions, since he’s “a Englishman – quite above suspicion” (49). Along similar lines, he tells us elsewhere “no Englishman ever feels himself in real danger from an Oriental” (78). He too then, retains a deep connection to his nationality, and uses it to defend himself from the hostile political reality in Burma, the pukka sahib code again the yardstick by which his distance from local culture is measured:

No European ever gets to the bottom of these quarrels; there is always something impervious to the European mind, a conspiracy behind a conspiracy, a plot within
a plot. Besides, to keep out of ‘native’ quarrels is one of the Ten Precepts of the pukka sahib. (46)

While both characters try to retain some core constituents of their Englishness when abroad then, and preserve a sense of their nationality as insulating them from foreign ‘contamination,’ they are also keen to present a culturally sensitive and respectful front to the local population, or to more transient visitors from the West. Laura is, as Donald Lammers puts it with regard to her creator, a cultural “insider” (389). The narrator frequently intercedes to offer evidence of O’Malley’s knowledge of Chinese diplomacy:

   China is a trying place for all European diplomatists, and especially so for those of the type of Sir James Boggit. It is, as he said, a most irregular country. Humor, flexibility, and the very casualness he deplored in Fitzmaurice are essential qualities, if not to success, at least to a quiet life, out there. (32)

In her memoir Facts and Fictions O’Malley tells of one incident where she wrote a poem about a Chinese warlord, Chang-T’so-Lin, whom she had met while living in Peking. The poem was ultimately published in England, and O’Malley suggests that it was her status as a cultural insider that led to the interest in doing so:

   It wasn’t a particularly good poem, but it could only have been written by someone who knew China – and Chang – at first hand […] China at that time was “news,” and editors couldn’t have too much of lively, first-hand accounts of it. (35)

As an actual envoy for much of his life, Mary O’Malley’s husband Owen must have proven a good model for the ambassador figure that she applies to her central
protagonist in *Peking Picnic*. Owen’s autobiography makes more than one comment challenging the notion that Europeans had aided in the development of Chinese culture, for example, when it was already so highly developed in its own terms (93). On the contrary in fact, Owen asserts that: “China inspired in me so high a degree of affection and respect that I got to understand very well why the Chinese had traditionally regarded the English as barbarians” (99). Owen is sensitive to Chinese culture and keen to assert its positive qualities. As well as indicating the kind of understanding appropriate to what I have termed the ambassador figure, his comments actually gesture to a persistent distinction between England and China. Both countries are, Owen implies, independently developed (perhaps China even the more so), but crucially the two do not share a common, universal sophistication. Instead, they compete for the designation, in an international contest. Owen’s reading of the other nation’s particularities only solidifies the uniqueness of England.

Laura appears to read China in similar terms. She has a detailed knowledge of the complex nature of anglo-chinese relations, which suggests her qualifications for the role of national ambassador (56). She defends Chinese working lifestyles in comparison to English working-class lives: “I don’t think hauling a cart or pulling a ricksha is nearly as unhealthy as being a stoker on a liner, nor as dangerous as coal mining, and it’s certainly far less demoralizing than leaning against a wall all day and drawing the dole’” (52). She shows a deep affection for what she sees as Chinese idiosyncrasies: “It was the loveliest of Chinese inventions, the small pipes bound to the pinion feathers of pigeons, so that the birds cannot fly without creating this ethereal music” (27). Throughout *Peking Picnic* Laura is cast in the role of translator for her European and American guests (121),
educator about Chinese cultural practices (as she explains to the group the religious ceremonies which they all witness at the temple, 94), detector of threats to the group’s safety (as she knows the particular type of rifle fire which denotes a hostile military faction, 152), and even director of the group’s reaction to their unexpected captivity at Tan Chueh Ssu (178). All this underlines what Lammers cites as one of O’Malley’s central goals in writing *Peking Picnic*: to advocate for the kind of sensitive cultural awareness that her central character demonstrates. As Lammers puts it:

Mary O’Malley’s attitude towards the Chinese people and the British role in China emerges most clearly with a series of conversations between the fearlessly candid Laura and other members of the picnic party, particularly two American women, whose untutored reactions are used to illustrate the dangers involved in approaching radically different cultures with unacknowledged preconceptions.

(396)

Thus Laura must remain throughout “poised, worldly, quickly comprehending, accessible, *simpatica*, and hence regularly sought out by others of both sexes as a reliable confidante” (396). She also remains the figure who maps national specificity onto China, in distinct relation to England.

When Flory meets and tries to court Elizabeth Lackersteen, his first attempt is to have her witness a Burmese musical performance, involving local music and dance. It is an extraordinary event, which the narrator suggests appears quite alien to European eyes:

The orchestra burst into a sudden loud squalling. There were pipes like bagpipes, a strange instrument consisting of plaques of bamboo which a man struck with a little hammer, and in the middle there was a man surrounded by twelve tall drums
of different sizes [...] In a moment the girl began to dance. But at first it was not a
dance, it was a rhythmic nodding, posturing and twisting of the elbows, like the
movements of one of those jointed wooden figures on an old-fashioned
roundabout. The way her neck and elbows rotated was precisely like a jointed
doll, and yet incredibly sinuous. (104)

Despite the narrator’s descriptive terms, which give the dance a surreal quality, Flory
seems both fascinated by it and in favor of such witnessing on the part of the English
abroad:

Don’t you think this is worth watching, in its queer way? Just look at that girl’s
movements – look at that strange, bent-forward pose like a marionette, and the
way her arms twist from the elbows like a cobra rising to strike. It’s grotesque,
it’s even ugly, with a sort of willful ugliness. And there’s something sinister in it
too. There’s a touch of the diabolical in all Mongols. And yet when you look
closely, what art, what centuries of culture you can see behind it. [...] In some
way that I can’t define to you, the whole spirit of Burma is summed up in the way
that girl twists her arms. When you see her you can see the rice fields, the villages
under the teak trees, the pagodas, the priests in their yellow robes, the buffaloes
swimming the rivers in the early morning[...] (105)

Flory perceives Burmese culture as “sinister” in some ways, and “willfully ugly” to his
English sensibilities. Standing as he does at the point of demarcation between the two
cultures though, he also remains keen to attempt to achieve some cultural awareness of
that which initially appears foreign. He uses the performance to try to read Burmese
culture as a whole back to another, less familiar, English subject abroad. Despite his
extremely heavy-handed generalizations about it, there is something empathetic in his
sensitivity to the details of “the priest in their yellow robes,” for example. Orwell seems
to move towards thinly veiled nonfiction narrative here too. The figures “I” and “you” in
“what I can’t define to you” could quite easily be Orwell himself, and us, his uneducated
English audience. If so, Orwell must feel a considerable empathy with Flory, trying to
inform Elizabeth as Orwell tries to inform his readers.

Both Laura and Flory then, albeit in their sometimes maladroit manner, wish to
demonstrate cultural sensitivity regarding the local population. They are figures living in
a liminal extension of the border between England and foreign lands. Their acts both of
retaining Englishness and reading foreignness similarly function to underline the
distinction between the two. They keep up ‘what is English’ to those who are not familiar
with it, and they recount to other English individuals abroad aspects of the alien culture
that are profoundly distinct from what they have designated as ‘the homeland.’

Underlying these aspects of their ambassador status is another implied principle
of the term. Both characters appear to conclude that nationality is the foundation of
individual identity, since either assuming ‘English’ characteristics or reading ‘foreign’
cultures nation by nation depends upon this assumption. Laura demonstrates this thinking
on several occasions during the course of her narrative, both about the Chinese
population, but also about various European nationalities:

If she had hoped to remain alone, however, her hopes were frustrated – the
German Counselor came and clicked his heels before her and said that it was very
hot; the Italian First Secretary kissed her hand and murmured that she looked
deliciously cool; the Flemish Minister did likewise, and told her a funny story
about their hostess in a low, rapid, and indistinct French; the Japanese minister bowed very low and said that he regretted not to see her so distinguished husband in English which was monosyllabically correct. (6)

Laura assumes in general that “we can never really get away from our traditions and our racial make-up” (103). The narrator of *Burmese Days* makes prejudiced racial assumptions about the Burmese on several occasions, such as “the Burmese do not sag and bulge like white men, but grow fat symmetrically, like fruit swelling” (5). Orwell’s own thinking, though far more liberal in general than the narrator of *Burmese Days*, similarly defends the notion that nationality is an underlying and fundamental constituent of identity. In *The Lion and the Unicorn* he argues that: “Till recently it was thought proper to pretend that all human beings are very much alike, but in fact anyone able to use his eyes knows that the average of human behavior differs enormously from country to country” (9). Laura’s and Flory’s positions as ambassadors for England are predicated on a reading of all the individuals around them as first and foremost national subjects.

Laura and Flory stand on the boundary between England and other nations. There are a number of indications that they can be fittingly described as ambassadors for their nation abroad, as I have defined the term. This evidence seems to suggest that Orwell and O’Malley feel national subjects abroad adhere to these particular characteristics unequivocally, but there remain other aspects to both novels that make this kind of conclusion problematic.
Laura Leroy as Alien

When one looks more closely, there is a fundamental lack of contentment in these characters. This is the most overt indication that their qualifications for the ambassadorial role are questionable. Both Laura and Flory are profoundly discontent throughout their respective narratives: generally despondent; unhappy with the pressure to fulfill the role of ambassador in particular; uncomfortable with their complicity in England’s oppressive imperial project; disillusioned by the reality of their lives abroad; and ambivalent about the relationship they now have with their home nation. Unhappiness at their positions as English subjects abroad does not in itself disqualify these characters from carrying out the role of ambassadors for their nation. The nature of their dissatisfaction though, indicates that sustaining the role of ambassador for England is ultimately untenable. Orwell and O’Malley demonstrate that positioning Flory and Laura on the boundary between national constructs does not facilitate the reification of England’s conceptual borders. Instead, it dislocates the individual from connection to either (or any) national space, as they become ‘aliens,’ adrift from home or foreign roots.

Initially Laura’s unhappiness seems the quite explicable and temporary discomfort of any individual trying to become familiar with a new and hitherto unknown environment. As she looks out across the Chinese countryside, she wonders at the effect of China’s strangeness on English eyes:

The delicate strange beauty of the whole landscape struck powerfully on her senses, rousing her to an active delight […] She remembered with curious distinctness the distress she had felt during the first months of her sojourn in Peking at the sheer unfamiliarity of the face of nature. Her mind, accustomed to
draw nourishment from the well known scenes of England, the great elms
standing round the quiet fields, the broad sweep of distant downs [...] had ranged
eagerly, vainly, over the Chinese countryside, finding no resting place. She
remembered how alien at first had seemed these dusty flat fields, unmarked by
hedge or tree [...] how unnatural the sharpness of outlines in crystal dry air [...] till her very spirit had sickened for green, for the touch of dew [...] what had been
lacking was beauty in familiarity, the richness of association entwined with sights
and scents going back through the quiet swing of the seasons to the enormous
days and tiny pleasure of childhood; going back deeper and further still, blood of
her English blood and bone of her English bone, to the very roots of life. Cut off
from all that, planted down in a life a strange as the world she looked upon, she
had wilted within like an uprooted plant. (65)

Thus it appears that the English subject abroad must enter into some period of adjustment
to a foreign culture and landscape. This adjustment may be challenging, but should prove
only fleeting, since “gradually the alien beauty of China had awakened its own response
in her, and now this scene too, under the blazing untempered light, had power to nourish
her spirit” (65).

From the opening page of *Peking Picnic* though, the narrator suggests that
Laura’s sadness is actually rooted in a much deeper problem than mere homesickness. It
is an issue of divided consciousness, as Laura is suspended between the two
environments of England and China:

To live in two different worlds at the same time is both difficult and
disconcerting. Actually, of course, the body cannot be in China and in
Oxfordshire simultaneously. But it can, and does, travel rapidly between the one place and the other, while the mind of the heart persists obstinately in lingering where the body is not, or in leaping ahead to the place where the body is bound. The whole man – or perhaps chiefly the whole woman – is in such circumstances never completely anywhere. (5)xxi

The consciousness of the ambassador figure proves difficult to sustain as, the narrator suggests, Laura is dislocated from both England and China in her attempt to bridge the gap between the two. Lammers argues that: The most introspective and self-revealing of these “diplomatic fictions,” [Peking Picnic] lays out in rich detail the emotional and psychological effects of living serially, and sometimes almost simultaneously, in two different cultures” (395). Thus in China Laura is, as she herself puts it, ‘rootless:’ “We have no roots in the life of this soil – we’re like cactuses, feeding on air” (66). She goes on to say that in England “we have our own roots in the life of the soil; when I see men ploughing in Oxfordshire I know that I am part of their life, as they are of mine. None of us can say that out here” (66). At other points though, Laura feels that England is also distant and ‘foreign’ to a subject living abroad for long periods:

As she stared at it [an oak tree] with idle concentration something in the strangeness of those leaves, so impossible in England, roused her to a peculiarly sharp sense of the division in her life. The next time she looked down on Oxford from Shotover she would remember that oak tree! And this would seem reality, this and no other, and England would be the dream; and for this she would then be homesick. She knew it well. She would be suffocated again by England’s smallness and muffling greenness, maddened by its petty irrational humps and
hollows, after the masterly geometrical flatness of the China plain; oppressed by it
grey dripping skies, after that high light firmament in which the sun glitters like a
burnished shield from dawn till evening nine months of the year. […] No – it was
too difficult, it was impossible; she could never make the two halves of her life
fuse and fit properly. People should live only one life and not two – otherwise, in
both one was divided, uncertain, incomplete. And in a flash of understanding she
realized suddenly why Anglo-Indians congregate in places like Cheltenham, and
old China hands frequent the Thatched House Club – it is in a forlorn attempt to
keep their most important reality alive and intact. (111)

This divided self is at the center of Laura’s difficulties, despite the confident front she
presents to her guests on the trip to Chieh T’ai Ssu. Laura’s unhappiness manifests
principally in her displacement from her young children, who live for most of the year in
England:

She knew them really very little. For the last eight years now she had been in
China, most of the time, and when she did go home she was usually too much
absorbed in Tim and Sarah, their holidays and their clothes and their amusements
and arrangements, to have much leisure for anything else. It was terrible how fast
time flew then. She seized the moments, grasped them, held onto them with an
almost physical intensity – but they slipped by like water, flowed past, sank away,
and were gone; and she was left staring after two trains which had swallowed up
those two small funny faces. (16)

She keeps this distress concealed from most of the group though, (perhaps in her attempt
to maintain her status as an ambassador figure), removing herself to a secluded spot to
read letters from her distant children (61). This distance makes for the central quandary of her life in China. It is this feeling of loss which seems to motivate a number of daydreaming returns to England which she experiences during the novel:

Her firm body, soaked with the heat of many Chinese summers, felt no discomfort from the strong sun – tilting the broad brim of her felt hat unbecomingly over her eyes, she lit a cigarette, pulled out her packet of letters, and was immediately ten thousand miles away. A single kite wheeled, mewing at intervals, in the hot blue overhead – she did not hear it. Crickets shrilled ecstatically among the still-withered plants between the rocks […] she never heeded them. By Tim’s untidy and disjointed script, by Sarah’s ragged and yet somehow cultivated scrawl, she was transported into the green and chilly heart of England – to damp playing fields under grey skies, to bare and drafty classrooms and playrooms, full of a din of young voices, and, with the advent of the Easter holidays, to Garsover. They would be there now (61).xxii

The narrator makes clear that this transportation to her children’s side is indicative of the general malaise of her divided consciousness: “Will you tell me, philosophers, where in those moments was Laura Leroy? In her long, relaxed body, resting on the sun-baked rocks above Hun-ho? Or in the rooms and gardens of that manor house in Oxfordshire, where her spirit followed after and watched her children?” (62). Laura, it becomes clear, is not an ambassador to her home nation. She is more aptly described as an alien, divided from both spaces and cultures, and as such she cannot to align herself with either. Laura is not best described as a national ambassador abroad. O’Malley makes it clear that, quite to the contrary, such a designation is no more than a dream of the
English subject abroad, overwhelmed by the status of ‘alien:’ dislocated, rootless, adrift from her original nationality.

**John Flory as Alien**

John Flory’s dissatisfaction with his life in Burma is both more overt and more pointed than Laura’s. There is from the start a general malaise in his thinking about Burma. On several occasions this unhappiness reaches an almost hysterical degree of severity:

> In India it is in some way evil to spend a day without being once in a muck-sweat. It gives more a deeper sense of sin than a thousand lecheries. In the dark evening, after a quite idle day, one’s ennui reaches a pitch that is frantic, suicidal. Work, prayer, books, drinking, talking – they are all powerless against it; it can only be sweated out through the pores of the skin. (56)\(^{xxiii}\)

Orwell gives the sense here of connection between several key elements of his thinking on Burma in general. There is first the opportunity for the European abroad to be corrupted by the freedom from formal English constraints at home. There is a sense of “idle” luxury in this colonial position too, in which days are effortlessly easy and thus vacuous. This is all then tied to the oppressively harsh climate of Burma itself for the Englishman abroad.

Some of Flory’s discomfort is explicable in uncomplicated terms. At times it appears to be simple homesickness: “It was the beginning of the short winter, when Upper Burma seemed haunted by the ghosts of England” (66). Flory’s life in Burma also seems to him generally isolated from the rest of the world. The world war, for example,
“rolled on, like a storm beyond the horizon. The hot, blowsy country, remote from danger, had a lonely forgotten feeling” (67). At brief, more hopeful moments, Flory suggests that Burma could be more tolerable, that you could even “love this country, if only you were not alone!” (152). It quickly becomes clear though, that homesickness, isolation and loneliness cannot alone account for Flory’s profound sense of contempt for the world around him, and for himself.

The narrator of Burmese Days comments on Flory’s life in Burma as “lonely, eventless, [and] corrupting” (65). This last term speaks to Flory’s melancholy about his own sense of sin in Burma. Far from the perfect exemplar of impeccable English moral standards living abroad, Flory has become a corrupt individual in what the narrator suggests is a corrupt land (6). The world war is distant not because of his isolation in rural Burma, but because of his own cowardice, lethargy and lechery, compared to his English compatriots: “In reality, Flory had dodged the War because the East had already corrupted him, and he did not want to exchange his whisky, his servants and his Burmese girls for the boredom of the parade ground and the strain of cruel marches” (67). This kind of evasion would have particularly exasperated Orwell, since Rodden and Rossi tell us that Orwell personally “enjoyed” the war’s “hardships and crises:” “He believed that a major conflict could create a revolutionary situation in England. His own bedrock patriotism had surfaced on the eve of the war and he was convinced that this concept could unite the otherwise class-ridden English nation” (7). Flory’s attitude would thus be all the more contemptible to Orwell. Orwell also uses the rather heavy-handed device of Flory’s facial disfigurement to underline this sense of a corrupted version of the English ambassador figure.
The root of Orwell’s sense of personal corruption in general was, perhaps unsurprisingly, more politically inflected than O’Malley’s. Rodden and Rossi argue that “Burma saw Orwell’s naïve rebellion against authority take on a bitterly anti-imperial atmosphere. His egalitarianism now gave way to a hatred of the British Empire and all it represented” (2). Beyond Flory’s own ethical corruption, his misery is driven by his feeling of complicity with a corrupt and despotic English colonial regime:

Year after year you sit in Kipling-haunted little Clubs, whisky to right of you, *Pink’un* to left of you, listening and eagerly agreeing while Colonel Bodger develops his theory that these bloody nationalists should be boiled in oil. You hear your Oriental friends called “greasy little babus,” and you admit, dutifully that they are greasy little babus. You see louts fresh from school kicking grey-haired servants. The time comes when you burn with hatred of your own countrymen, when you long for a native rising to drown their Empire in blood. And in this there is nothing honourable, hardly even any sincerity. For, *au fond*, what do you care if the Indian Empire is a despotism, if Indians are bullied and exploited? You only care because the right of free speech is denied. You are a creature of the despotism, a pukka sahib, tied tighter than a monk or a savage by an unbreakable system of tabus. (69)

This systemic colonial corruption is epitomized by almost every other character in the novel. The other members of the club are depicted as variously racist, drunken, lecherous, and disappointed at the indications they feel they see that English colonial supremacy is waning. Ellis is perhaps the most extreme example, a sadistic and violent racist, who desires nothing more than the continued brutal oppression of the local population by the
English colonial forces. Even the slightest indication of educational advancement by Burmese servants must be vehemently quashed by Eliis:

“How much ice have we got left?”

“’bout twenty pounds, master. Will only last today, I think. I find it very difficult to keep ice cool now.”

“Don’t talk like that damn you – ‘I find it very difficult!’ Have you swallowed a dictionary? ‘Please master, can’t keeping ice cool’ – that how you ought to talk. We shall have to sack this fellow if he gets to talk English too well. I can’t stick servants who talk English. D’you hear, butler?’ (26)xxv

Complaints about English decline by other club members are equally indicative of support for colonial oppression. Another English club member outlines the general consensus, and bemoans England’s failure to maintain its oppressive power over its colonies:

“Ah, you’re about right there,” said Westfield in his gloomy way. “This country will never be fit to live in again. British Raj is finished if you ask me. Lost Dominion and all that. Time we cleared out of it.”

Whereat there was a murmur of agreement from everyone in the room.

[…] No Anglo-Indian will ever deny that India is going to the dogs, or ever has denied it – for India, like *Punch*, never was what it was. (29)xxvi

Flory finds these attitudes on the part of the club members towards the local population repulsive, and tries to maintain only ironic parallels with their thinking about the decline of empire,xxvii but he cannot seem to gain enough distance from them:
Flory pushed back his chair and stood up. It must not, it could not – no, it simply could not go on any longer! He must get out of this room quickly, before something happened inside his head and he began to smash the furniture and throw bottles at the pictures. Dull boozing witless porkers! Was it possible that they could go on week after week, year after year, repeating word for word the same evil-minded drivel, like a parody of a fifth-rate story in *Blackwood’s*? Oh, what a place, what people! What a civilization is this of ours – this godless civilization based on whisky, *Blackwood’s* and the ‘Bonzo’ pictures! God have mercy on us, for all of us are part of it. (33)

Flory feels himself then, despite his repulsion, party to the attitudes of this group. It is interesting to note here the move from narratorial remarks about Flory’s thinking, to a comment in the last sentence which sounds rather like the author’s own feelings about his (and all our) complicity with ‘nationalism,’ as I have shown he defines the term. It is, *Burmese Days* tells us repeatedly and in no uncertain terms, the pukka sahibs’ code that dictates the Englishman abroad’s guilt and unhappiness, for Burma is:

… a stifling, stultifying world in which to live. It is a world in which every word and every thought is censored. … even friendship can hardly exist when every white man is a cog in the wheels of despotism. Free speech is unthinkable. All other kinds of speech are permitted. You are free to be a drunkard, an idler, a coward, a backbiter, a fornicator, but you are not free to think for yourself. Your opinion on every subject of any conceivable importance is dictated for you by the pukka sahibs’ code. (69)
The tyrannical effect of the code on Flory implicates all English individuals in the oppression that it predominantly exports. Flory is inevitably ruined by his ties to the empire as, Rodden and Rossi point out, “Orwell came less to identify with the Burmese and other oppressed races of the Empire than to see the whole process as debasing the ruler even more than the ruled” (2). Though as an English subject living abroad Flory tries, as we have seen, to present both the home nation’s purported civility and liberal sensitivity to the local environment and culture, he is put in an impossible position of trying to reproduce liberal intellectual values while living through a colonial structure that is inherently despotic. Thus Flory is led to self-loathing, and to acts, like the failure to support actively Veraswami’s admission to the club, for which he chastises himself:

“Cur, spineless cur.” Flory was thinking to himself; without heat, however, for he was too accustomed to the thought. “Sneaking, idling, boozing, fornicating, soul-examining, self-pitying cur. All those fools at the Club, those dull louts to whom you are so pleased to think yourself superior – they are all better than you, every man of them. At least they are men in their oafish way. Not cowards, not liars. Not half-dead and rotting. But you –” (62)

Flory is not entirely cognizant of the extent to which the proposition of representing ‘the best’ of his nation and yet being a constituent of its underlying oppressive and exploitative colonial agenda could explain his misery and self-hate. Instead, he feels shame when he thinks of England, a place he still envisions as ‘better’ than the colonial mire that surrounds him in Burma:

Flory had never been home to England. Why, he could not have explained, though he knew well enough. In the beginning accidents had prevented him … Then at
last he had set out. He was pining for England, though he dreaded facing it, as one
dreads facing a pretty girl when one is collarless and unshaven. When he had left
home he had been a boy, a promising boy and handsome in spite of his birthmark:
now, only ten years later, he was yellow, thin, drunken, almost middle-aged in
habits and appearance. Still, he was pining for England. (70)

Flory feels distanced then, from an image of the “pretty girl” of England that he
himself creates. This distance is all the more pronounced given the cultural sensitivity
that I have already outlined, in his reading of the Burmese girl’s dance. It becomes clear
that Flory’s degree of sensitivity is actually too great, and is outside the acceptable
English norm (as Burmese Days represents it). In the delicate balancing act of retaining
Englishness and at the same time engaging with foreignness, Flory oversteps his bounds
and becomes more an empathetic advocate for Burmese culture than merely a
sympathetic intermediary between the two nations. His sympathy is put into sharp relief
in comparison to Elizabeth’s dismayed reaction: “The whole expedition – the very notion
of wanting to rub shoulders with all those smelly natives – had impressed her badly. She
was perfectly certain that that was not how white men ought to behave” (107). Flory tries
to argue that “‘you know, one gets used to the brown skin in time. In fact they say – I
believe it’s true – that after a few years in these countries a brown skin seems more
natural than a white one. And after all, it is more natural. Take the world as a whole, it’s
an eccentricity to be white,’” but Elizabeth is more and more disapproving of this (119).
The trip culminates in her witnessing a child urinating in the street, and Flory again trying
to deflect her displeasure:
“But honestly, you oughtn’t to mind that sort of thing. Not in this country. These people’s whole outlook is so different from ours. One has to adjust oneself. Suppose, for instance, you were back in the Middle Ages.”

“I think I’d rather not discuss it any longer.”

Elizabeth’s role is crucial in Flory’s failure to achieve the status of ambassador for his nation. She is for him the “pretty girl” figure who might redeem him from his corrupt state and allow his return into the fold of England (both literally and metaphorically):

He saw his home as she would remake it. He saw his drawing-room, sluttish and bachelor-like no longer, with new furniture from Rangoon, and a bowl of pink balsams like rosebuds on the table, and books and water colours and a black piano. Above all the piano! His mind lingered upon the piano – symbol, perhaps because he was unmusical, of civilized and settled life. He was delivered forever from the sub-life of the past decade – the debaucheries, the lies, the pain of exile and solitude. (272)

The “exile” state which Flory feels is his displacement from the behavioral code of people like Elizabeth. Her perspective is of course bigoted and racist, but it is in line with the other members of the club, who display either unequivocal contempt for the local population like Ellis or a patronizing outlook, which seems rather like a parodic version of Laura Leroy’s sensitivity to them, like Mr. Macgregor:

“I don’t like niggers, to put it in one word.” [said Ellis]

Mr. Macgregor stiffened at the word ‘nigger,’ which is discountenanced in India. He had no prejudice against Orientals; indeed, he was deeply fond of them.
Provided they were given no freedom he thought them the most charming people alive. It always pained him to see them wantonly insulted.

“Is it quite playing the game,” he said stiffly, “to call these people niggers – a term they very naturally resent – when they are obviously nothing of the kind? The Burmese are Mongolians, the Indians are Aryans or Dravidians, and all of them are quite distinct –”

“Oh, rot that!” said Ellis, who was not at all awed by Mr. Macgregor’s official status. “Call them niggers or Aryans or what you like. What I’m saying is that we don’t want to see any black hides in this Club.” (30)

In terms of cultural sensitivity too, Flory fails to maintain the national distinctness that figures like Elizabeth (and the other club members) seek of him. Ellis even suggests that Flory’s birthmark indicates a racial connection to the local population, which further distances him from Ellis’s perspective on Englishness: “He’s a bit too Bolshie for my taste. I can’t bear a fellow who pals up with the natives. I shouldn’t wonder if he’s got a lick of the tarbrush himself. It might explain that mark on his face. Piebald. And he looks like a yellow-belly, with that black hair, and skin the colour of a lemon” (34).

Unlike *Peking Picnic*, *Burmese Days* presents a set of English values that are themselves immoral and corrupt, and Flory is judged out of line with these ethics. Ironically, he is actually too decent – too culturally sensitive, considerate and empathetic – to be permitted admission into the reality of England that *Burmese Days* presents.

Flory’s ambivalence about both England and Burma is profound then, and leads him to much of this agonized reflection on his position as an Englishman living abroad. Like Laura Leroy, John Flory is positioned by this role as what should be an ambassador
for his nation, but is then challenged by the reality of living at the boundary between two spaces, the border between two ways of life, and the disjunction between the iconic image and political reality of England. Flory seems dislocated from both England and Burma in the end. There is his personal sense of sin, which runs counter to the English standards he maps onto his home nation. There is his implication with a despotic colonial regime, propagated by England, but still for Flory distinct from the image of the pure, “pretty girl” which England represents for him. There is finally his inappropriate empathy (as opposed to a comparatively disinterested sympathy) with Burmese culture, in a novel whose other English characters have nothing but contempt for it. So questionable is his position in relation to his purported home nation in fact, that he, like Laura, is better labeled an ‘alien,’ dislocated from inclusion in the nation’s agenda abroad, than an ambassador, already to be considered a constituent of it.

**Safe Spaces**

The narratives of *Peking Picnic* and *Burmese Days* share a trajectory of central characters who fail to achieve or maintain the status of ambassador, which the English nation seeks from them through devices like the pukka sahib code. There is a parallel narrative in both books also, in which the nation more or less directly erects safe spaces that represent extensions of the English nation's prestige abroad. In the course of each narrative, these spaces – the picnic in the Chinese countryside and the colonial club in Burma, respectively – are tested by threats of violence from local populations. The reaction of Laura and Flory to these threats appears to indicate a heroism that might seem fitting for ambassadors of England, defending outposts of home territory. However, along
with the failure of Laura and Flory to achieve the position of ambassador, these challenges to the picnic’s and club’s safety shatter the illusion, implied by the bold establishment of safe spaces in what proves hostile lands, that these English territories are effortlessly insulated from external threats. The need for Laura’s and Flory’s heroism, supported on both occasions by military force, only underlines the fragility of places that English subjects have boldly, perhaps arrogantly, projected as safe.

The picnic on which Laura takes her guests appears to be an extension of the English legation where she and her husband reside in Peking. The legation is a secure annex of English territory on foreign soil, protected by features like bullet-proof glass (Picnic 37), and self-contained to the point that Owen O’Malley describes the real British legation as the place on which it was based as “a city within a city [of other legations] within a city” (Phantom Caravan 95). The security of this space is complete, Owen O’Malley suggests, its importance preserved even by the intimidated locals:

There was no anti-foreign feeling to be met with anywhere; even when a patriotic crowd was howling outside the Legation Quarter gates for the blood or expulsion of all foreign devils, a pathway was made through the press, not by the police, but by the rioters themselves, for a British nurse and perambulator returning from a morning walk on the walls. (103)

Laura’s European party ventures into the Chinese countryside, and then takes over a section of the Cheih T’ai Ssu shrine in which they establish themselves (Picnic 78). There they attempt to live a life of sumptuous luxury parallel to that which the legation typically offers Laura and her husband. Vinstead notes:
… with some surprise that he found himself sitting down to a table correctly spread with linen, being offered sherry by one white-robed manservant, and a clear soup with a pigeon’s egg in it by another. How such things were produced in the heart of the hills, twenty miles from anywhere, was a mystery with which his mind, dulled by fatigue and hours spent in the open air, refused to grapple for the moment. It was sufficiently astonishing to be dining in such a place. (87)

There are some early indications of the coming threat to this purported tranquility. On the road to Cheih T’ai Ssu, the party sees a sign that reads “GOD DAMN BRITISHERS, GET OUT OF THIS ROAD,” a threat which knowing members of the group quickly dismiss as a remnant from a previous uprising (56). They see various armed groups on their journey too (77), but again do not seem cognizant of any threat to them personally.xxx

All this changes when they witness the murder of one of the temple’s monks (155). Laura acts first to tell the others how best to react to the bandits, and then, courageously, to stop the gang from executing one of the group, by threatening them with the repercussions of English displeasure if they do so: “‘If that man,’ she told the bandits, ‘holds his firestick there till I count ten, I jump on it. Then I die […] English Emperor very angry; afterwards you all extreme regret this plan. Now–’ she paused dramatically, ‘one, two, three, four–’” (171). Laura seems personally heroic in this moment then, and fear of the threat of English retaliations appears enough to halt the bandits’ plans. Disaster is averted, as troops from the legation arrive to rescue the group just as they are to be moved from the temple, presumably into prolonged captivity. English security is ultimately maintained. The elision of the danger they have all been so close to seems
complete when Vinstead sits down, just as before, to a lavish banquet, which seems intended to re-establish English control over the space:

> To Vinstead, perhaps the most fantastic part of that fantastic day was the meal which followed. His perceptions, sharpened by fatigue, want of food, and nervous exhaustion, made him peculiarly awake to the strangeness of eating a regular four-course dinner, at midnight, on a moonlit terrace of a Chinese temple; or drinking wine in a buzz of European conversation. (189)

Thus O’Malley seems to suggest the incident is merely a minor disturbance, before English authority and security is resumed. This is in line with the elision of disturbing events in other of her otherwise tranquil narratives.³³³

The implications of the incident cannot be dismissed so easily though. Only twenty pages before we are told of their four-course dinner, the narrator writes that: “Never in their lives, probably had they experienced such violent emotions of murderous hatred and helpless impotence,” as they struggle with what to do to escape (169). The move from a potentially life threatening attack on the group to the evening’s festivities is extremely jarring. Though O’Malley quickly elides the seriousness of the situation, the attack on the group reveals that in trying to organize the picnic Laura has gone too far in her attempts to establish an extension of the legation, and thus in turn, an extension of the English nation. As Lammers puts it: “All of these novels end with the forces of justice, peace, and reason in control, though the margin of victory is often very narrow and the grounds for optimism about the future slight and uneven” (390). The safety of the group, and the ability of English subjects abroad to boldly reproduce protected spaces in further and further positions of remove from the national center, seems tenuous at best.
Much of the narrative of Burmese Days concerns the English club in the small
town in Burma in which Flory lives. The narrator suggests that the club is a bastion of
Englishness abroad:

When one looked at the Club – a dumpy one-storey wooden building – one
looked at the real centre of the town. In any town in India the European club is the
spiritual citadel, the real seat of the British power, the Nirvana for which native
officials and millionaires pine in vain. It was doubly so in this case, for it was the
proud boast of Kyauktada Club that, almost alone of Clubs in Burma, it had never
admitted an Oriental to membership. (17)

One of the central threads of the narrative surrounds the efforts of most of the members
of the club to maintain its separation from incursion by any Burmese individuals
(centrally Flory’s friend Doctor Veraswami). Ellis again says:

“If it pleases you to go to Veraswami’s house and drink whisky with all his nigger
pals, that’s your look out. Do what you like outside the club. But, by God, it’s a
different matter when you talk of bringing niggers in here. I suppose you’d like
little Veraswami for a club member, eh? Chipping into our conversation and
pawing everyone with his sweaty hands and breathing his filthy garlic breath in
our faces. By God, he’d go out with my boot behind him if I ever saw his black
snout inside that door.” (24)

This exclusionary effort is underlined by the desperation of Veraswami to gain this
admission, an achievement that would extend the purported safety of the club to protect
him from attacks on his character:
“If our prestige iss good, we rise; if bad, we fall. A nod and wink will accomplish more than a thousand official reports. And you do not know what prestige it gives to an Indian to be a member of the European Club. In the Club, practically he iss a European. No calamity can touch him. A Club member is sacrosanct.” (47)xxxii

So powerful is the safety offered by admission to the club that Veraswami makes clear that merely the label of club member would be enough to protect him from conspiracies against him: “It iss – I hope this iss clearly understood – that I have no intention of using the Club in any way. Membership iss all I desire. Even if I were ever elected, I should not, of course, ever presume to come to the Club” (151), since “once there, and no one would listen to these tales about me any more than if it were about you, or Mr. Macgregor, or any other European gentleman” (150).xxxiii Veraswami’s opponent in his quest for club membership, U Po Kyin, suggests deep parallels between this desire for inclusion in the club and friendship with a European ambassador figure in general: “You cannot hurt an Indian when he has a European friend. It gives him – what is the word they are so fond of? – prestige” [my italics] (12).

As a physical extension of England abroad, the safe space is thought by many of the characters in Burmese Days to stand as a protective cloak, literally, but also symbolically. Ellis’s brutal beating of a local Burmese child prompts a riot in the town though,xxxiv and an attack on the club that shakes the notion, that characters like Veraswami have repeatedly asserted, that it is a place of unconditional security.

In some ways the attack may appear to actually re-enforce the club’s image of protection. England, as represented by the club and its members, is actually solidified in
opposition to this external threat. Events seem to bind together the English club members with a kind of camaraderie:

The Burmans seemed to have no plan beyond flinging stones, yelling and hammering at the walls, but the mere volume of noise was unnerving. The Europeans were half dazed by it at first. None of them thought to blame Ellis, the sole cause of this affair; their common peril seemed indeed, to draw them closer together for the while. (248)

The attack also prompts some heroism on Flory’s part rather like Laura’s in *Peking Picnic*, “detached” from the scene and “not much afraid,” since he still “found it difficult to believe that Orientals could be really dangerous” (249). In swimming downstream to raise the guard, and then directing their resumption of control over the town, Flory’s bravery and support for the safety of the English territory abroad seems manifest. The club is not ultimately overrun then, and nor are its borders breached, except by one stone, which hits Elizabeth’s elbow, and stirs Flory to action.

As I have already indicated though, the notion of the safe space that the club is meant to represent is founded not merely on physical protection – on the ability of the club and its members to put down threats when they arise. Crucially, the safe space should provide an unshakable *image* of complete security, like the image that the ambassador is supposed to embody, which natives dare not challenge. As Veraswami puts it, the club is intended to present as “a fortress impregnable” (150), symbolically rather than merely literally. Orwell writes in “Marrakech” of this well-kept illusion that the colonial figure cannot be challenged, but also of the frailty of this slight of hand: “there is one thought which every white man (and in this connection it doesn’t matter
twopence if he calls himself a socialist) thinks when he sees a black army marching past.

“How much longer can we go on kidding these people? How long before they turn their
guns in the other direction?” (187). During the riot various club members’ initial
incredulity that any attack could take place underlines the extent to which this notion of
unwavering security is revealed to be vulnerable:

“What is the meaning of this?” Mr. Macgregor repeated.

The man spoke with a cheerful grin, and not very insolently.

“We had no quarrel with you, min gyi. We have come for the timber
merchant, Ellis …”

Mr. Macgregor had turned temporarily quite purple. His rage was so great
that it almost choked him.

“Whom do you think you are speaking to? In twenty years I have never
heard such insolence!” … Mr. Macgregor made a furious motion with his fist, as
though hammering in a nail. “Go away, son of a dog!” he cried, using his first
oath in many years. (246)

Earlier in the novel Mrs. Lackersteen (Elizabeth’s aunt) sums up the distinction between
despotic force and supposedly unshakable “authority:” “‘the laziness of these servants is
getting too shocking …’ she sighed. ‘We seem to have no authority over the natives
nowadays, with all these dreadful Reforms, and the insolence they learn from the
newspapers. In some ways they are getting almost as bad as the lower classes at home’”
(29). The attack on the club is an extreme example of this failure, not perhaps of the force
that the English can still invoke, but of the authority they presume to hold over the local
population in the image of the safe space.
Like Flory’s ultimately failed status as an ambassador for England abroad, the security of the club, established by the English nation-state to support the efforts of would-be ambassadors like him, is shaken by threats of violence which demonstrate that it is not truly insulated from the outside world. Like the attack on the party by bandits in *Peking Picnic*, though it does not fall, the very shaking of the club is indicative of a profound breakdown in the authority on which it is founded.

**Conclusion**

Just as these authors’ lives differed, so their novels have divergent conclusions. *Peking Picnic* ends with the complete elision of its troubling elements, superseded by a romantic narrative between Laura and Vinstead (though Laura’s dreams of England remain). *Burmese Days* concludes with Flory’s suicide, the birthmark which has finally jeopardized his prospects of a new life with Elizabeth fading only as he dies (282). En route though, the trajectories of the two novels intersect, so that their implications bear some striking similarities. Before it is supplanted by romance, O’Malley’s novel, like Orwell’s, suggests that nationalism is difficult to maintain when transplanted from the national base, and that efforts to reproduce or replicate it abroad are profoundly problematic. The difficulties of both central characters can be exemplified by one of Vinstead’s comments in *Peking Picnic*: “‘You see,’ he went on, ‘the only unifying point in your two lives is you yourself. That is inevitable. And the more you can – do you know what I mean by integrate? – well, the more you can unify yourself, the nearer you bring your two lives together, and the easier it becomes to live them both harmoniously. There is no other way’” (115). Contrary to this optimism, Orwell seems to sum up the challenge
for both characters inherent in this notion of integration in his conclusion to “Notes on Nationalism:”

As for the nationalistic loves and hatreds that I have spoken of, they are part of the make-up of most of us, whether we like it or not. Whether it is possible to get rid of them I do not know, but I do believe that it is possible to struggle against them, and that this is essentially a *moral* effort. It is a question first of all of discovering what one really is, what one’s own feelings really are, and then of making allowances for the inevitable bias. (381)

The English subject living outside the country is, impossibly, both English and foreign, both prejudiced against and sympathetic towards the culture of the home nation and to that of the new one, readable entirely in terms of his or her nationality at some points and completely beyond it at others. Owen O’Malley’s memoir offers a reading of the experience of living as an Englishman abroad that in the light of these conclusions would appear so unequivocally optimistic as to be absurd:

The result of it was that when younger men later came down to Bridgend and asked me should they accept the offer of a Chinese appointment, I always answered: “Of course you must accept, you will then have two worlds instead of one. I cannot quite explain this. It is like the religious experience: you cannot understand it unless you have it. It is true that all my three children nearly died, but you must not worry unduly about this; this risk, for the English, is the risk of Empire. So go; and go with a good courage and a receptive mind and heart, and you will see when you come back that I was right.” (102)

Laura and Flory, Orwell and even Owen’s wife Mary, would undoubtedly disagree.
CHAPTER 3

Dreaming Up the Northern Nation: Bentley, Sillitoe, Waterhouse, and Wise

Northern England is a place divided from the rest of the nation, at least in the minds of its citizens. Hugh Trevor-Roper has pointed out along these lines, in Hobsbawm’s seminal *The Invention of Tradition*, the greater similarity of northern English culture to a lowland Scottish one than to that of southern England, despite the implied distinction of a national boundary. Trevor-Roper’s point is that mapping national boundaries can be a contrivance of enforced cultural divisions, but we must keep in mind that for many in the north of England it is considered just as much an instrument of enforced cohesion. This kind of broad truism about a detached north is commonplace in England, and in this chapter I will interrogate it with the help of a selection of regional writing from the middle of the last century.

I will argue that the four novels I refer to here, written by authors from the north of England between the late 1920s and the late 1960s, form a trajectory which indicates that to be born in the north of England places one in a cultural aporia. On one hand all these four books engage with the resentments and longings of northern subjects in the twentieth century, towards the rest of the nation – a feeling of dislocation from what they perceive as a southern English cultural hegemony. However, these writers also ultimately concede that any idea of founding a northern regional nation can itself only be made to cohere in the most reductive of readings, or in the most abstract of fantasies. Their characters’ attempts to establish an independent space for themselves or for the northern
subject more generally end in defeat. This problem escalates chronologically across the four texts I will deal with in this chapter.

It is undoubtedly true that there are common cultural practices in parts of the north of England that might be driven together to aid in the contrivance of a northern sub-state, which could then in turn be considered distinct from other practices located as quintessentially southern. However, this construction ultimately opens a perennially slippery process of forced delimitations that cannot be bounded into a coherently bordered space unless it is viewed from a distance so remote as to be without value. Distinctions between Yorkshire and Lancashire, York and Manchester, even southern and northern Manchester itself (and so on) appear to problematize this delineation at every turn. David Neave’s reading of the many boundary changes in the East Riding region of northeast England give a good example of the fluctuating nature of such an attempted definition. Neave’s sociological study narrates the frequent historical re-inscription of the region on the north east coast of England, as its boundaries are repeatedly contested by successive political bodies.xxxvii

All four of the novels I will consider here were written by authors deeply involved in solidifying northern cultural specificity. The author of the first, Phyllis Bentley, was born in the West Riding region of Yorkshire in 1894, to a middle class family. After a stint as a teacher in London, Bentley moved back to Yorkshire and became a librarian, publishing novels and articles on the side. Some of her works were intended to promote Yorkshire industry to the nation more widely. She received an honorary doctorate from the University of Leeds in 1949, and the OBE in 1970. She died in 1977.xxxviii
Alan Sillitoe was born into extreme poverty in 1928, in the industrial city of Nottingham. He left school at 14 and went to work in a bicycle factory. He joined up towards the end of the Second World War, and then began writing short stories and novels once he was discharged. His most well known works are the collection that contained *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* and the 1957 novel *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, which was later successfully released as a film.\(^{xxxix}\)

Keith Waterhouse was born into a working class family in Leeds in 1929. Along with wartime service, he held a number of menial jobs including – tellingly for his character Billy – as an undertaker’s assistant. He finally settled into journalism, first for the *Yorkshire Evening Post*, and later for the left-wing tabloid national, the *Daily Mirror*, and still holds the post of governor of the Leeds Theatre Trust. *Billy Liar* remains his best-known novel.\(^{xl}\)

Information on the life of the last of the four authors, Arthur Wise, is scarce. A short biography by L.J Hurst\(^{xli}\) states that Wise was born in York in 1923, fought in the Second World War as a pilot, became an actor for some time, and then took an academic post in speech education back in Yorkshire, at the University of Leeds. He first published *The Day the Queen Flew to Scotland for the Grouse Shooting*, the novel I will be concerned with here, in Ireland in 1968, Hurst suggests because “no British publisher was willing to face the then controversial subject of a dis-united Kingdom.” He retired from academia around 1970, and went on to publish one further book – a political thriller entitled *Who Killed Enoch Powell* in 1972. He died in 1982.

These authors’ backgrounds in the north of England led them to engage with northern cultural experience in comparable ways. All narrate the frustration of the
northern subjects with their lot, and with the relative power of the south of the country over them. All conclude ultimately that hopes to break from this reality are futile. In the first, Phyllis Bentley's *Environment*, Marjorie is in perpetual motion around the country in her attempt to embody a protean subjectivity that cannot be reductively read by the wider society around her. She is eventually absorbed back into the predetermined aspects of ‘her place’ though – both as a woman and a northerner – in a southern-led nation, in the 1920s.

Sillitoe’s novella *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (hereafter referred to as *Loneliness*) is about the petty criminal as an outsider. Sillitoe’s anti-hero in *Loneliness*, the Runner, a young northerner sent to Borstal for theft, cannot win the cross-country race in which his jailors have entered him, since to do so would make him no more than the agent of central authorities who represent the social "in-laws" he has been so desperate to rail against. His only option is to throw the race in the final straight, as a rather hollow act of defiance, since he knows to do so will lead to severe punishment. Beyond a largely ineffectual gesture then, the runner remains completely under the mastery of the warden, despite protestations to the contrary.

Waterhouse's central character, Billy Liar, from the novel of the same name, is like Sillitoe's runner associable with a peculiarly northern variant of the Angry Young Men movement. He shares with characters like Lucky Jim and Jimmy Porter from *Look Back in Anger* a deep dissatisfaction with his lot and a wide-ranging frustration with the established social order. Unlike the major figures from the AYM movement however, neither Sillitoe nor Waterhouse came from an Oxbridge background, and the northern experience of their central characters was born of their own upbringing, rather than from
invention. Like most of the AYM texts, society offers Billy little or no chance to move outside a predetermined path of menial work and stifling home life. He wants to establish himself as a comedy script-writer, but in the end cannot bring himself to venture outside his enclosure and go to London try to fulfill this dream.

The last of the four, Arthur Wise's novel *The Day the Queen Flew to Scotland for the Grouse Shooting* (hereafter referred to as *Queen*) makes clear that England cannot find its own communally acceptable center, but nor can it create a new one in the north with a unitary consciousness, even if it tries to engineer this solidity from longstanding historical roots. As the Council of the North asserts the region's independence, support comes from some places which might not immediately be considered constitutes of a northern Nation. As they journey north, southern troops similarly find themselves under attack in places they expected to be solidly within their territory. The nation cannot be firmly formed here because it cannot be delineated.

If such attempts at founding a palpable northern state are futile, what can be salvaged from the exploits of all these characters for the troubled northern subject? It appears that the northern subject has only fantasy worlds left open to him or her, within which to forge a space of his or her own. Chronologically tracing the four novels I will consider in this chapter, there appears to be a developing inclination in these central characters to resort to immersion in fantasies, when connection to the national community around him or her proves unpalatable. *Environment* is the most subtle example of this maneuver. Bentley's heroine Marjorie turns to daydreams of other specious lives which might be hers whenever presented with the dissatisfying reality of her own oppressed state both as a woman in the period and as a northerner in an England
whose socio-cultural center gravitates heavily towards the south. Sillitoe's hero keeps up a stream of fantasies of his own future exploits as he runs across country, mobile both in literal and intellectual terms. Billy Liar exists in a fantastic parallel universe in which he can find communal will which matches his own, but only because he is both its inventor and its ruler, seemingly the only criteria for truly matching individual and collective consciousness. Queen is the most extreme example of this delusional mode, since it is in its entirety a fantastic contrivance of bloody revolution in England, presented – in its subtitle – as "a document," and concluding with a suggestion by the narrator that the manuscript recounts true events and was written in a prison cell after the end of the north and south's civil war.

This narrative of regional writing in England in the middle of the last century seems a gloomy one then. Regional writers seem to feel first that the concerns of their fellow northerners are not met by the current socio-cultural climate in the country as a whole, but also that there is little hope of any radical re-inscription of these circumstances, so that all they have left is fantasy worlds in which to assert more freedom and control over their lives.

**Regional Angst**

Though little read today, Phyllis Bentley made a number of important contributions to regional writing in England in the middle of the twentieth century, perhaps most notably in her article published in 1941, “The English Regional Novel.” It is clear from this that Bentley is keen to assert a lineage of uniquely northern writing across the last several hundred years, though she does so somewhat tentatively,
suggesting that she wishes to make a claim about northern writing to an audience who are unfamiliar or even opposed to the implications of such a notion:

The regional novel is the national novel carried to one degree further of subdivision; it is a novel which, concentrating on a particular part, a particular region, of a nation, depicts the life of that region in such a way that the reader is conscious of the characteristics which are unique to that region and differentiate it from others in the common motherland. If any nation, then, were completely homogeneous, not at all diverse, regional novels could not arise within her literature. But where within the limits of a national culture there is considerable diversity, a considerable variety corresponding to geographical divisions, of patters of life, in such a nation there exists considerable material for regional novels … English literature is extremely rich in regional novels. (7)

Throughout the article Bentley makes similar cautious contentions about the distinctiveness of the regions in England: “We who live here know that, within the limits of a very firm and deep-rooted national culture, she [England] displays a quite considerable variety of character, speech, custom and scene” (8). She goes on to try to explain the reasons for this distinctiveness on three grounds: race, geography and distance. The historical roots of the “at least six races [who] domiciled themselves in different parts of England during her early formative period” (9) provides one, as far as Bentley is concerned absolute, division between north and south. Bentley argues that the north is populated by the descendants of “Britons,” “small and dark and Celtic,” while the south has developed from Roman and then Saxon roots. Geographically as well, “the British isles have an geological diversity amazing for their size” (11). The great “basic
human communication time” between regions in the past provides the third explanation for English regional diversity (9). Bentley freely concedes that her model of English ethnography and geography is “cheerfully over-simplified and rather flippant,” but she continues to argue that “it is absolutely necessary that these facts should be present in the mind during any consideration of the English regional novel” (10) [my italics].

While Bentley’s article is keen overall to remain politic in its statements about the north, her novel Environment, written more than ten years earlier, demonstrates a rather more antagonistic position on the place of the regions in a wider English society. The novel’s northern heroine, Marjorie, grows up in the fictitious East Riding town of Hudley, and from an early age seems abstractly disgruntled with her environment: “Her vague ambitions, her vague dislike of her present mode of living, her eager youthful revolt against the inevitable sordidness of life, now bid fair to crystallise into mere desire for wealth.” (13). She is also resistant to working in her uncle and aunts’ shop without specific cause (35), “brooding” instead, “trying to discover what exactly it was that she wanted from life, and not finding an answer” (28). The real causes of her broad-ranging dissatisfaction become clear only later in the novel, as she leaves Hudley and travels to the south of the country.

Marjorie’s general state is reflected in that of a number of other characters from regional novels of the period. The unnamed narrator of Sillitoe’s 1959 novella Loneliness makes abundantly clear from the start of his narrative that he is extremely antagonistic towards many of those around him and towards the borstal life they have foisted upon him. Put simply, “[...]it's war between me and them” (16), the definition of whom will make up much of the substance of the story. Billy Liar also feels a broad angst towards
the world around him in Keith Waterhouse’s northern novel, also published in 1959. Billy’s Yorkshire town of “Stradhoughton” is described as “littered with objects for our derision” (41). One member of the incredulous southern government in Arthur Wise’s militant northern civil war fantasy *Queen* (1968) tries to articulate the general malaise in the north after a riot at a football game: “We shouldn't ignore the fact that Wembley was an open clash between the North and the South. There’s a feeling up there of being - out on a limb you might say” (26).

The nature of this shared disquiet forms the substance of this section. I will propose that all these characters have similar reasons for their dissatisfaction. They all resent what they perceive to be an imbalance in the power structure between north and south. This manifests itself in two ways: as an increasing resentment at the limitations of the northern cultural space in which they feel forced to live, and as an antipathy towards the southern hegemonic influence which they feel defines their limited prospects. *Queen* includes a number of epigraphical quotes that help to elucidate some of terms of this profound sense of distinction between north and south. Among them, Wise quotes Orwell, on his train journey to northern mining territory in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, writing that the north is an alien land that cannot be fathomed by a southerner such as himself, but only wondered at, or even feared (9). The distinction is environmental then, but it also has other aspects. In *Environment* one of Marjorie’s fellow students, Burton, articulates a common truism about educational values between north and south:

“‘She has a degree in English.’ [said Marjorie]

‘Oh, well, of course,’ replied Miss Burton, ‘but only Newcastle or Manchester or
some place like that. Give me London - Oxford and Cambridge, of course, I mean, but London's the only other.’” (167)

Initially aligning herself with this kind of thinking, Marjorie feels she has made a timely departure from Hudley near the start of *Environment*:

Early in September Marjorie packed her belongings, including the few books which belonged to her and not to the school, in a yellow tin box, and set off to London by the Midland Railway. Auntie Clara and Uncle Marcus both saw her off; her aunt cried bitterly, and her uncle looked sad. It dawned on Marjorie that they did not expect to see her again.

“I don’t care,” she said to herself, “if I never see Hudley again. Who would?” (43)

Much of this frustration comes from the stifling lack of opportunities that her life in Hudley seems to offer her. Rather than work in the shop that her uncle and aunt own, Marjorie is determined to matriculate from university, an act that she sees as defiance in the face of her predetermined path (143). Her aunt makes clear that Marjorie’s hopes of educational escape go against the more prosaic responsibilities of Hudlean life: “You’re a right down silly selfish girl, you are. Who asked you to come back here and live like a lady of the land, going to Universities and not doing a stroke of work for your bread? And expecting us to find the money. Who’s to cook your meals for you, and make your bed for you, and wash your clothes for you, I’d like to know?” (246)

The Runner in *Loneliness* articulates a more concrete sense of immersion in an oppressive community that attempts to monitor and discipline him:
And when the governor kept saying how “we” wanted you do to this, and “we” wanted you to do that, I kept looking round for the other blokes, wondering how many of them there was. Of course, I knew there were thousands of them, but as far as I knew only one was in the room. And there are thousands of them, all over the poxeaten country, in shops, offices, railway stations, cars, houses, pubs – In-law blokes like you and them, all on the watch for Out-law blokes like me and us – and waiting to ‘phone the coppers as soon as we make a false move. And it'll always be there, I'll tell you that now, because I haven't finished making all my false moves yet, and I dare say I won't until I kick the bucket. (10)

It may appear that the Runner’s antagonism is not directed towards a specifically southern English upper-class. However, a number of his interactions with the warden betray linguistic idiosyncrasies between them that imply that his background is northern, while his jailor is from the south.xlvi The Runner is in training for a cross-country race that he is well aware is in the service of aristocratic philanthropy:

They're training me up fine for the big sports day when all the pig-faced snotty-nosed dukes and ladies - who can't add two and two together and would mess themselves like loonies if they didn't have the slavies to beck-and-call - come and make speeches to us about sports being just the thing to get us leading an honest life... They give us a bit of blue ribbon and a cup for a prize after we've shagged ourselves out running or jumping, like race horses, only we don't get so well looked-after as race horses ... (8)

The function of the race is also clearly to solidify a national body that the Runner associates with his oppressed state (“So the big race it was then, for them, watching from
the grandstand under a fluttering Union Jack, a race for the governor” (41xlviii). The Runner lives in a literally and metaphorically entrapped state then, his movements curtailed by both southern authorities and northern ‘in-laws.’

Billy Liar’s life consists of constant chastisement and stock conversations with his disapproving family, xlix pressure to take over the family electrical business akin to Marjorie’s in Environment (165), and a sense of profound dislike towards the grim and staid northern world around him. In one imagined conversation with a local newspaper columnist, Billy sets out his dislike:

I had a fairly passionate set piece all worked out on the subject of rugged Yorkshire towns, with their rugged neon signs and their rugged plate-glass and plastic shop-fronts, but so far nobody had given me the opportunity to start up on the theme.

“Dark satanic mills I can put up with,” I would say, pushing my tobacco pouch along the bar counter. “They're part of the picture. But” - puff, puff – “when it comes to dark satanic power stations, dark satanic housing estates, and dark satanic teashops –”

“That's the trouble with you youngsters,” said Man o’ the Dales, propping his leather-patched elbows on the seasoned bar. “You want progress, but you want all the Yorkshire tradition as well. You can't have both.”

“I want progress,” I retorted, making with the briar. “But I want a Yorkshire tradition of progress.” (23)

To his tedious job working in a local funeral parlor, Billy angrily tells his father that “I didn't want to work for Shadrack and flaming Duxbury's. You put me there, now
you can answer for it!” (164). Billy’s employer Mr. Shadrack is a rather pompous and patronizing southern businessman, parodied by Billy in conversation about Billy’s plans to go south and work as a script-writer for comedies.1 Billy is trapped by both northern tedium in his family and southern exploitation in his employers.

Perhaps the best representation of Billy’s sense of entrapment is in the calendars which his employers have given him to post, but which he has instead kept, siphoning off the postage money to fund his dreams of escape to the south. This act prompts him to romanticized dreams of imprisonment by the authorities which bear some resemblance to the Runner’s position: “Tying my tie, I began to imagine myself in Armley Jail, impressing the governor with my intelligence, making friends with the padre...” (18). The calendars are a burden which represents his suffocating Stradhoughton life, and which he must bear through almost all of the novel, still carrying them with him as he walks to the train station near the close of the narrative, planning to leave for London (166).

The last of these four regional novels asserts what it sees as a southern community’s oppression of the north of England in the most militant terms. From very near the start of Queen there are frequent diatribes about this power imbalance:

[Blackett] saw the [theatre building] committee as a tool, a mouth-piece, through which a neglected and depressed community could at last make itself heard. As far back as 1966, he had said to a meeting of doctors in Harrogate: “Make no mistake about it, the central government rules for the south-east, not for us. Medical practice is laid down in Harley Street and the Central Middlesex, and we are expected to follow it without question. Second-rate citizenship begins north of Hitchin.” He saw himself really as one of the rare and vocal members of a
deprived and underprivileged nation. The North. At that time he saw the frontiers rather vaguely. Sometimes the southern frontier ran just south of Doncaster, as other times it fell just north of Barnet. He confessed later to a certain Messianic sense of destiny, a feeling of carrying with a handful of others the responsibility of lifting a community into the sunlight. “London,” he said, “is where the blossom and the fruit are. But the roots are here. We want at least some of the pickings from our own tree.” Blackett was rare in being able to verbalise his feelings so clearly. But the feeling itself was shared by millions of others. The North was beginning to stir. (18)

It seems clear that Wise himself shared his characters’ resentment towards southern hegemony, both by the number of this kind of invectives in Queen, and by a comment he made for the dust-jacket of the English edition of the novel: “I wrote the book because there is a great sense of frustration in the North, and a general disillusion with the central Government. I seriously believe that unless the North gets more decentralised government and wider consultation, then there will be violence.”

The book also suggests that Wise saw the resentments of the north of England towards the south as parallel to various colonial states’ resistance towards England as a whole. On a number of occasions these potential similarities are raised, for example in the demonstration by foreign students in Leeds, holding banners demanding “Liberation for the North:”

The group was made up of four Nigerians, two Ghanaians and a Zambian ...

Colonel Fitzwallace, when he heard of the incident, was quick to see its significance. ‘We’ve taken too parochial a view of things,’ he told Wordsworth
the next morning. ‘We’ve seen this as the liberation of one part of England from
the domination of another. You know, it’s nothing of the sort. It’s part of a world
liberation movement. No wonder we have African sympathizers. We’re doing no
less than they did some years ago – demanding independence from a central body
on which we have no real representation and with which we have nothing in
common.’ (48)

The southern authorities in *Queen* are initially dismissive of the unnerving notion of
colonial parallels *within* segments of English society. At a meeting of the cabinet in
Downing Street early on in the narrative, Blanchard, Minister of Home Security,
dismesses the idea: “It seems to me entirely fatuous, entirely ridiculous, to suggest that a
large section of the population of this country is deprived – in the Indian sense, or any
other. Macmillan’s pronouncement in the late 50s that we’d ‘never had is so good’ was
politically inept perhaps, but it was equally true” (26). Macmillan’s infamous claim from
1957, during England’s persistently depressed economic state following the world war, is
invoked here to indicate the degree to which both the south is out of touch with northern
concerns within *Queen*, and that the parallels between other colonial states and northern
England are, for Wise, plausible. Here the title of the novel becomes ironically
meaningful, for it is only from the most delusional perspective that the boiling up of
deeply-rooted and long-standing antagonism in the north could be dismissed by a title
which tells only of the southern monarchs inconsequential activities on that day.

The escalating violence in the north in *Queen* demonstrates the solidarity felt
across various northern English ethnic communities:
Perhaps strangely, the feeling [of the masses after the televised speech declaring independence] was not one of general xenophobia, but was quite specifically directed against London in the rather wide Northern definition of that place. In Bradford, for example, the Pakistani and Polish populations were as active as the rest of the community in smashing the windows of all London-based banks in the city. In Leeds, it was coloured students from Ghana and the West Indies who burnt an effigy of 'the typical Londoner' on the steps of the Town Hall. (85)

There is even a suggestion amongst the rhetoric that the power relation between north and south is one of slave and slave owner. When junior civil servant Paine (originally a northerner) meets Sir Brian Wordsworth from the Council of the North, Wordsworth says to him: “‘You were a Northerner,’ he said. ‘You know the truth of what I’m saying. For two hundred years we have been a depressed race. We still live in conditions that are a scandal in any country claiming to be civilized – conditions in which no Southerner would keep his dog. We've produced the wealth of this country and it's been stolen from us. But we're going no further with you. This is where slavery ends’” (36).

These four regional novels demonstrate comparable feelings of resentment among northern subjects towards the state of living in northern England during the period. They are feelings that seem to increase in severity as the century progresses. I will now begin to look in more detail at the ways in which these two locales within the one nation – north and south – are perceived and presented by these characters.
The North

All four of these regional novels present England as founded upon (at least) two quite distinct cultural and physical spaces during the period. The north country and its subjects are rendered as sharing a number of common characteristics – similarities that help Bentley, Sillitoe, Waterhouse and Wise in their attempts to solidify an image of the north which appears potentially capable of being autonomous. The north is first of all an ancient place, with longstanding historical roots – a rugged, rural wasteland. Its people are hardy, honest, direct, and predictably similar to the point of being caricatures. Perhaps most interestingly, some of these texts assert that the northern region cannot be clearly delineated in physical or cultural terms – it is more a metaphorical concept than a physical space.

Regional novels of this period seem commonly to demand a representation of the ancient rural world that precedes the north’s industrial revolution. Both Arthur and Marjorie in Environment (356) and Olsen and Valerie in Queen take a kind of pilgrimage to the northern moorlands (133). Olsen tries to define the importance of this environment to the image of the north more broadly:

‘You don’t know the North, do you? What do you know about us really? You used to come here during August for the grouse shooting. That isn't the North. The North's bare and sad. It's wild. It doesn't give a damn about people. Savage, you know, at times. The excitement of all that power lying just under the surface. Have you ever felt it? It lies like an animal read to strike.’ (133)

The north’s industrial heritage is elided here, presumably as a constituent of the south’s economic exploitation of it. Instead various characters in Queen seek primordial roots,
like those mentioned by Bentley in “The English Regional Novel,” that might help to validate their claims for northern independence: “For the first time since the conquest of Danelagh, we have a body that can not only speak for the North, but is prepared to act on its behalf” (32).iii Billy Liar offers a parodic version of this same assertion. Trying to find a place where he might discard the calendars surreptitiously, Billy wanders to the edge of Stradhoughton and ends up on the moors: “Stradhoughton Moor was a kind of pastoral slum on the edge of town” (100). The north is depicted here as quintessentially an undeveloped wilderness.

Northern subjects, as rendered in these texts, also have particular and specific shared characteristics. They are often reticent or reserved, like Marjorie as she refrains from speaking of her first class degree because of “Hudleian restraint” (153). Expressions pecuilar to the north are often highlighted too:

“… Nora Parry, my cousin, is rather poorly”

“Poorly?” queried Mr. Knaresbrough. “What does that mean, pray?”

“Poorly”? Oh it means ‘not so well,’ ‘rather ill but not very.’ Why,” said Marjorie, noting the fact for future reference, “don’t you say ‘poorly’ in the south?”

“Not in London at any rate,” he replied. “Where do you come from?”

“Hudley,” confessed Marjorie with some reluctance. (107)

Bentley’s omniscient narrator even steps in at some point, feeling the need to offer explanation to her unfamiliar (presumably southern) readership of various northern idiosyncratic practices, like that of naming all close family friends as ‘uncle’ or ‘aunty’ (257). The Runner’s first person narrative discourse in Loneliness is manifestly northern
throughout, employing constant slang and non-standard grammatical constructions that make reading by those unfamiliar with this type of speech challenging. *Billy Liar* again gives such peculiarities a comic twist, as Billy co-opts and parodies the northern discourse in conversation with various more minor characters’ clichéd speech:

“‘Ah’m just about thraiped,’ said Arthur in broad dialect. The word was one we had made up to use in the Yorkshire dialect routine, where one took the Michael out of Councillor Duxbury and people like him. Duxbury prided himself on his dialect which was practically unintelligible even to seasoned Yorkshiremen.” (30)

Billy eventually gets so wrapped up in his fantastic versions of northern language that he finds it impossible to stop himself from using them, even in serious conversation:

“‘Afternoon, Councillor!’ I called in the robust voice.

‘It's a sunny 'un this!’ Appen tha’s watching the football?’

‘Nay, ahm’ just bahn for a walk ower t’ moor.’ I always talked to Councillor Duxbury in his own dialect, half-mockingly, half-compulsively …

‘So, tha’s going to London, is ta?’ he said.

Hopefully, I said: ‘Aye, ah’m just about thraiped wi’ Stradhoughton.’ I remembered too late that ‘thraiped’ was a word Arthur and I had made up.

‘How does ta mean?’

‘It's neither muckling nor mickling,’ I said, using another invented phrase in my complete panic.” (89)

That he can so easily parody the local dialect demonstrates the degree to which northern subjects have a unique, even clichéd, turn of phrase in regional novels. Thinking of Rita, one of the two locals girls he has proposed to, Billy writes:
Everybody I knew spoke in clichés, but Rita spoke as though she got her words out of a slot machine, whole sentences ready-packed in a disposable tinfoil wrapper. There was little meaning left in anything she actually said; her few rough phrases had been so worn through constant use that she now relied not on words but on the voice itself, and the modulation of the animal sounds it produced, to express the few thick slabs of meaning of which she was capable.” (47)

The rough or even savage aspects of the north environment can be seen as much in the northern characters of some of these novels. One of the commanders of the northern dictatorship that develops in Queen, Blackett, suggests to the leader Fitzwallace at one point that a southern prisoner of war be publically hanged:

“‘Hang him publically,’ said Blackett, putting the suggestion as if it had just occurred to him.

‘What kind of animal are you Blackett?’

‘A Northerner,’ said Blackett.

‘Yes. A black and savage place this North of yours.’

‘Of ours.’” (160)

The distinction between this ‘yours’ and ‘ours’ is crucial to understanding the way in which the north is represented in Queen. Beyond the pastoral and linguistic clichés, where and who constitute the north? For Wise the north is ultimately a conceptual space more than a physical one. There are repeated indications that the boundaries that might define the region are porous and intangible. After the initial declaration of independence, letters of support and solidarity come from progressively more southern towns and
villages, and also from the Welsh, whose suggestion that they will stand with the north against “the crippling domination of the English” prompts northern leader Fitzwallace to ask “What do they mean, do you think, by ‘the English’?” (50). Military confrontations are hampered on both sides by just this doubt as to the definition of the region. Wise is keen to make clear that the field of opposition to southern authority is extremely protean:

The definition of the North remained as elusive as ever. Southern patrols moving north parallel to the main convoy routes, had expected to be received with a certain enthusiasm north of London, as the saviours of the South against the Northern barbarians. But they met no enthusiasm anywhere. Indeed, as far south as Bedford and Biggleswade, there was an atmosphere of hostility towards them. Outside Kettering, a group of young people were carrying a banner which read: LONDON GO HOME. A mile north of Preston, Between Uppingham and Oakham, a patrol was held up for twenty minutes by railway lines laid across the road. To Paine, a Northerner by birth, the developing picture that he pieced together from all the signals and reports that reached him, was profoundly disturbing. It became increasingly clear to him that what he had suspected but never expressed, was in fact true. The North was not a geographical location, clearly bounded by this river and that range of hills. The North was an attitude, a feeling, a particular philosophical conviction. As such it could exist as easily in Plymouth and Norwich as in Newcastle. (116)

The north, as constituted in these regional novels, is a place capable of being both clearly established and substantial to the point of being clichéd, but also at moments amorphous and slippery as an ideological rather than merely geographical space. These seemingly
divergent depictions are perhaps best reconciled in the notion of the north as a wilderness. All four books conclude that the north is ultimately an untamed place, either during Marjorie’s day-trips with Arthur, in the runner’s vision of the frosty countryside, in Billy’s view across the wild moors, or in Valerie’s journey with Olsen into the unknown. Such imagery aligns the north with a space, perhaps idyllic, perhaps threatening awesome, which cannot be delineated in concrete terms. This also makes connecting the north of the country to the south as a single, cohesive national body a complex and thorny undertaking.

The South

Juxtaposed with the depiction of the north is that of southern England. Bentley, Sillitoe, Waterhouse and Wise all show the south as almost entirely distinct from the image of the north they have constructed. The southern region is bohemian and extravagant, liberal and creative. It is a place of fantasy in most of these novels. The southern subject is commonly shown as disingenuous and untrustworthy though, often in direct contrast to the northerners’ depiction.

Ensnared by the restrictive worlds that their authors present in the north, several of these central characters dream of the south as a utopian and emancipatory space. Marjorie dreams of educational freedom: “She thought with longing of the great world outside Hudley, which she vaguely imagined to be a beautiful, refined, learned place ... she remembered Miss Irvine's successful educational career, and earnestly desired to stretch her scholastic wings and fly from her native town” (34). Traveling south, Marjorie initially finds everything she considers southern attractive, and is “determined to become
a Southerner without delay” (47), largely because is it distinct from the north, and objectionable to the northerners she knows.\textsuperscript{lv}

Billy Liar too, sees the world beyond his northern town as capable of allowing him freedom to break from his prescribed role in northern society. Talking with Liz, a friend who seems able to travel freely around the country on a whim, he attempts to put this feeling into words: “‘Do you know why I’m so fascinated by London?’ I said [...] ‘A man can lose himself in London,’ I said. ‘London is a big place. It has big streets and big people –’ I tailed off.” (147). Despite the inadequacy of his definition, the sense of London as an other space that might provide new opportunities is clear.

It is less the real experience of the town (which at this point in their respective novels neither character has actually ever experienced) than the idea of London as a fantasy space that attracts these characters. Billy’s fantasies are extreme and detailed on the subject:

For as long as I could remember, I had been enjoying rich slabs of No.1 thinking about London, coughing my way through the fog to the Odd Man Out Club, Chelsea, with its chess tables and friendly, intelligent girls. I was joint editor, with the smiling ‘Jock’ Osonolu, a Nigerian student, of the club’s sensational wall-sheet, modelled somewhat on the lines of the Ambrosia Times-Advocate. I would live in a studio high over the embankment, sometimes with a girl called Ann, a Londoner herself and as vivacious as they come, but more often with Liz, not Liz as se actually existed but touched up with a No. 1 ponytail to become my collaborator on a play for theatre in the round. Sometimes I could see myself starving on the Embankment, the tramp-poet ... (29)
Full of romantic and comically clichéd images of big city life, Billy cannot make his northern family empathize with his desire to escape to this other place ("The business of going to London was shelved, forgotten or, as I suspected, completely uncomprehended." (16)). In spite or perhaps because of this incredulity, Billy spends most of his time in the course of the narrative thinking of London and the south in these fantastic terms.

The reality of southern experience though, forces a re-assessment of their initial feelings about London and the south. Marjorie comes to feel that the southern subject is disingenuous and self-interested. Of Marjorie’s southern head-teacher, when she takes on her first teaching position, Marjorie thinks:

She was dignified, she was literary, she had a degree in English, she could spout Tennyson by the yard, she could express herself with elegance, she was refined and undoubtedly cultured, but – she was South Country. That is to say, to Marjorie she appeared insincere; her character had no jaggy bits which repelled at first, but which one could cling to afterwards with friendship. (156)

In *Billy Liar* references to the south by anyone but Billy himself are generally derogatory. Comments during his comedy routine that are considered to be “London talk” by the audience are treated with derision (125). His father too, sees Billy’s profanity as indicative of a permissive, southern mentality that his father finds objectionable. lvii

*Loneliness* presents the southern authorities as actually threatening to the northern anti-hero. The authorities in *Loneliness* threaten the Runner with violence on a number of occasions, violence that he associates with acts of national oppression like the contemporaneous suppression of civil rights in Hungary:
“‘Listen my lad,’ he [the police detective] said, like the dirty bullying, jumped up bastard he was, ‘I don't want too much of your lip, because if we get you down to the Guildhall you'll get a few bruises and black-eyes for your trouble.’ And I knew he wasn't kidding either, because I’d heard about all them sort of tricks. I hoped one day thought that him and all his pals would be the ones to get the black-eyes ad kicks; you never knew. It might come sooner than anybody thinks, like in Hungary.” (33)

The southern state government is also, the Runner points out, the institution which calls on people like him to show patriotic investment by joining the army, for which the runner feels they “should be put in clink for attempted suicide” (17). The Runner rejects this affiliation with a southern national body he does not recognize as his own: “Government wars are not my wars: they've got nowt to do with me, because my own war's all I'll ever be bothered about” (17). *Loneliness* represents southern government and southern personalities as oppressive and threatening to the northern Runner.

*Queen* is far more extreme in its depiction of the south as threatening and oppressive to the north. Wise reserves perhaps the most brutal of violence in the fictitious war between north and south for two occasions: the south’s carpet bombing of Nottingham suburbs, and southern Brigadier comments as the south prove victorious, on his plans to annihilate the north entirely:

“Let me tell you – Wordsworth – no one sues for peace in this war. You’re all damned rebels – traitors. We’ll treat you as such. We’ll make an example of you. Before there’s any talk of peace, we’ll have every stick and stone in the North knocked down. I’ll see to it there’s not a woman that my men don’t rape. There
won’t be a man we don’t shoot. There won’t be a Northern child three weeks from now, who isn’t glad to lick a Southern arse for a crust of bread. We’ll sack your cities and burn your fields. We’ll smash your factories and burn down your cathedrals. We’re carry your stones to Southend and build them into pleasure palaces for Londoners. And you and your stinking kind, we’ll sell you in Hyde Park, and every Londoner will have two of you to wait on him, to clean his shoes and make his meals and trot behind his car. And nobody will remember the North. We’ll erase it from human memory.” (182)

Thus we return to Wise’s incendiary use of slave narratives to describe future north-south relations. This hyperbolic diatribe is perhaps the most vicious in *Queen*, and goes unanswered by Wordsworth as he is bundled off to the Tower of London. The north will cease to exist in the vision. At another moment Wise does offer a competing southern perspective, although it is hardly less mercenary. The southern government’s decision not to use nuclear force against the north is, Wise suggests, motivated by self-interest:

> It was the City of London that tipped the balance against nuclear attack on the North, by throwing its enormous weight behind the PM. Sir Clupton Everarrd stated the City's case: 'The destruction of the means of production of the North, together with any considerable reduction in Northern purchasing power, could prove a most serious embarrassment to the City's investments in that area. (139)

What Wise perceives to be the south’s economic exploitation of the north is manifest here – violence is curtailed only to protect the City’s interests in the north.

Regional writing of the period seems to have conflicted opinions about the south of England. Its reputation ranges from a romanticized space of possibility for escape, and
a literally incredible place of disingenuous or even malicious people. All these texts present the south as manifestly distinct from the image of the north they have constructed – largely in terms of its implausible unreality.

**Dream-States**

For the most part, neither the north nor the south proves palatable to these characters then: their northern lives are comparably suffocating, and their southern engagements are mutually antagonistic. The reactions they have to this uncomfortable relation to either side of their English nationality are also parallel. All four books depict a turn to personally constructed fantasy in an attempt to negotiate this thorny relation to the nation. These fantasies become more and more intricate in the later texts – from romantic daydreams to elaborate delusions of new states outside the confine of the English nation.

Marjorie gradually develops a daydreaming life parallel to but also independent from her real one over the course of *Environment*. Her dissatisfaction in Yorkshire and then in the south convinces her that “I didn't get on at Hudley[...] and I don't get on here. I don't believe there's a place where I can get on.” She says this as one romantic engagement fails, and this upset leads to one of her first, relatively modest, flights of fancy:

She was homesick for a world she had never known, where Marjories could sparkle with wit and beauty and be adored for their learning.

“If I had been pretty the affair would have gone differently,” she thought, and began to imagine herself with just that picturesque heightening of form and colour that would make her beautiful. This charming creation of her brain had a
similar interview with the Prince, but it ended in a different and delightful fashion... It would make for a better story if the Prince were a villain, and the hero were an extremely handsome Earl. Marjorie visualised him with pleasure. The Earl and the pretty Marjorie began a fascinating conversation in the real Marjorie's head. They were certainly very alluring ... With a sigh of content Marjorie lay back among the pillows and pursued the girl's adventure until her marriage with the handsome Earl. But it was thrilling, it was fascinating this new world of hers ... A world too, where everything went as one wished”(56).

The fantasy Marjorie creates is romantic, but it is crucially also an act that changes the nature of her relations within the dream-world. In this dream-state she is able to empower herself to control events where, as she concludes, “everything went as one wished.”

It’s not long before the “alluring” qualities of daydreaming like this begin to become her instinctive recourse. The more unpleasant her external experience, the more this alternative allows her an escape of sorts: “It's no use. I won't try to be nice, or good, or clever, because it isn't any good. Nobody likes me, and nobody ever will. I shall just – dream” (56). This is true of daytime imaginings and her nighttime dreams, which she speculates might even offer her enduring escape:

“Marjorie awoke next morning with her hand pressed against her cheek and her body beautifully warm and flushed. She had just returned from fairyland.

‘It's a pity,’ thought she as she sat up and looked at the ugly little clock with its brass frill which decorated the mantlepiece, ‘that this world isn't mine. I should like to go to mine and stay there. I wonder if I could?’” (63)
The narrator asserts that “there was nothing noble or inspiring in Marjorie's dreams, they simply formed a luxurious and unhealthy refuge from the storms of her daily life” (185). However, given the degree of discomfort she feels, and the extent to which her life is in a state of constant subjugation from prosaic north expectations and derogatory southern assumptions about her as a northern, her fantasies seem to take on a politically emancipatory function.

Daydreaming reaches a further degree of severity in Loneliness, where the Runner’s narrative begins with casual dreams of freedom from the authority’s watchful eyes and of anarchic criminal endeavors, but eventually shows a process of thought that is a little beyond his control. It is the Runner’s profound isolation from the world around him that allows his dream-states to begin:

I go my rounds in a dream, turning at lane or footpath corners without knowing I’m turning, leaping brooks without knowing they’re there, and shouting good morning to the early cow-milker without seeing him. It's a treat, being a long-distance runner, out in the world yourself with not a soul to make you bad-tempered or to tell you what to do or that there’s a shop to break and enter a bit back from the next street. Sometimes I think I've never been so free as during that couple of hours when I’m trotting up the path out of the gates and turning by that bare-faced, big-bellied oak tree at the lane end. (11)

The Runner is alone and acting on instinct while his mind wanders, and for both reasons he feels himself free despite the profoundly limited terms of his run. His loneliness, of the title, is ironically not automatically to be taken as a negative state then. It is of course intended as ironic, in the sense that the Runner is far from alone while under state
incarceration – he only appears so while he crosses the fields. But from the Runner’s perspective here, loneliness is also independence of a sort. He is free to enter a daydreaming world of his own.

The connection between his mind and his running becomes more complex as the narrative progresses. Sometimes his running allows him to develop ideas. For example, when he comes to the conclusion that power corrupts (“Maybe as soon as you get the whip-hand over somebody you go dead”) he realizes that “By God, to say that last sentence has needed a few hundred miles of long-distance running” (14). On other occasions it is the reverse, as his mind conditions his ability to run: “I had a picture in my brain of me running and beating everybody in the world, leaving them all behind until only I was trot-trotting across a big wide moor alone ...” (40). By the end of the race though, this delicate balance has become an overwhelming influence of his daydreaming over him, which cannot be curtailed, despite his wish to do so:

I wasn't far from going into that last mile and a half like a knife through margarine, but the quietness I suddenly trotted into between two pickets was like opening my eyes underwater and looking at the pebbles on a stream bottom, reminding my again of going back that morning to the house in which my old man had croaked, which is funny because I hadn't thought about it at all since it happened and even then I didn't brood much on it. I wonder why? I suppose that since I started to think on these long-distance runs I'm liable to have anything crop up and pester at my tripes and innards, and now that I see my bloody dad behind each grass-blade in my barmy runner-brain I'm not sure I like to think and that it's such a good thing after all. (48)
The recollection of discovering his dead father is – unlike most of the other images of which he dreams – troubling and does not help him to positively assert in his mind either freedom or some longed-for defeat of the warden. His daydreams have begun to overwhelm him.

*Billy Liar* carries this notion of the mind in a dream-state running amok to yet a further degree of extremity. Billy’s elaborate mental constructions have developed to the point where he does not merely toy with romantic fantasies as in *Environment*, nor merely imagine escape from his oppressive life in criminal escapades like the Runner. Instead Billy invents an entirely new nation (Ambrosia) in which to imagine an uninhibited life. The novel itself opens with detailed daydream on the subject:

Lying in bed, I abandoned the facts again and was back in Ambrosia. By rights, the march-past started in the Avenue of the Presidents, but it was an easy thing to shift the whole thing into Town Square. My friends had vantage seats on the town hall steps where no flag flew more proudly than the tattered blue star of the Ambrosian federation, the standard we had carried into battle. One by one the regiments marched past, and when they had gone - the Guards, the Parachute Regiment, the King’s Own Yorkshire Light Infantry – a hush fell over the crowds and they removed their hats for the proud remnants of the Ambrosian Grand Yeomanry. It was true that we had entered the war late, and some criticised us for that; but out of two thousand who went into battle only seven remained to hear the rebuke. We limped along as we had arrived from the battlefield, the mud still on our shredded uniforms, but with a proud swing to our kilts. The band played
“March of the Movies.” The war memorial was decked with blue poppies, the strange bloom found only in Ambrosia. (5)

Woven into this daydream are a number of telling points about the nature of Billy’s fantasy nation. He appears to draw from real elements of the outside world, but has then adapted them to suit his dream. The name Ambrosia could be associable with Greek mythology, but is more likely, given the comic tone of the novel in general, to be taken more directly from the popular British pudding manufacturer, which was a staple in the diet across northern England during the period. Ambrosia seems interestingly to have absorbed parts of England, since one of the forces listed in the parade is “The King’s own Yorkshire Light Infantry.” The troops are also generally northern it appears, as they wear what are often traditional Scottish uniforms (kilts). Despite the co-opting of various English and British cultural signifiers, Ambrosia remains a unique and separate nation, whose blue poppies are found only in his nation.

Billy’s dreams are undoubtedly detailed and intricate then. Though Ambrosia is one of many daydreams that Billy constructs, it becomes increasingly clear that Billy is not entirely in control of his own inventions. Even at the very start of the book, the dream passage he opens with can only be put out of his mind with great effort: “I put an end to this, consciously and deliberately, by going ‘Da da da da da da da’ aloud to drive the thinking out of my head” (5). Billy is aware that the dream-state is taking over more and more of his life:

I was spending a good part of my time, more of it as each day passed, on this thinking business. Sometimes I could squander the whole morning on it, and very often the whole evening and a fair slice of the night hours too. I had two kinds of
thinking (three, if ordinary thoughts were counted) and I had names for them, applied first jocularly and then mechanically. I called them No. 1 thinking and No. 2 thinking. No. 1 thinking was voluntary, but No. 2 thinking was not; it concerned itself with obsessional speculations about the scope and nature of disease (such as a persistent yawn that was probably symptomatic of sarcoma of the jaw), the probable consequences of actual misdemeanors, and the solutions to desperate problems, such as what would one do, what would one actually do, in the case of having a firework jammed in one's ear by mischievous boys. The way out of all this was to lull myself into a No. 1 thinking bout, taking the fast excursions to Ambrosia, indulging in hypothetical conversations with Bertrand Russell, fusing ad magnifying the ordinary thoughts of the day so that I was a famous comedian at the Ambrosia State Opera, the only stage personality ever to reach the rank of president. (15)

Billy’s role in the Ambrosian state fluctuates continually, as he is its leader, a soldier in its battle for independence, a star opera singer, and so forth. All of these roles are employed to underline the distance between the dream-state and the tense or even panicked No.2 thinking, where Billy worries incessantly about issues ranging from those related to plausible pressures of everyday life, to those ridiculous fears that betray Billy’s more general paranoia. He is able, in this way, to turn the continual parental pressure he feels into a new No.1 thinking fantasy about his parents that shows the degree to which he can distort the real world into his parallel one:

… this morning, in harder mood, I began to plan entirely new parents for myself. They were the modern, London, kind. They had allowed, in fact encouraged me to
smoke from the age of thirteen... and when I came home drunk my No. 1 mother would look up from her solitaire and groan: “Oh God, how dreary! Billy’s pissed again!” I announced at breakfast that I was going to start out on my own. My No. 1 father - the old man disguised as a company director - clapped me on the back and said: “And about time, you old loafer. Simone and I were thinking of kicking you out of the old nest any day now. Better come into the library and talk about the money end.” As for Gran, she didn't exist. (16)

The last of these regional novels, Queen, takes a rather different approach, presenting a story that is in its entirety fantastic. It is one in which the author himself becomes a daydreaming figure in his own text. Rather than merely presenting a central character that daydreams, the entire narrative of Queen is presented, in its subtitle, as “A Document by Arthur Wise.” There then follows a Prologue, in which Wise claims to be “setting down the bare facts” of “the disastrous events of the past year, from existing reports and from personal interviews” (11). He claims that central characters in the narrative that follows are in fact “in hiding in the North” and “living in the South of France.” This fantasy is underlined most notably by the closing page of the novel, in which Wise asserts that he is himself writing from “Cell 4, Debtors’ Prison, York,” after the defeat of the north in the war, following American intervention on behalf of the south:

It remains for the North to sit out the present situation, for there is nothing we can do about it. Resistance groups are being organized, or so it is rumoured. But the Stars and Stripes flies over the central tower of York Minster, and Southern troop pillage the countryside … I have every hope that this manuscript can successfully
be smuggled out of the country. My friend, Nicholas Leonard of Cavalier Publishing in Dublin, is arranging for its publication in a neutral country” (189).

We have moved across the period, and across these regional novels, from slight daydreaming to sophisticated constructions of alternate space and nations. The dream-state is the perennial resort of the northern character in this period, as a means by which he or she attempts to evade and escape ensnarement within a national structure in England that each finds objectionable.

**Failure to Escape**

These hopes of escape appear ultimately futile for a number of reasons. Physical movement to a new place does not mean outright freedom for some. Fear overwhelms others. The hegemonic order in the south also proves overpowering in several cases.

Marjorie discovers that traveling to new parts of the country in the hopes of evading her proscribed role does not lead to any more satisfactory circumstance for her:

She thought of the many different places she had lived, and the different sets of people who had surrounded her. First there was Hudley - Hudley, which the death of her parents had caused her to view, not as ‘home,’ but as a north-country town where she happened to live ... “But it's too absurd,” she cried. “Am I to pick holes in every environment because it isn't perfect? First I try to adapt myself to my surroundings, then I see some defect in them, and decide it is they which should adapt themselves to me.” (214)

She is still trapped in a narrow and restrictive life, now as a qualified teacher, despite her education, and her attempts to dream her way out of her trouble (181). Eventually she
feels compelled to return to Hudley, though her contempt for its parochial life remains acute (371). Hudley represents a real environment, where her experiences in the south indicate that something unreal (like her dream-states) cannot be accepted in the long-term: “Marjorie could not help feeling that the time she had spent away from Hudley had been in the nature of a holiday, pleasant but artificial; while life in her native town was really Life, unpleasant, perhaps, but genuine and true” (290).

On her return to the north Marjorie does her best to reconcile herself to its repressive mode:

As the board with its big white “Hudley” loomed dimly through the spring twilight, Marjorie savoured to the full the disturbing affection which even voluntary exiles feel for their native land. The phrase “the industrial North” rang with a pleasing energy through her brain; she cast off the enervating influence of the Southerner, Maurice Knaresbrough; she was genuinely glad to be in Hudley again, and felt ready to imbibe its prejudices and maintain with vigour its rude independence against the polished insincerity of the South. (230)

Having failed to make her artificial dream world or her real southern life sustainable, Environment concludes by falling into a more traditional romantic narrative form, in which Marjorie finds love and then allows her concerns about her proscribed role to be forgotten: “‘It has to do with my environment theories,’ she said. ‘I've just made a discovery. When I'm with you everything looks nice, even the alley; but when I'm away from you everything looks horrid. It rounds off the theory nicely, doesn't it’” (373). Environment’s rather elliptical title is now clearer then. Rather like the notion already noted in Queen that the north is an ideological stance more than a physical location,
Marjorie comes to feel that her external surroundings are of little consequence when compared to her emotional state. The novel seems to want us to conclude that her quest to find a suitable environment is less important than her need to be content wherever she finds herself. In terms of her attempts to break out of a predetermined path in the north though, Marjorie’s ‘rounding off’ is in fact a capitulation to the terms of her life as a woman and a northern as it is set out for her. Her dreams are considered no more than “unhealthy” distractions from the idyllic married life she is about to set on in Hudley, with her suitor Arthur.

Billy is so conditioned by his northern environment that, despite his objections to it, the prospect of escape to London as he dreams of if it is repeatedly deferred:

“I’m thinking of going to London,” I said.

“Only thinking?” [said Liz]

“Well, going. Soon, anyway.”

“When's soon?”...

“Well, soon.”

“That sounds remote. Why not now?”

“Difficult,” I said.

“No, it's easy. You just get on a train and four hours later, there you are in London.”

“Easy for you,” I said. “You've had the practice.” (131)

Instead of a new life in the south then, Billy returns to the contrivance of his dream world at the end of the book, seemingly defeated by anxiety: “The idea of being in London next Saturday, put down on paper and staring me in the face, filled my bowels with quick-
flushing terror” (29). His fear is somewhat comparable to Marjorie’s, as she tries to leave
the country for France at one point in her narrative, and has high hopes for this new place
as one where she can free herself from the social-cultural pressure of England:

> “Once I get to Boulogne I’ll never come back again,” announced Marjorie firmly
to her reflection in the mirror. “I’ll put my hair up and get some work to do, and
live my own life and make it interesting.” As she undressed, the words “She
overrode all adverse circumstances” throbbed excitedly in her brain. She was
going to do a mad, wicked, outrageous, blatantly unconventional thing, and she
gloried in it. (87)

As she wakes the next morning though, the weather causes her “some anxiety,” as “the
sea did not look as flat as she had hoped.” This minor inconvenience makes her second-
guess her decision to leave for the continent for some time. Like Billy, Marjorie seems
conditioned to have doubts about a space outside the environment she knows.

*Loneliness* is rife with imagery that underlines the full extent of the authorities
power over the Runner. The Runner frequently refers to himself in animalistic terms, as a
horse (13), or a trained racing dog: "I trotted on along the edge of a field bordered by the
sunken lane, smelling green grass and honeysuckle, and I felt as though I came from a
long line of whippets trained to run on two legs” (43). He is, in his role in the borstal, less
than human. In this context it seems too much to hope that the Runner might evade the
authorities in any but the most abstract terms.

Dreams of emancipation in *Queen* are ultimately dashed by the overwhelming
forces ranged against the north by the south and by its American allies, but also crucially
by a lack of determined will in the north itself:
They would say it was dissension at the top, at the seat of power. No doubt they would say it. But it wasn't that at all. It was something in the Northern spirit that wasn’t in essence independent. It could rise in a bloody bubble of fury, but it couldn't take charge. It couldn't se itself in command. Generations of subservience had built servility into it very nature. Its soul was a peasant. (176)

Again here the northern subject, like Billy and Marjorie, are too conditioned in their social position to be able to completely break from the status quo, despite their overt ambitions.

None of these narratives are willing to assert an unequivocal break from the structure of north-south relations that they seemingly find so objectionable. For those born in the north of England, it seems, a subjectivity that is oppressively limited and predestined is not palatable, but neither is it avoidable.

**Afterword**

Among all four regional novels there remains just one more hopeful possibility for northern subject seeking to evade their narrow, predetermined path. Billy’s delusional state is desperate and to some extent overwhelming, but he thinks of his friend Liz as a possible means by which he could break from the isolation of his self-created world (“Sometimes I think, if we were married, and lived somewhere in that house in the country, we could just sit and imagine ourselves there [in Ambrosia]” (154)). Liz remains a model of the kind of subject that Marjorie, the Runner, Billy, and several of the Council of the North in *Queen* try to envisage for their own future. She lives a nomadic existence moving around the country to anywhere “whatever urge possessing her [takes] her” (20).
Billy is “proud of her bohemianism, crediting her with a soul-deep need to get away and straighten out her personality, or to find herself, or something” (32). As she puts it:

“Ask me where I’ve been for the past five weeks.”

“Does the geographical location make any difference?” I said with simulated bitterness, hoping to keep this all on the same sparring level.

“No, I don't suppose it does,” said Liz. ... “Every so often I just want to go away. It's not you, Billy. I want to be here with you. It's the town. It's the people we know. I don't like knowing everybody, or becoming part of things - do you see what I mean?” ... “What I'd like is to be invisible,” said Liz. “You know, to do everything without people knowing, and not having to explain all the time.” (153)

The notion that Liz speaks of, of the “invisible” subject, is exactly the kind of protean subjectivity that might surpass the surrounding social-cultural pressures of north-south English subject definition. While Billy, Marjorie and others find evading their predetermined northern paths untenable, Liz remains mobile. Among all these narratives of defeat in the face of hegemonic socio-cultural pressures in England, Liz offers a glimmer of hope for the northerner keen to reach beyond his or her status as first and foremost simply northern.

The fantasies of characters like Billy and Marjorie, in so far as they are unreal constructions of alternate subject positions, might be construed as frail attempts to achieve this same mobility. These characters live in unreal spaces that cannot be delineated within the socio-cultural structure of England at the time. Something of their subjectivity remains liminal where those who do not fantasize like them, such as the Borstal warden in Loneliness or Billy’s fiancée Rita in Billy Liar, are pinned down into
an often repressive position within English society. These overtly futile acts of make-believe offer a kind of protean subjectivity that can be seen as emancipatory in comparison to concretely located national subject positioning. These four northern regional novels create spaces in which to be northern is most importantly to be not simply associable with England. It is not then the goal to re-cast and re-enact national boundaries in endlessly smaller reductive attempts at unitary specificity, as in the abortive exploits of the Council of the North in *Queen*, but to renounce affiliation to a projected central authority through the creation of fantasies, and in so doing refuse to replace it with any other simple national structure. These northern English subjects find themselves in largely comparable aporias, ones that can only be negotiated in the repeated assertions not of what they are but of what they are not.

This may appear little more than a pyrrhic victory of course. These remain novels that readers may logically conclude narrate the out and out failure on a number of levels of the casting of independent northern subjectivity. Such a perspective is plausible, but is perhaps founded on a sense of subjectivity that does not readily perceive anything outside a framework of nations and nationality. Perhaps these characters imply that there is something to be said for ‘thinking’ beyond a model that is predicated on the idea that national affiliations are the underlying basis for subject definition. Like the Runner's envisioning of a community of outsiders, perhaps northern identity is ultimately able to reach towards a slippery state that is communal only in its shared lack of national investment.
CHAPTER 4

Interminably Embroiled in Nation: Golding and McEwan

As the century progresses, several English writers develop more and more profound misgivings about the effect of the nation over the subject in England, and more and more radical notions of characters’ attempts to evade this influence. William Golding and Ian McEwan offer us narratives of individuals who rail desperately against what they perceive to be both repressive national bodies, and along with them a wide range of other ideological constructs which they consider to have a comparable conditioning effect on their identities. Ultimately though, both Golding and McEwan conclude that identity in England in the Twentieth Century cannot be founded entirely independently from the nations which surround us. Both authors and characters are ensnared irresistibly by their nation.

William Golding’s *Free Fall*

William Golding’s 1959 novel *Free Fall* encircles a moment during the Second World War when POW Sammy Mountjoy is locked in a totally black cell: “my life has remained centred round the fact of the next few minutes I spent alone and panic-stricken in the dark” (184). Sammy has just been interrogated by Gestapo officer Halde about a possible escape plot. He claims he knows nothing, and is taken to the cell. It will transpire that the “cell” is no more than an empty closet, but Sammy is petrified and screams out into the darkness, “Help me!” (184). Sammy, the narrator of *Free Fall*, becomes obsessed with the notion of losing his freedom in concrete and more existential
terms. I will argue that Sammy’s obsession is wrapped up in his sense of his nation and his relationship to it.

Golding’s fourth novel tells the fragmentary story of Sammy’s attempt to recount his past and recover the key moment of his loss of freedom. Sammy is an artist, a veteran of the Second World War. He tells of his infancy and youth living in a slum called “Rotten Row” with his mother. He is orphaned after her death and taken in by a local priest. He toys with investment in the competing perspectives of various teachers at his school. He has a teenage affair with a young girl called Beatrice Ifor, whom he eventually dismisses in favor of another woman, Taffy, whom he goes on to marry (a situation Golding had instigated in his own life, and which his daughter suggests haunted him for many years [Living with a Writer, 48]). There is then a sudden jump to his capture and his time in the cell.

Free Fall is a book of its period—the middle of the century marked by widespread struggle with ideological constructs that sought to assert their authority across Europe. By the time of the writing of Free Fall, Golding had lived to see a worldwide struggle with Fascism and then an ongoing one with Stalinism. He had served in the armed forces during the war, personally requesting to return to active service, from research work, in 1941 (Living with a Writer, 48). Just three years before the publication of Free Fall, the Hungarian uprising demonstrated the will of ideologically driven forces to put down individual will, and disillusioned much of the Left in England regarding communism in general.

The effect of these events on the conception of the nation, in Golding’s mind, in that of his central character Sammy, and in English society at large, was highly
ambivalent. Nation was both the means by which these oppressive forces could be
curtailed, and at the same moment another potentially threatening ideological construct in
itself. This paradox is all the more pointed in states of war and cold war.

Several examples in Golding’s fiction and nonfiction writing articulate a sense of
nations in general as the underlying source for the agency of the various ideological and
totalitarian forces at play in Europe across the century. Golding did a lecture tour in the
United States within three years of the publication of Free Fall. The published version of
that lecture, "Fable" (The Hot Gates, 85), contains a long reflection on Golding's
perception of European nations as a whole, which begins to articulate the intricacies and
equivocations he felt on the topic:

I am a European and an optimist. But I do not believe that history is only a
nominal thing. There have been many years when as I contemplate our national
frontiers, I have fallen into something like despair. Frontiers in Europe may be
likened to wrinkles in an aged face, and all that will remove them is the death of
the body (92).

What is this decrepitude really founded upon? It is entrenched national rivalry and
mutual contempt which has driven the evils of totalitarianism, for despite the hopes for
European integration: "I cannot think of a confederation in history where the members
voluntarily bowed to supranational authority without the least one of the members
fighting a war to contest it. In Europe there is and has been a terrible fund of national ill
will, handed down from generation to generation." Golding denies that nations can divest
themselves of entrenched power without violence, since nationalism is so deeply
inculcated in our consciousnesses. This is a personally implicating claim on Golding's
part: “As I make these words I am aware in myself of resents, indignations and perhaps fears which have nothing to do with today, with the England and Germany of today, in a word, with reality, but are there nevertheless.” This irresistible inclination to malevolence for another nation is, Golding concedes immediately, quite wrong. Not only does it force an “unreal” contempt, but it leads to a national subject invested improbably in support of ‘his own’ nation, since when “one Englishman and one American are gathered together, that sad story of the eighteenth century will raise its head [and] the Englishman who may have spent his life in the pursuit and furtherance of liberal principles may find himself forced into the ridiculous position of defending his fellow Englishman George III.” The "unconscious legacy" of national entrenchment is the fount of oppression from which, as Golding perceives it, "there's bloodlust. There's ugly nationalism raising its gorgon head" (93). Entrenchment in a nation (even in Golding's own) is, he claims, no more than:

... a cloak of national prestige which the uneducated pull round their shoulders to keep off the wind of personal self knowledge. It is a dead thing handed on, but dead though it is, it will not lie down. It is a monstrous creature descending to us from our ancestors, producing nothing but disunity, chaos. War and disorder prolong it in the ghastly and ironic semblance of life. All the marching and countermarching, the flags, the heroism and cruelty are galvanic twitches induced in its slaves and subjects by that hideous parody thing. (94)

Golding's employ of the terms "slaves" and "subjects" conflates them in an assertion of the evil in nationalism, so that both seem oppressed by the nation. This nationalism has evolved over the century so that it could purportedly, "perfect most men, and at the least reduce aberrance" (87). European nationalism is a model of history that
constitutes a "monstrous creature" that cannot go unchallenged. It struggles with what Golding calls "academic, or if you like campus history" (90). Campus history is:

...not only of importance but of supreme importance. It is that objective yet devoted stare with which humanity observes its own past; and in that stare, that attempt to see how things have become what they are, where they went wrong, and where right, that our only hope lies of having some control over our own future (90).

Golding also writes frequently of his antagonistic relationship with England in particular. Golding's writing outside of Free Fall demonstrates a less radical, but no less problematic, sense of connection to the nation—both to England specifically and to the nation as a conceptual structure in the wider world. He clearly expressed his own ambivalence in his Nobel lecture: “I condemn and detest my country’s faults precisely because I am so proud of her many virtues. One of her faults is to believe that evil is somewhere else and inherent in another nation” (The Hot Gates, 89).

Golding presented one highly derogatory impression of England in a short story he published almost concurrently with Free Fall, "The Anglo-Saxon." The story opens with a broadly parodic statement of this quintessential Anglo-Saxon's limited capacities: "Six hundred and fifty words were hung on hooks in George's dark cupboard; blunt words, broken and worn, clung to out of custom like a chipped cup... Six hundred and fifty words for dirty George, George small and warped, hot under his cap and army greatcoat and trousers coarse as sacking..." (37). In what follows, a frequently drunken and violent English farmer picks and loses a fight in a bar with American troops stationed in the area during the war. Even by the close of the story, the ignorant George doesn't
understand the meaning of his own anger towards the American soldiers, who remain
magnanimous in their victory over him: "George understood that the twisted body inside
his clothes was shaking with hangover. He did not understand the hot tides that seemed to
be taking his chest and throat and eyes and filling them with water. He turned away,
clutching the tankard, and blinked out the warped window; saw, without deduction of any
sort, the lights, the parking, the turn left, the signs of law and order on the Queen's
Highway" (47).

This kind of critique is often tempered with the divided sense of England as still
being Golding's home, and in some ways, laudable. Thus when he received news of his
Nobel prize, he was quoted in The Guardian (7 October 1983, qtd. in Prusse) as pleased
"not just for myself but because the prize has been won after 30 years by an Englishman."
In his essay “The English Channel”, he also writes of English shores as comforting as he
leaves for the continent, despite his ambivalence: "Even though you quarrel with a
relative you can be glad to see him, because, though the years, he has become part of
your life" (41). His comfort around England is, he admits, an attractive feeling to him.
Across the Channel lies, unlike "England - the real world" (44), a truly other place: "out
there on the horizon they could not speak English, they had a president and not a king,
they even drove on the wrong side of the road." Golding has no illusions about his own
absorption within the nation, but it is a position from which he struggles, and this struggle
is perhaps rendered best in Free Fall.

In Free Fall, Paul Crawford argues, “Golding attempts to drive home a much
more direct questioning of “English” values and “English” fantasies of moral superiority
than he was able to achieve in Lord of the Flies and The Inheritors” (85). Free Fall is a
complex and fragmentary reflection on a struggle with a very broad range of ideological constructs. These constructs have a hegemonic effect on the individual, conditioning his or her perception of the world around them. In the case of Sammy Mountjoy, the individual is ambivalent about (or even rebels against) absorption within any of these ideological constructs and wants to remain free of social, political, or ethical pressures.

The suspicion Sammy shows is merely a more absolute and ultimately nihilist envisioning of Golding's own prejudices about ideologies, where nation is expelled with the horrors of Fascism and the corruption of Stalinism. Sammy's struggle is an allegorized version of the struggle of many in England and the wider world over the last half century. In him, Golding renders one potential outcome of this struggle for investment in the nation: Sammy is profoundly disillusioned with any and all ideologies, and the nation is seen as just another one of these hegemonic forces. He challenges them repeatedly, since he has “hung all systems on the wall like a row of useless hats. They do not fit. They come from the outside, they are suggested patterns, some dull and some of great beauty” (6). The scope of these ideological pressures from Sammy’s extremist perspective is sometimes difficult to perceive immediately: social authorities at school; political authority in the police; theological determinism; even ethical responsibility.

Sammy goes on:

That Marxist hat in the middle of the row, did I ever think it would last me a lifetime? What is wrong with the Christian biretta that I hardly wore at all?

[Sammy's school science teacher's] rationalist hat kept the rain out, seemed impregnable plate-armour, dull and decent. It looks small now and rather silly, a
bowler like all bowlers, very formal, very complete, very ignorant. There is a school cap, too (6).

To these other sources of hegemonic pressure we can add a highly ambivalent sense of national allegiance, which like them conditions the individual’s thinking so that they are not, as Sammy would wish, able to experience complete autonomy. Sammy tries to articulate this notion of freedom on the book’s first page. It is the absolutely independent ability to make choices so that, presented with different paths, there is “nothing to draw me down one more than the other” (5). He dreams of a choice, as essential as “a colour or the taste of potatoes” (5), unaffected by any force he locates as outside himself.

**Sammy’s Struggle**

As Sammy’s reconstruction of his life begins we are confronted immediately by an individual disconnected from, and dismissive of, the roots that commonly tie us to our socio-cultural environment:

I never knew my father and I think my mother never knew him either. I cannot be sure of course, but I incline to believe she never knew him – not socially at any rate, unless we restrict the word out of all useful meaning. Half my immediate ancestry is so inscrutable that I seldom find it worth bothering about. I exist (9).

Sammy’s is an identity generally dislocated from the world around him.

Chronologically earlier in the text, the German interrogator Halde sums up Sammy’s attitude to forces considered outside his own self-determination:
You do not believe in anything enough to suffer for it or be glad. There is no point at which something has knocked on your door and taken possession of you. You possess yourself. Intellectual ideas, *even the idea of loyalty to your country* sits on you loosely. You wait in a dusty waiting room on no particular line for no particular train. And between the poles of belief, I mean the belief in material things and the belief in a world made and supported by a supreme being, you oscillate jerkily from day to day, from hour to hour.” [my italics] (144)

I am not the first to outline Sammy’s rejection of socio-cultural forces. James Gindin writes, “Sammy is the artist who rejects all systems in his effort to understand himself and his world” (Gindin 44), and he is not alone in this view. Sammy tells us early on that this includes Marxism, Christianity, rationalism, and even institutional learning (7). Halde also suggests national affiliation is one of those ideological constructs Sammy rejects. In a world of such relativity, what remains for Sammy is the self. “For, after all, in this bounded universe, I said, where nothing is certain but my own existence, what has to be cared for is the quiet and the pleasure of this sultan” (128).

This model of self-interest leads Sammy to steadily escalating combative acts, beginning with minor acts of rebellion against authority initiated by others, such as breaking into an airfield with his friend Johnny, which Sammy describes as "frightening" (40), and then into the general’s garden, where he takes on more of a leadership role for a time. (As they evade the police, “Johnny muttered: ‘How are we going to get out, Sam?’” [44]). Some critics have downplayed Sammy’s act of spitting on a church altar as no more than the act of what Sammy earlier calls “ragamuffins” (44). Though he is “moved by dare and vault” by his manipulative friend Phillip, “until I was where he wanted me”
(59), it is Sammy alone who ultimately desecrates a symbol of religious orthodoxy, a profoundly hostile act.

Sammy’s combative persona does not always react as one might expect when his rebellious acts are put down. When he is “sent into Coventry” for his misbehavior it only reinforces his independent position: “The head teacher thought a period in Coventry would show me the value of social contact and persuade me to stop using people as a punchbag”. “I can still sense my feeling of defiance and isolation; a man against society. For the first, but not for the last time I was avoided” (53). Sammy is deliberately isolated on other occasions as well, and finds them empowering:

… she had my desk moved out of the body of the class. It rested now against the wall right out in front where I should not contaminate the others by my presence. I sank into the seat and was alone. Here I was, with the waves of public disapprobation beating on the back of my neck. I have never minded them since (209).

Attempts to bring Sammy into line with power structures only leave him more divided and entrenched. His belligerent attitude to external authority is not shaken by these punishments.

By far the most extreme example of Sammy’s hostile relationship with all socio-cultural forces outside himself comes in his contact with Beatrice, which is always antagonistic at root: “Sammy wants to ‘nail down’ Beatrice, to pull the heart of her mystery from her, to literally be her, thus imposing his own pattern of being upon hers” (O’Donnell 90). Thus Sammy wants to “kill the air for touching” her (84), to “obliterate” (82) her friends for impeding his attempts to acquire her. Beatrice is a victim first as a
proxy for the contempt he feels towards institutional religion. Sammy discovers that Beatrice will not see him on a Sunday, and recognizes that he has “met my first, indeed my only rival”, a rival to whom he feels no small degree of “rage” (93). Beatrice’s ties to her faith, aligning herself with a Christian sacrificial victim as she draws a cross at the top of her letters to him, remain suggestive of her as religious icon and target. She is cloistered in her faith just as Sammy is swallowed in a “deep and muddy pool” (113). Contrary to this religious explanation for targeting her, S. J. Boyd argues she is targeted because she remains freely indeterminate to Sammy, a position which is profoundly frustrating to his vehement struggle with ensnaring external forces (72). Even in his reminiscences Sammy confesses that “she baffles me still, she is opaque” (113). Her repeated response of “maybe” (94), in the face of his aggressive questioning, would also fit with Boyd’s assertion. Beatrice is a victim simply because she is another subject external to Sammy who must be “defeated” in his perennially combative mode. Having professed his “love” for her she responds:

“I don’t know what to say, Sammy.”

“I meant every word of it. You’ve” – spread hands – “got me. I’m defeated.”

“How?”

“It’s a kind of competition.” (92).

The competition extends his antagonism toward external forces, from purely ideological constructs, to other persons. In this way his “spread hands” are telling: though he claims submission in the struggle between them, he is still projecting a contrived persona to try to win out. The outcome of Sammy’s involvement with Beatrice closes the
novel. We discover that Beatrice has had a nervous breakdown following their relationship—the implied trigger being Sammy's treatment and discarding of her. Sammy goes to see her in a psychiatric hospital that bears a striking resemblance to a POW camp like the one where he was held. Beatrice urinates at the sight of him, underlining again the full extent of Sammy's cruelty and Beatrice's trauma.

It becomes fully apparent then that Sammy is a profoundly malicious being, who desecrates and destroys all around him, physically and emotionally. When war comes into Sammy's world of malicious intent, he is liberated from moral responsibility because he feels that “the world was exploding [so that] none of us would live long” (127). *Free Fall* thus becomes a war narrative not only in turning to a wartime environment, but in depicting a central protagonist whose profoundly antagonistic attitude to all those forces he perceives in the world around him is in keeping with a period when many societal structures were shattered: “I welcomed the destruction that war entails, the deaths and the terror. Let the world fall. There was anarchy in the mind where I lived and anarchy in the world at large… The shattered houses, the refugees, the deaths and torture – accept them as a pattern of the world and one’s own behavior is little enough distress” (132). Sammy and the wartime world are shown as parallel in a number of Sammy’s turns of phrase: “I was in the gutter, sitting [on] my bike, willing them to die, be raped, bombed or otherwise obliterated because this demanded split second timing” (82).

Just as Golding's opinion on the nation appears conflicted, for Sammy the war proves not merely an opportunity to revel in his nihilistic tendencies, but also a moment of re-enforcement of the nation, a new investment in a socio-cultural construct akin to those against which he has elsewhere stood in opposition. Here he is confronted by a
“pattern” of competing national groups that not even his nihilism can circumvent. German interrogator Halde makes this binary logic of nations clear: “It is the karma of our two nations that we should torture each other” (148). He goes so far as to suggest that the freedom from responsibility that Sammy has enjoyed as a result of the war is a by-product of this national struggle: “One must be for or against. I made my choice with much difficulty but I have made it. Perhaps it was the last choice I shall ever make. Accept such international morality, Mr. Mountjoy, and all unpleasantnesses are possible to man. You and I, we know what wartime morality amounts to” (140). Halde perhaps comes closest to defining the socio-cultural forces around them as he claims that “We have given ourselves over to a kind of social machine. I am in the power of my machine” (140).

Several critics have mentioned that Halde tests Sammy regarding his national investment by challenging him to reveal a supposed escape plot. Kinkead-Weekes and Gregor say that Sammy knows nothing useful about any scheme, and thus that his response in the interrogation is not an indication of any national loyalty on Sammy’s part:

He refuses to talk, not because he is either a hero or a ‘chuckle-headed’ conformist to some ‘little code’ of loyalty or patriotism, but because he is as helpless as the infant Sammy interrogated by the verger and facing the impossibility of communication” (Kinkead-Weekes and Gregor 182).lxiii

Jay Halio goes a little further, implying that Sammy might be aware but “unwilling” to reveal the plot. What is crucially important here is that Sammy does have a belief that he knows something, even though it be slight, which he chooses to keep from Halde:

“‘I tell you I can’t.’
For, of course, I knew something. I had known something for more than a year. It was the standard of knowledge required that I did not know. But I could have said at any time that out of the hundreds of us there were perhaps twenty-five who might actually try to escape… I could say to him quite simply; I do not know when or where the escape organization operates or how – but take these twenty men into your trawl and there will be no escapes. (149)

At this moment, Sammy has made a critical decision to align himself with his now “comrades” – the English prisoners-of-war. He is no longer independent—as he perceives it, free – but is led by a desire, or perhaps need, outside himself, to protect his fellow Englishmen. Now when he considers Halde's thinking and his threatening interrogation, Sammy conflates one with the other into an image of a tortured national body: “We have beaten the world. We have hung in a row the violated bodies of Abyssinia, Spain, Norway, Poland, Czecho-Slovakia, France, Holland, Belgium” (176).

Sammy’s reminiscences in *Free Fall* have begun with the complaint that he is no longer free, and that he wants to trace the moment when he loses his struggle to remain so. Could it have been when he commits to follow the thinking of one of his teacher’s rationalist worldview over another teacher’s religious investment? Perhaps it is when his headmaster leaves him feeling guilty for misconduct rather than punishing him. There is also the decision to assault emotionally the innocent Beatrice. There are other possibilities, but the majority of critics have concluded that this last is the key moment when Sammy loses his freedom to an ethical responsibility bigger than his self-interest, and it overpowers him. However, the crucial lie Sammy seems compelled to tell to Halde about his fellow inmates' plans suggests another possibility: that he lost his freedom when
he made a choice to align himself with his nation. The war has shown him a model for his nihilist rejection of authority and ideological constructs, but it has also driven him to make a commitment he cannot withdraw. Further, it is the choice to seek support and find meaning outside himself that he will be forced to enact again in the cell where he is imprisoned.

The Cell

In his lecture on *Lord of the Flies* ("Fable," in *The Hot Gates*, 88) Golding suggests he was prompted to write the book to correct the impression given in Ballantyne's *The Coral Island*, which suggested children left to the their own devices would rationally construct an ordered society and thus survive. This optimistic and post-enlightenment vision of human intellectual supremacy was unconvincing to Golding, and thus in *Lord of the Flies* the children enact wild and violent fantasies of megalomania.

Several years before the publication of *Free Fall*, Macmillan published *Solitary Confinement*, the memoirs of Christopher Burney, a Second World War POW who was kept in captivity for eighteen months in Germany. *Solitary Confinement* aggressively asserts the possibility of retaining determined self-control in the face of imprisonment. Burney writes unequivocally, "Patience is a matter of anticipation. One does not suffer the passing of empty time, but rather the slowness of the expected event which is to end it; the patient mind is fixed on a future happening, not present inactivity" (14).

Throughout his imprisonment, he keeps up a regular daily process of manicuring his fingernails as a means to maintain his self-control (18). Given a razor to shave with on occasion, he says that it never even occurred to him at the time that he could use it to
attempt suicide and end his captivity (18). *Solitary Confinement* is a catalogue of coping strategies that elides what must remain the extreme challenge of enduring the experience. Burney's account seems so improbably controlled and rational throughout his time in captivity in fact, that the relationship between *The Coral Island* and *Lord of the Flies* may be replicated in that between *Solitary Confinement* and *Free Fall*. *Free Fall* also centers around an experience of solitary confinement, but renders the time there as horrifying beyond reckoning.

As he is placed in the cell, Sammy’s shout of “Nazi bastard” to Halde (171) reinforces his newly found combative entrenchment of wartime national affiliation. Sammy perceives Halde’s aggressive nationalism as driving him to break his national alignment and force a confession, but what happens when Sammy is locked in the cell is a far more extensive and profound dislocation. Over the next few minutes, this newly acquired national investment (and all other connections with forces considered outside himself) will fall away.

The isolation of solitary confinement is a deep reflection on the self, unaffected by any external stimuli. This leaves Sammy ‘free’ to perceive what fragments, if any, of his own subjectivity he might have been able to construct in his state of struggle and attempted independence from ideological conditioning. Why this should be such an onerous prospect for Sammy is a point that has become clear as his numerous acts of malicious self-interest are revealed over the course of the novel.

Sammy's various sins are motivated by what Golding had made clear, in his previous novel *Pincher Martin*, was man's essential ethical bankruptcy. In that novel, the central protagonist, Christopher Martin creates a completely dislocated world of his own
to defy the supplication to a force greater than himself, which is implicit in his own death. Though a less theologically conditioned text, in *Free Fall* Sammy is an outlaw more than a sinner, by dint of his attempts to establish his independence from all these socio-cultural ideological constructs that aim to condition his thinking. This obsessive self-interest has struggled against alignment with church and state, with fascism and communism, even with the dependence implicit in love for another. Sammy tries to exorcise these and all other forces from his independent will, and the cell is the resulting untenable mental creation. His suggestion that he might live independently from ideological conditioning is completely unsustainable, and the cell is the final indication of this.

In the face of Sammy’s dismissal of these socio-cultural forces, then, what remains is an absolutely fantastical independence from the nation, religion, rationalism, need for others, etcetera— the pure state he has sought for so long—a void “like a colour or the taste of potatoes”. Sammy is now not only threatened with division from his newly acquired national affiliation in the cell, but from every stimulus and pressure he has felt, all replaced with what Virginia Tiger describes as “fear and conjecture” (Tiger 137). It is his own fear and his own conjecture—he is entirely free to construct in this void any kind of experience. When he is confronted with this possibility though, he becomes aware that this patternlessness is horrifyingly nihilistic: “I? I? Too many I’s, but what else was there in this impenetrable cosmos? What else?” (169). As Catherine Bernard puts it: “the cell compels the narrator to confront his own darkness… to determine his own position in a configuration of facts he gradually discovers to be unreliable yet meaningful in their very indeterminacy” (Bernard 57). In this way, the various readings of the cell as a proxy for
Sammy’s consciousness seem persuasive, for the cell is a place outside the remit of the socially constituted world, leaving Sammy to his own devices. What he creates is nightmares of snakes, pits, corpses and dismembered body parts, and he cannot endure this “freedom.”

Sammy screams out. There has been much debate over the meaning of his cry of “help me!” (184). Many see it as a spiritual call of atonement and for salvation (Henry 104). Tiger, on the other hand, feels the cry is instinctive and hollow: “…he screams, expecting nothing beyond the threshold of his own consciousness but pain and its own cessation” (Tiger 139). Sammy himself gives an inconsistent reading of the cry. In hindsight, he claims the cell is a time when he turns back to submission to a theological construct: “[As a child] I slammed [the door] shut on Moses and Jehovah. I was not to knock on that door again, until in a Nazi prison camp I lay huddled against it half crazed with terror and despair” (217). As he recounts the moment of the scream itself though, he claims it is not a direct call to any one entity, but only “the cry of the rat when the terrier shakes it, a hopeless sound, the raw signature of one savage act. My cry meant no more, was instinctive, said here is flesh of which the nature is to suffer and do thus. I cried out not with hope of an ear but as accepting a shut door, darkness in a shut sky” (184). The cry may or may not be theologically inflected, but it remains an expression of need that must be seen as a supplication to an agent outside Sammy’s supposedly independent identity. In that gesture, we see Sammy return to the fold of socio-cultural forces that will limit his unadulterated separation from the world around him: “I looked up beyond the huts and the wire, I raised my dead eyes, desiring nothing, accepting all things and giving all created things away” (186). These self-created “things” that Sammy has engineered in
his independent world are given up to acceptance of the world outside himself. He has
seen what it might be like, in a mythical place, to break free from all the investments he
has struggled with, but this state of dislocation is not sustainable and must be displaced
by a reinvestment in the ideological constructs that condition us all.

**Ian McEwan's *Black Dogs*—Monumental Stories**

Like *Free Fall*, Ian McEwan's 1992 novel *Black Dogs* is about the ways in which
subjects in the late twentieth century are interminably ensnared by the concept of the
nation. Nations are represented in McEwan’s novel as metanarratives that repressively
map meaning—significance, authority, position, rights—onto otherwise amorphous and
underlying socio-cultural circumstances. This is best illustrated in *Black Dogs* by nations’
propensity to build monuments that act as central points in the historical stories they
contrive. James Young has suggested that memorials like these only generate "a petrified
version of the past that buries the living" (20). Young implies here that monuments enact
a reading that elides the complex matrix that constitutes real historical events, in favor of
simple and generic stories.

Some subjects, like Jeremy, the central protagonist and narrator in *Black Dogs*,
are resistant to this kind of metanarrative, and try to dismiss ideological constructs that
would read the world as no more than contrived exercises in meaning-making. Ultimately
though, it becomes clear that Jeremy is not exempt from the drive to make reductive
meaning. On the contrary, Jeremy is first and foremost a storyteller, and as such he acts
in parallel with the nation as it is characterized here. When confronted with a slippery and
unstable world Jeremy tells monumental stories that serve as a coping mechanism, in
hopes that this unnerving instability can be curtailed. Both Jeremy and nation-states employ meaning-making narratives in order to neutralize a fearfully mutable universe. I will argue here then, that Jeremy tells stories in just the same way that nation-states build war memorials.

The nation is an interminably troublesome concept for Jeremy as it has been for Sammy, because it seems objectionable to the late twentieth century person trying to define him or herself independently of it, but at the same time cannot be dismissed, evaded, or resisted for long before it becomes enticing as a comfortable means by which we can read the world. There remain attempts by the central characters in these novels to define themselves beyond the scope of the nations that surround them, but in the end there is no more than the most flickering possibility of a break from a nation-state’s ability to reductively locate us within its ideological narrative.

Set in the late 1980s, *Black Dogs* revolves around the efforts of narrator Jeremy to piece together a memoir of his mother-in-law, June, and try to understand the meaning of her encounter with two black dogs in the French countryside decades earlier, an event which June claims dictated the course of much of the rest of her life, perhaps most pointedly her estrangement from her husband Bernard. The novel consists of four principal sections. Jeremy first interviews June about her life, at the retirement home in England where she lives. He then recounts the point when he met his wife, as they traveled together on a fact-finding trip to Poland, and to the Majdanek concentration camp. After June’s death, Jeremy travels to Berlin with Bernard during the fall of the Berlin Wall. The novel closes with a retelling of the black dogs’ episode in its entirety.
National Monuments

Nations are represented in _Black Dogs_ by their monuments. Jeremy visits the Majdanek concentration camp, a site now transformed into a huge monument to the German nation’s past atrocities. This kind of memorial is an assertion of a certain history by a national body. The intention of the Polish state in endorsing the Majdanek monument is to:

… preserve the buildings as material evidence of the crimes committed there; to analyze the facts of these crimes; and to present analyzed facts to the public. As becomes clear, however, the ruins are material evidence not only of these crimes but also of the state’s reasons for remembering them. Indeed there is little reason for preserving the ruins outside of the meanings preservation imputes to them. 

(_Texture_ 121)

Young goes on to argue, as Jeremy’s wife-to-be Jenny will do in _Black Dogs_ (88), that the site elides the scale of Jewish victims of the camps relative to Soviet POWs, among others. Young's study of Holocaust memorials cites the general "ire and skepticism of philosophers and cultural critics" towards memorials, perhaps most notably Nietzsche’s demand that we do "away with the monuments!" Young argues that “the memorials of every community organize public memory of the Holocaust according to a particular understanding of events” (_Art of Memory_, 20). The monument serves a political function on the part of the nation that establishes it, to tell a reductive historical story, in the case of Majdanek of “a relatively Marxist interpretation of the war and its victims.”

While they wander the streets of Berlin, Bernard observes another monument to the German nation’s grim history, at it is being established:
He [Bernard] gestured towards the hole. “I’ve been reading about this. It’s the old Gestapo headquarters. They’re digging it up, researching the past. I don’t know how anyone of my generation could accept that – Gestapo crimes neutralized by archeology.”

I saw now that the trench had been dug along the lines of what once must have been an access corridor to the series of white-tiled cells we were looking down into. Each one barely big enough for one prisoner, and in each there were two iron rings set into the wall. On the far side of the site was a low building, the museum. Bernard said, “They’ll find a fingernail extracted from some poor wretch, clean it up, and shove it in a glass case with a label. And half a mile over there the Stasi will be cleaning out their cells too” (70).

Bernard’s point is that nation-states are inclined to memorialize their pasts, and in doing so, they reduce emotionally-charged events to sanitized, anemic histories. The tangled details of the attempted establishment of the actual Gestapo-Gelände, which Young recounts, underline the political weight that these spaces can carry in telling national stories (Art of Memory 29). The site remains endlessly contested by various community and political groups, demonstrating its value as a nodal point from which a metanarrative of meaning can be reified.

Jeremy as Skeptic

Jeremy is keen to assert what is objectionable to him: both the monumentalizing inclination that nation-states in Black Dogs seem party to, and the telling of relatively simply stories in place of complex historical circumstances. He tries to claim from the
beginning of the novel that ideologically grounded readings that make interpretable the otherwise mysterious dogs for example, by mapping them symbolically to a narrative frame (like June’s life story or her mysticism) are contrived:

Turning points are the inventions of storytellers and dramatists, a necessary mechanism when a life is reduced to, traduced by a plot, when a morality must be distilled from a sequence of actions, when an audience must be sent home with something unforgettable to make a character’s growth. Seeing the light, the moment of truth, the turning point – surely we borrow there from Hollywood or the Bible to make retroactive sense of an overcrowded memory. June’s ‘black dogs.’ Sitting here at the bedside, notebook in my lap, privileged with a glimpse of her void, sharing in the vertigo, I found these almost nonexistent animals too comforting. (27)

Jeremy immediately asserts his suspicion that June’s narration of her own life, has “worked things out rather [too] well” (17). Jeremy is keen to establish distance between his sense of meaning and June’s. Jeremy asserts his ability to circumvent this kind of “entrapment,” and reach instead a point of “historical accuracy”:

It was family lore, a story burnished with repetition, no longer remembered so much as incanted, like a prayer got by heart. As far a June was concerned, it was to be the centerpiece of my memoir, just as it was in her own story of her life – the defining moment, the experience that redirected, the revealing truth by whose light all previous conclusions had to be rethought. It was a story whose historical accuracy was of less significance than the function it served. It was a myth, all the more powerful for being upheld as documentary. (26)
Jeremy derogatively applies the term “story” to June’s position on the encounter with the dogs. This position is shared by Bernard’s notion that June’s reading is no more than “poetic truth” (63).

Francois Flahault’s study of the roots of *Malice* explains the process of delimitation that Jeremy enacts by his skepticism towards June’s tendency to mythologize:

> When it comes to narratives which rebel against reason, or do not propose to illustrate ideas, they are quite free to go their own way, but on condition that they remain within the enclosure of literature; this word ‘literature,’ with its aura of the modern values of Art and the Artist, thus discreetly fulfills the function of a *cordon sanitaire*. (107)

What could be characterized as an exorcism, of a certain type of understanding, by re-inscribing the terms of its genre, allows rational persons like Jeremy to banish this now devalued mystery to a position distant from themselves. The underlying motivation for Jeremy’s skepticism is a determined inclination to question June’s account of those unknown forces that might threaten him as safely bound by meaning.

Jeremy’s position is representative of a much larger ideological tradition than his individual skepticism might suggest. In their 1944 book *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the project of the Enlightenment as a whole is predicated on the notion that Reason must supersede a myth-making means of understanding the world, which it radically opposes: “The program of the Enlightenment was the disenchantment of the world; the dissolution of myths and the substitution of knowledge for fancy” (3). The grounds for this determined exorcism is an assumption
that Myth is based upon an irrational fear of the unpredictability (the incomprehensibility) of the world around us. The reasoning subject cannot allow the mysterious or protean element, which Reason claims Myth tolerates, to stand, since “there is to be no mystery – which means, too, no wish to reveal mystery” (5). It is almost possible to perceive Jeremy’s professed mode of thought in Horkheimer and Adorno’s claim that Myth-making should be discredited as an irresponsible contrivance of understanding:

It [the Enlightenment] asserted that in the authority of universal concepts, there was still discernable fear of the demonic spirits which men sought to portray in magic rituals, hoping thus to influence nature. From now on, matter would at last be mastered without any illusion of ruling or inherent powers, of hidden qualities. For the Enlightenment, whatever does not conform to the rule of computation and utility is suspect. So long as it can develop undisturbed by any outward repression, there is no holding it. (6)

What is further introduced in this move then, is the suggestion of something fundamentally threatening in the adherence to ideological grand narratives, which helps to drive Reason’s denunciation of it. To consent to Myth-making, reasoning subjects like Jeremy attempt to argue, is to manufacture a meaning akin to June’s understanding of the black dogs, a contrivance that only purports to locate a threateningly mutable universe. Thus one of Reason’s tactics, in order to combat this fearful and threatening irresponsibility on the part of Myth-making, is to demote it to merely playful storytelling.
Jeremy as Storyteller

But Jeremy remains, despite his protestations to the contrary, a storyteller too. He is not ultimately able to dislocate himself from a process of reductive meaning-making, motivated by a fear very much akin to the mythmaking inclination he sees in June, and attempts to reject. Horkheimer and Adorno implicate Reason in the fear with which Myth has had to contend, since “Man imagines himself free from fear when there is no longer anything unknown. That determines the course of demythologization, of enlightenment, which compounds the animate with the inanimate. Enlightenment is mythic fear turned radical” (15). Raymond Geuss’s article on Horkheimer perhaps puts this parallel position in the most pointed terms: “Human history is nothing but a series of attempts to deal with our overwhelming fear of what is other or unknown” (1). If the overriding fear is perennial then, the need to overcome it can also be considered as consistent an underlying goal for Reason as it is for Myth, so that the terms of their notions of “understanding” are bound together:

Another way to react to fear of the unknown is by separating it strictly from the self and subjecting it to a system of identifying categories the better to keep track of it and perhaps eventually control it. This second reaction is that of enlightenment: a rigid fixation on self-preservation as the absolute overriding goal and an incipiently paranoid concern to classify everything so as to be able to subordinate it to the attainment of that goal. Looked at, then, from sufficient distance enlightenment and myth seem similar. (Geuss, 1)

As a rational, skeptical subject, Jeremy is not exempt from a profound fear of the indeterminate that both nation-states and individuals commonly attempt to purge. Jeremy
is no more independent of this than June. He tells stories, and each one is the reductive closing down of a complex underlying circumstance. In *Black Dogs*, this process is enacted on three principal occasions: in Jeremy's visits to Majdanek and Berlin, and in his narration of the dog's story that closes the book. By dint of his inclination to tell reductive stories and map them over politically complex circumstances, Jeremy effectively acts as an agent of the national regimes at these moments.

Jeremy’s stories are monuments to the insidious conditioning influence of the nation over some individuals. *Black Dogs* traces Jeremy's repeated and troubled confrontations with amorphous, conceptually awesome spaces such as Majdanek, and his determined efforts to put them down into reductive stories that fail to render their weight, just as the nation-state's monuments seek to do.

**The Majdanek story**

Jeremy’s visit to the Majdanek concentration camp demonstrates both his profound, primal fear of the politically substantive reality of their horrors, and his rather meager attempts to cope with this fear by forcing a contrived love story into juxtaposition with them. His journey there—walking through the farming town (of Lublin) located next to the camp—immediately rouses in him a comparison between the town as limited and substantive, and the horrors of the camp as somehow beyond individual interpretability: “They lay side by side, Lublin and Majdanek, matter and antimatter” (87). Jeremy repeatedly experiences the limitless scale of the horrors of Germany's past. The huts are so much “more numerous than I had imagined” that he says they “fill the horizon” (88).
Jenny and Jeremy are literally silenced by the immensity of the camp and what has
happened there:

We did not speak for an hour … We followed a party of schoolchildren into a hut
where wire cages were crammed full of shoes, tens of thousands of them,
flattened and curled like dried fruit. In another hut, more shoes, and in a third,
unbelievably, more, no longer caged but spilling in their thousands across the
floor[…]The extravagant scale, the easy-to-say numbers – tens and hundreds of
thousands, millions – denied the imagination its proper sympathies, its rightful
grasp of the suffering. (88)

What Jeremy concludes here is that such a scale denies the possibility of meaningfully
“grasping” what the camp connotes. This word is particularly interesting—his desire to
“grasp” is at one and the same time a desire to understand, and to take hold of and locate.
His reaction suggests fear of a confrontation with an object that is boundless; boundless
in that it cannot be delineated by any act of interpretation.

Perhaps most tellingly of all is Jeremy’s almost panic-stricken reaction to Jenny’s
aside about the sign that is inscribed with the names of “so many hundreds of thousands”
of the camp's victims (88). Jenny reads the omission of Jewish names from the sign as an
indication of an anti-Semitic conspiracy that she then ties to the black dogs themselves.
Through this act, she asserts a meaning for both the camp and the dogs—Jenny believes
by this move that both signifiers can be read, and can even intersect to give each other
meaning. Jeremy’s reaction to this reading may initially seem extreme. He tries to
“ignore” it, but “a residual truth was sufficient to transform Majdanek for me in an instant
from a monument, an honorable civic defiance of oblivion, to a disease of the imagination

178
and a living peril, a barely conscious connivance with evil” (87) [my italics]. This is a densely woven statement that needs to be unpacked. First, Jeremy suggests that before Jenny speaks he thinks of the camp as “a monument,”—a meaningful and stable cultural node. The monument’s signified meaning is then given: “an honorable civil defiance of oblivion.” Until Jenny’s comment, Jeremy perceives the camp as it is now as representing a struggle with a threatening infinite, in which the solidity of the meaning of the monument itself is at stake. In this battle, he clearly aligns himself with the project to make the camp mean in unequivocal terms, to make it limited as the oblivion is not. What Jenny then introduces into this position is a fluid and unconstrained metanarrative of conspiracy and elliptical meaning (since she does not “explain” what she means by raising the black dogs) that Jeremy feels is aligned with the threat of the infinite he wishes to curtail. Positioned, as we are, so close to the over-determined horrors of a “concentration camp,” the real source of Jeremy’s horror, the limitless evils of the Third Reich, may be hard to extricate. That the threat Jenny enacts is “barely conscious” seems only to highlight how insidious the effects of this kind of destabilizing interpretative move can be. Jeremy’s distress is only underlined by his final explicit indication that her statement is akin to the infinite horrors of the camp—that it should actually be considered “evil.”

Jeremy's fear betrays a profound support for the concept of the nation, since he finds the notion of an infinite horror associable with Germany's past unbearable. To allow this limitless horror to stand is unacceptable to him, since then the confines of the nation would remain unclear. This is demonstrated in the way the Majdenak section ends. Jeremy's forceful rejection of the threateningly boundless evils he is initially compelled
to attribute to the German nation is reconstituted as a contrived love story that he directly juxtaposes with Majdanek. The two emotional reactions, of love and horror, are located in direct opposition even before they get to the camp, as Jeremy’s “lovesick” state cannot coexist in the proximity of a node imbued with such boundless connotations:

> The kiss, the feel of it, the extraordinary fact of it, the expectation of another and of what lay beyond, had preoccupied me for twenty-four hours. But now, as we headed out through the drab outskirts of Warsaw, conscious of our destination, the kiss receded before us.” (86)

What the experience of touring the camp produces in Jeremy is also telling. As he walks away from the camp he feels compelled to kiss Jenny, and then they walk to a nearby hotel and “spend three days there, having dismissed the driver. Ten months later, we were married” (90). The section is thus bracketed by an incongruous and contrived love story, born of an impulsive reaction to having “been released from [the] long captivity” (88) of the horror with which he has been confronted. He includes it as a means to counter this horrifying scale then, a fearful retreat into “Love.” Jeremy has attempted in this move to establish his individual, intimate, love story a clear distinction with the limitless, indiscriminate “evil” which Majdanek suggests nation-states commit.

**The Berlin story**

Berlin shares with Majdanek an indeterminacy that challenges our ability to render it in simple terms, though in this case it is its multifarious nature, rather than its conceptual scale, that presents the problem for Jeremy. In a contemporary context in which nations are one of the typical means by which we understand and structure the
world, the notion of a post-nation space might seem farfetched, or even untenable. *Black Dogs* though, revolves around McEwan’s envisioning of just such a space, in Berlin in 1989, which can plausibly be considered, at least briefly, beyond the hegemonic influence of the nation. The fall of the Berlin Wall suggested for McEwan that there was a real chance for more subtle, complex interpersonal and communal relations among people than those proposed by any national or supra-national entity. Personal relations are not defined here by allegiances to nation-states. If anything, they are defined by a communal will to celebrate the dissolution of such an entity. Thus, in this space, "even the Germans were tourists" (71), dislocated in the melee of people from around the world who have descended on Berlin: “Our isolation had been mere chance, a hole in the crowd. Within seconds fifteen others were squeezed up around us, clicking cameras and calling excitedly in German, Japanese, Danish.” (70).

This liminal community in Berlin, formed briefly as East Germany evaporates and a reunited Germany has not yet solidified, remains in a state of flux, suggesting it cannot be easily interpreted. Sometimes contradictory facets seem to present themselves. At times, the group seems to have little or no agency for example (“A crowd is a slow, stupid creature, far less intelligent than any one of its members. This one was prepared to stand all night, with the patience of a dog, waiting for what we knew could not happen.” [65]), while at other moments they do seem to have active will, in defense of a fragile peace:

An officer walked up and down in front of the line, smoking and watching the crowd. Behind the soldiers rose the illuminated flanking façade of the Brandenburg Gate, with the flag of the Democratic Republic just stirring. Barriers
held the crowd back, and the moans of disappointment must have been for the
West Berlin police, who were positioning their vans in front of the concrete
blocks. As we arrived, someone tossed a full beer can at one of the soldiers. It
flew high and fast, trailing white foam picked out by the overhead lights, and as it
passed over the young soldier’s head there were immediate shouts of disapproval
from the crowd and calls in German for no violence. The spread of the sound
made me realize that there were dozens of people up in the trees. (64).

The benevolence of the apparently undirected crowd is all the more surprising
because of its diversity: "It was not difficult to push our way to the front. Now we were
among it, the crowd was more civilized, more varied than I had thought. Small children
sat on their parents’ shoulders, with a view as good as Bernard’s. Two students were
selling balloons and ice cream. A[n] old man with dark glasses and a white cane stood
still, with his head cocked, listening” (65). At still other moments, the crowd can itself
become malevolent: “The young man’s antagonists were a mixed bunch… It was true
that most of the crowd would have dismissed him as a crank and ignored him. Berlin was
a tolerant place, after all. But tonight there was just sufficient drunkenness, and a vague
sense in a few people that someone ought to be blamed for something – and the man with
the flag seemed to have found them all in one place.” (72). Bernard feels compelled to
intervene, and when a Nazi gang attack him the crowds seem unable or unwilling to
intervene to suppress the violence: “there was a groan of disapproval from the crowd, but
nobody moved” (75). For McEwan, Berlin at this historical moment is a space of
profound multiplicity and contradictions, and one that cannot easily be summarized.
There is no consistent and unitary will on the crowd’s part. Instead, disparate elements
rise and fall in their influence. It is an almost fantastical space of unreal detachment from larger political power structures.

However, the potential that this Berlin might offer for a new, truly multifarious envisioning of post-national space, is almost entirely quashed by Jeremy, who is determined to elide the individually repressive mentality of the Third Reich and GDR, and who cannot come to terms with the potentially new state of affairs that this space might gesture toward. Jeremy does observe the various contradictory strains in the space, but the Berlin section of the novel concludes with Jeremy recounting a story that wholeheartedly adopts June’s mysticism in order to subsume the complex, seemingly directionless agency of the crowds under an umbrella of purposeful greater powers at play. In the fight that breaks out, which nearly consumes Bernard, Jeremy turns the avoidance of this perilously close threat into something like a visitation, by a young German girl:

I saw two, perhaps three black boots withdrawing on the backswing. But they did not move. They froze in place, for just then there sprang a figure who whirled about us, lashing the boys with staccato sentences of piercing rebuke. It was a furious young woman … I recognized them as the two who had swished passed us on June 17th Street (76)

Grete’s arrival on the scene is depicted in hyperbolic terms not comfortably associable with Jeremy’s claims for rational skepticism, and then we see his transformation of luck, coincidence, or an indication of the independent good will of another, into an act of love by an estranged lover, June Tremaine, in order to rescue her husband:
I was anxious to have Bernard acknowledge the identity of his rescuer. I asked her name – Grete – and repeated it to him. He was concentrating on his pain, he was bent over, and he may have been in mild shock, but I persisted in the interest of – what exactly? Unsettling the rationalist? In him? In me? … There followed the hiatus of easing Bernard in [to the taxi…] during which time I hoped he would at last take a look at his guardian angel, the incarnation of June. (76)

Like the jarring elision of Majdanek into a love story, Jeremy pushes us to conclude that in Berlin there are overarching powers at work that can make the amorphous into a coherent, structured story. We have seen that Jeremy feels some discomfort along with Bernard at the building of the Gestapo museum, which would reductively memorialize some of Germany's more gruesome history, and in so doing would solidify the national object from which it came. Here though, Jeremy effectively acts comparably when he imposes an inconsequential love story over this heterogeneous, post-national space. Both the German authorities and Jeremy seek in differing ways to delimit the overwhelming scope of Berlin at this historical moment.

**The Dogs' Story**

The most pointed example of monumental storytelling is from the episode that gives the book its title, an encounter that seems capable of being read in a number of different ways. Jeremy claims he does not wish to reify the myth, but the novel closes with a recounting of the event that both makes it concrete and closes off its previously nebulous nature. The dogs' story is another example of Jeremy's inclination to suppress overwhelming complexity to a simple narrative, in this case of good and evil in battle.
This inclination parallels the monumentalizing efforts of the nation, which has attempted, by dint of the construction of memorials, to curtail the threateningly infinite scope of the horrors of nations' past (in the case of Majdenek), and the terrifyingly amorphous possibility of a post-national future (as in the Berlin of '89).

The dog’s meaning has been contested by many through the course of the book. Jeremy’s wife Jenny ties the dogs to an anti-Semitic conspiracy (87). For the Maire the dogs are fundamentally explicable as trained rapists, exemplars of the horrors of twentieth century European national histories:

“We had this once before,” he said. “Last winter. Remember?”

“I did not hear about it,” Mme Auriac said.

“It was one dog last time. But same thing, same reason.”

“Reason?” Bernard asked.

“You mean you didn’t know. Ah, c’est une histoire” (131).

Bernard Tremaine’s response to the Maire is the most antagonistic of these competing interpretations. He views the incident completely logically. (As June paraphrases it, he sees merely “a young girl frightened by a couple of dogs on a country path” [35]). He asserts vehemently that June’s understanding of the dogs is specious: “This belief that life really does have rewards and punishments, that underneath it all there’s a deeper pattern of meaning beyond what we give it ourselves – that’s all so much consoling magic” (57). His perception of June’s reading is founded on a rationalism that precludes her mysticism, so that she does not, for him, understand the dogs at all: “My wife might have been interested in poetic truth, or spiritual truth, or her own private truth but she didn’t give a damn for truth, for the facts, for the kind of truth that two people could recognize
independently of each other. She made patterns, she invented myths. Then she made the
facts fit them” (63). June herself is aware that these others are challenging her reading of
the event, admitting that “I know that everyone thinks I’ve made too much of it” (35).
The repeated recounting of the dogs’ story by all those who compete to assert its meaning
underlines the novel’s preoccupation with contested meaning-making. Jeremy notes that,
among the Tremaine family in general: “I had heard of it in Poland years before, when I
had met Jenny. I had heard it often enough from Bernard, who was not, in the strictest
sense, a witness. It had been reenacted at Christmases and other family gatherings”
(McEwan 27).

Critics too, have seen a central indeterminacy in the dogs various possible
meanings. Jack Slay suggests, in line with Bernard’s fixation, that “All of June’s and
Bernard’s beliefs, as well as the novel itself, balance upon the confrontation with the
black dogs” (143). In his assessment of the book’s critical reception though, Slay makes
clear that the dogs are an opening in the narrative that should be allowed to remain
indeterminate:

Critics… were fascinated by the symbolic constitution of the dogs, variously
referring to them as “incarnations of the savagely irrational eruptions that occur
throughout history,” “a terrifying embodiment of the evil and irrationality at
loose in the world,” the “intimations of revived fascism and the Hound of Hell.”
The black dogs are all of these, and more. (145)

Slay is cognizant of the dogs’ potential then, but Jeremy is certainly not. The
indeterminacy of this central node has driven the entire narrative, but its foreclosure by
Jeremy suppresses all these open possibilities into just one: an attack by evil creatures
that prove the existence of spiritual powers coming to protect June. Jeremy tells us, “They emanated meaning,” but this is only a subjective response. Jeremy makes the dogs mean as he sees fit. As June is terrified by the dogs’ unrestrained potential (“the creatures that blocked the path seventy yards ahead were dogs only in outline. In size they resembled mythical beasts…” (120), she “tried to find the space within her for the presence of God” (125), a force that might curtail their power:

[She] thought she discerned the faintest of outlines, a significant emptiness she never noticed before, as the back of her skull. It seemed to lift and flow upward and outward, streaming suddenly into a oval penumbra many feet high, an envelope of rippling energy, or, as she tried to describe it later, of ‘coloured invisible light’ that surrounded her and contained her. (125)

Jeremy recounts June’s panicked struggle to try to place the dogs in a narrative that would mean they were no longer absolutely indeterminate. He tells us June feels that in the light she had “discovered something extraordinary,” which makes her “determined to survive.” In this moment, she has acted to contain this threat within a mystical or theological account. The result is a new impulse to survive, and it is a move comparable to Jeremy’s in telling stories while at Majdanek and in Berlin. The black dogs do not emanate meaning then, but are another nodal point that Jeremy employs to pin down a complex of uncertainty to what Flauhault has called a narrative “cordon sanitaire” (107).

Crucially for me then, this telling of the black dogs story is not, as Coster and others have suggested,\textsuperscript{lxvi} McEwan's failure to keep the dog’s episode indeterminate, but Jeremy's. McEwan quite deliberately sets Jeremy up for these problematic encounters with the immeasurable evil that nation-states are capable of, and the boundless scope of
human interactions underlying nationalist structures of authority. He does so in order to illustrate, through Jeremy's failures to cope with the confrontation, the persistently overwhelming power of the nation-state and the relative weakness of the individual in general.

In the dogs’ episode a further element is added to this depiction of nation-states and individuals closely linked by their antagonism towards the infinite. After the dogs have attacked her, June feels a deep connection to the French countryside as “home” (142), and she goes on almost immediately to buy a cottage there that she settles in for several decades. It is, we are told, the dogs themselves that “underpinned her [new found] joy” (144) in the place. The rootedness in the space which she feels seems one aspect of the realization of national investment, for it is precisely in the face of the limitless threat that June is driven to ground herself in France, and in the house which becomes her own monument to her defeat of the dogs. June enacts a nation-building drive in this way then. She turns to investment in particular national territory, and the physical memorials which nation-states have been shown to employ to demarcate the limits of a complex reality, only when confronted by a deeply threatening indeterminate. Not only does Jeremy act like the nation-state in the way he valorizes the dogs’ episode then, but he also renders June's initial steps towards a national affiliation of her own.

**Conclusion**

What we glimpse of the camp’s limitless horrors, of Berlin’s multiplicity, and of the dog’s indeterminacy, is very much in spite of Jeremy’s flawed efforts to elide them. Majdanek seems briefly to be overwhelming, but is eventually displaced by an
incongruous romance story, as he falls in love with Jenny literally as they walk out past the camp’s perimeter. Jeremy is keen to assert his objective distance from the mysticism his mother-in-law June has embraced since her encounter with the black dogs. However, in Berlin the multifarious crowd whose agency is so equivocal is reduced to another story of love, this one infused with a mystical intervention by June, from beyond the grave, to save her estranged husband from being attacked. Finally Jeremy tells the story of the black dogs, which masks their complexity with a simple tale of good and evil in battle.

This is our final instance of the negotiations that subjects in the late twentieth century conduct with the metanarratives of the nation-state surrounding them. Each expresses a desire to break from the state’s defining influence, but the tendency of the nation-state to generate readings is ultimately analogous to, perhaps even rooted in, a similar urge on the part of the individual. Both are driven to try to control an otherwise mutable and protean universe by dint of the stories they can narrate. As we can see from both *Black Dogs* and *Free Fall* before it, even those who struggle with the nation’s hegemonic historical metanarratives cannot help but enact these same types of stories as part and parcel of their own understanding of the world. The struggle is deeply ingrained, heroic, determined and enduring, but it is also limited and restricted by powerful national forces. It is a struggle that is unending – perhaps ‘unwinnable’ – but one that it appears from this survey will continually be re-enacted.
APPENDIX

Figure 1.1
and partly that they are somehow just a little wanting in one of the three circles of natural affection, like this—

I mean that the central dot being, say, ——, she has the first, or inmost circle, *i.e.* family affection, all right, and also the third or outermost circle, *i.e.* affection for humanity; but the middle circle, *i.e.* affection for the family, or company, of friends and comrades composed of one’s own nation, is somehow fainter than the others, like the dotted line; and people who are at all short of this affection often cannot believe that for other people to feel it passionately is anything more than a mistake or a prejudice or a disability of soul, although they are sometimes people who most vehemently prefer their own children to other people’s and would back their own relations through thick and thin against members of other families.
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http://dspace.dial.pipex.com/l.j.hurst/awbibbio.htm

194


FOOTNOTES

i Levenback’s study is concerned centrally with the ways in which Woolf’s work dealt with the First World War, and with the implications for Woolf’s view of her nation. Levenback is inclined to hyperbole on both topics, for example going so far as to assert that “to those who have been civilians in the war, Clarissa Dalloway and Peter Walsh in particular, not only death in the war but also war itself has left them untouched” (Levenback 48), or that “what ‘they’ as representatives of the social system want is the death of Septimus” (76). Such claims are overstated and prove reductive, but the broad implication that Mrs. Dalloway can justifiably be read in more antagonistic and confrontational terms than has sometimes been the case across the history of the book’s criticism is intriguing. While it should be dealt with a good deal of circumspection then, what Levenback offers to Woolf criticism is a determined assertion of sinister or even malicious threads in the novel, which, in spite of Levenback’s exaggeration, are traceable on a number of levels when readers are made aware of such possibilities. Also see Hussey 91.

ii As Kathy Phillips puts it, World War One “is presented in all Woolf’s books not as an anomaly or an external threat to British society, but rather as its inevitable result” (1).

iii “Far from following social events, Clarissa cares more for her roses than ‘for the Albanians, or was it the Armenians?’ Although it might seem inevitable occasionally to confuse foreign names, the magnitude of the problem in Armenia makes it less likely and more insensitive that Clarissa would forget it.”(Phillips 7).

iv See for example Phillips, who begins “From her first book to her last, Woolf consistently satirizes social institutions” [my italics] (vii). Her conclusion also repeatedly restates Woolf’s unswerving position on “the dominant ideology of her time” (221).

v In characteristically hyperbolic terms, Levenback goes so far as to argue that “Septimus in death… as in life, is hidden as far as possible, both his death and mangled body potentially giving rise to memories of war” (77).

vi “For having lived in Westminster – how many years now? Over twenty, one feels even the midst of the traffic, or waking at night, Clarrissa was positive, a particular hush, or solemnity; an indescribable pause; a suspense… before Big Ben strikes. There! Out it boomed. First a warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable.” (4).

vii See above 19, and Dalloway 9.

viii See Phillips 201.

ix Also see Esty 93: “Seeking to express a troubled half-love for England, Woolf presents an uncertain performance of – rather than a thorough ironization of or a complete identification with – nationalism.”

x “It is only in the last fifteen years or so that Woolf has been recognized as a social thinker, let alone a someone with a sophisticated grasp of complex ideologies” (Phillips xi). Mark Hussey cites a number of critics who have “done much to dispel [the idea] that she was apolitical” (6). In the same volume Roger Poole asserts that Woolf’s “books have
a tight grip on the events of her time, are even obsessed by them (Hussey 79). There have also been numerous studies like that of Celia Marshik, which demonstrate Woolf’s regular practice of researching contemporary cultural events for use in her writing (Davis 91-97).

xi This fondness for the south extends to Montague’s sense of the distinction between northern and southern Britain. In a manuscript version of the essay “The Pennine” (254), Montague writes of the mountain range as an outlying bone of rock [running] down from the rocky mass of northern Britain into the soft flesh of England.”

xii He writes a letter to his commanding officer stating where he is, but the farm woman he befriend puts it in the fire, unbeknownst to him.

xiii At the beginning of the war desertions made up 1.5% of the total British forces (409 in total). In 1915 that figure had jumped to 2,433; in 1916 to 9,000; in 1917 it reached 21,871 (Ellis 181).

xiv A War Office instruction stated: “Desertion during active service is one of the most serious crimes a soldier can commit, a fact which does not appear to be everywhere sufficiently appreciated by the officers who as presidents and members of courts martial have to deal with this offence, as sentences in not a few cases have been exceedingly lenient” (qtd in Corns and Hughes-Wilson, 216).


xvi O’Malley writes of the close parallels between particular experiences in China and the novel she set there: “On our way back to Peking, after climbing Mt Conolly and spending two nights at the temple of the Jade Emperor, we stopped for lunch at Tan Chueh Ssu; we entered this famous temple from behind, and ate our lunch in that delicious little corner courtyard with the island pavilion – where half the party in Peking Picnic are cornered by bandits, and spend such an uncomfortable time till they are rescued, thanks to Hubbard’s napoleonic machinations. That is how I knew that it was possible to get out, unseen, over the temple wall by back and foot method, as Lilah did to raise the alarm; and that is how I also came to know of the existence of the back entrance to Tan Chueh Ssu, where the foreign party are so dramatically rescued by soldiers of the British Legation Guard when they are being marched off into captivity by the Tao-pings” (Facts and Fictions 23). There are also a number of points in the narrative of Peking Picnic when the narrator’s descriptions of the Chinese countryside seem to move into non-fiction writing on O’Malley’s part (see, for example, 79).

xvii To narrate the full extent of Orwell’s theoretical critique of English norms and values over the course of his writing career would require a study that would dwarf this chapter (and such research has, of course, been completed more than once elsewhere). See, for example, Stephen Ingle, The Social and Political Thought of George Orwell: A Reassessment. New York: Routledge, 2006, and George Orwell: Into the Twenty-First Century, Thomas Cushman and John Rodden (eds). London: Paradigm, 2004.
See also 74: “I think of Frenchmen,” said Mrs Leroy, “as the clerks in God’s Office. They’re clever and shrewd, and busy – they nose about everything and assess everything, and their card-indexing system is simply perfect. But the great Englishman – like Shakespeare and Bridges – and the great Germans, have minds more like God himself – patient, brooding, tender.”

See also 113: Prof Vinstead: “Are you very homesick?” […] “It isn’t really homesickness,” she said; “it’s being one person in two lives. You see I go home fairly often – the children are there.” […] “So I can’t really settle down to this life, though I love it in a way – and of course I can’t settle down in the other, because I live mostly in this one. So I am in two halves all the time.”

See also 27: “The light could not lie more tenderly in the upper reaches of the sky above an English garden – not even above the garden at Garsover. And with the thought she was there. Her worlds met for a moment under the sky that arched over both, and then that distant one invaded the present and blotted it out” (27). Also see 109.

See also 14: “It was dark and slutish as all Burmese rooms are” (14).

See 17: “The first thing that one noticed in Flory was a hideous birthmark stretching in a ragged crescent down his left cheek, from the eye to the corner of the mouth. Seen from the left side his face had a battered woe-begone look, as though the birthmark had been a bruise – for it was dark blue in colour. He was quite aware of its hideousness. And at all times, when he was not alone, there was a sidelongness about his movements, as he manoeuvred constantly to keep the birthmark out of sight.” Also see 63.

See also 25: “Good God, what are we supposed to be doing in this country? If we aren’t going to rule, why the devil don’t we clear out? Here we are, supposed to be governing a set of damn black swine who’ve been slaves since the beginning of history, and instead of ruling them in the only way they understand, we go and treat them as equals.”

He continues: “It’s all this law and order that’s done for us,” said Westfield gloomily. The ruin of the Indian Empire through too much legality was a recurrent theme with Westfield. According to him, nothing save a full-size rebellion, and the consequent reign of martial law, could save the Empire from decay. (32).

Flory shares in the sense of English colonial decline in his conversations with Veraswami: “It was a joke between the two men to pretend that the British Empire was an aged female patient of the doctor’s” (37).

Also see 70: […] it occurred to him – a thing he had actually forgotten in the stagnant air of Burma – that he was still young enough to begin over again. He would live a year in civilized society, he would find some girl who did not mind his birthmark – a civilized girl, not a pukka memsahib – and he would marry her and enjoy ten, fifteen
more years of Burma. Then they would retire – he would be worth twelve or fifteen thousand pounds on retirement, perhaps. They would buy a cottage in the country, surround themselves with friends, books, their children, animals. They would be free forever, of the small [sic] of pukka sahibdom. He would forget Burma, the horrible country that had come near to ruining him.” Also 178: “Ah, he must have her, that was certain! Only by marrying her could his life be salvaged.”

She had formed quite a picture of India, from the other passengers’ conversation[...] In anticipation she tasted the agreeable atmosphere of Clubs, with punkahs flapping and barefoot white-turbaned boys reverently salaaming; and maidans where bronzed Englishmen with little clipped moustaches galloped to and fro, whacking polo balls. It was almost as nice a being rich, the way people lived in India” (96).

Owen O’Malley suggests that he is in reality conscious of a potential threat of violence from the local population. He recounts an incident which has a number of parallels with those in *Peking Picnic*: “One day we landed to shoot snipe in paddy fields surrounded by bunds or embankments rising ten or so feet above the deep mud in which the rice plants are bedded out. As we were have lunch at an intersection of these bunds we observed advancing towards us simultaneously from all four quarters small parties of Chinese dressed only in loincloths and armed with rifles and revolvers. No road was retreat was open to us nor any other course than to sit still and look unconcerned; but although the inhabitants of these delta villages combine piracy with agriculture and live beyond the reach of the law, my fears for the safety of myself and my friends proved unfounded. The villagers decided we were harmless, and after an exchange of mutually unintelligible compliments left us to finish our meal and go on shooting” (*Phantom Caravan* 93).

In O’Malley’s next novel after *Peking Picnic*, *The Ginger Griffin* (1934), the central character Amber witnesses a kidnapping in the middle of Peking, but it is a thread of the narrative that is never really explored in any depth.

See also 135: “In India you are not judged for what you do, you are judged for what you are. The merest breath of suspicion against his loyalty can ruin an Oriental official.”

See also Kyin on 11: “We must persuade the Europeans that the doctor holds disloyal anti-British opinions. That is far worse than bribery; they expect a native official to take bribes. But let they suspect his loyalty even for a moment, and he is ruined.”

“There was a second during which Ellis did not know what he was doing. In that second he had hit out with all his strength, and the cane landed, crack! Right across the boy’s eyes. The boy recoiled with a shriek, and in the same instant the other four had thrown themselves upon Ellis” (242).

See 278: “It was not what he had done that horrified her. He might have committed a thousand abominations and she could have forgiven him. But not after that shameful, squalid scene, and the devilish ugliness of his disfigured face in that moment. It was, finally, the birthmark that had damned him.”

*Invention of Tradition*, p 15.


xli http://dspace.dial.pipex.com/l.j.hurst/awbibbio.htm

xlii “I’m not going to win because the only way I’d see I came in first would be in winning meant that I was going to escape the coppers after doing the biggest bank job of my life, but winning means the exact opposite, no matter how they try to kill or kid me, means running right into their white-gloved wall-barred hands and grinning mugs and staying there for the rest of my natural long life of stone-breaking anyway, but stone-breaking in the way I want to do it and not in the way they tell me.” (45)

xliii The AYM were a 1950s literary movement whose central characters are perhaps best summed up by Walter Allen’s review of the first novel to be considered one of the group, *Lucky Jim*: “A new hero has risen among us […] he is consciously, even conscientiously graceless. His face, when not dead-pan, is set in a snarl of exasperation” (Carpenter 75). It is important to concede that that a number of studies have concluded that the AYM were an invention of over-jealous journalists of the period, and so its status as a literary group remains doubtful (See Morrison 246, and Carpenter 83).

xliv Phillip Larkin and Kingsley Amis are located as the initiating pair of writers in the movement in Humphrey Carpenter’s recent study of the AYM. The two were born in the midlands and the south respectively, and both educated at Oxford. Carpenter tells us that Kingsley Amis was even described as one of the “University Wits” by the *Spectator* (77). Carpenter also argues that Sillitoe and Waterhouse published too late to be considered within the AYM movement, before it was “old hat” (204).

xlv The northern command which declares independence is housed in the castle museum, within the historic fortification of the city of York.

xlv “The old man looked up from some invoices and said: ‘And you can start getting bloody well dressed before you come down in the morning.’ So far the dialogue was taking a fairly conventional route and I was tempted to throw in one of the old stand-bys, ‘Why do you always begin your sentences with an “And”?‘” (9)
“You get paid by the joke then, or what? Or do you get a salary coming in each week?”
“Well, it’s vair vair difficult to say,” I said. I had noticed before that I often started to imitate the person I was talking to.” [my italics](71)

There are numerous similar examples. Council of the North’s leader Fitzwallace’s dictatorship begins with a speech on Granada, which concludes: “‘...and so[...]on behalf of the Council of the North, whose servant - after all - I am, I’m here to tell you that at half-past seven this evening the counties of Cumberland, Westmoreland, Lancashire, Northumberland, Durham, and Yorkshire, became an independent state with its capital in the ancient city of York. From that moment we were free of the tyrannies of London and the South-East. Free to make our own laws. Free to spend our own money on our own needs. Free for the first time in a thousand years - ever since those French came over and stole our land and belongings.’ He poured out a glass of water from the carafe on the table, and lifted it to the television camera. ‘Friends,’ he said, with burning sincerity, ‘Northerners, fellow countrymen. I give you The North.’” (83).

Also see North commander Olsen in conversation with Southern minister’s wife Valerie:
“‘You do hate outsiders,’ she said. ‘Well perhaps,’ he said. ‘No it’s not that really; not outsiders. You’re an outsider; I don’t hate you. But anyone hates exploiters. We feel we’ve been exploited - always. We feel the cream of the country, its wealth, its energy, have all been drained away to the South.’” (136)

http://dspace.dial.pipex.com/l.j.hurst/awbibbio.htm

See also (54): “‘But what are we, we Northerners?’ he was saying... ‘Where do our roots go down? Where’s are real home? Are we Scandinavians, really?’” (54).

“Macey [northern troop commander] and his men moved off in trucks and light armoured vehicles at 9p.m., leaving Manchester by the Wilmslow Road. It was his intention to keep, as far a possible, to secondary roads, at least until he was well into Southern territory. The problem was to know where exactly the frontier of sympathy between the two areas of the country lay” (84).

Southern Gen. Sir Maxwell Howard goes north: “He had expected a clear drive a far, at least, as Bawtry. Beyond that he had expected a clearly defined line of wire, roadblocks and all the other rusting paraphernalia of formal warfare. On the one side would be what he described as ‘loyalists,’ and on the other ‘damned rebels.’ But through Nottinghamshire and northern Lincolnshire, resistance stiffened sharply” (121).

Marjorie’s southern acquaintance Nora shows her a blouse she owns: “It was pale in colour and of dainty appearance. Auntie Clara would have scorned it as cheap and flimsy, but it was even more fashionable in shape than the luxurious attire of Bertha West [a rich northern friend]” (47).

She similarly sums up her attitude towards one southern friend, Elinor, who makes a subservient comment about the head-teacher by thinking “Just like a Southener” (139).

“‘Ere, rear, rear, watch your bloody language! With your flaming this and flaming that! At meal-times! You’re not in bloody London yet you know!’” (14).
“[the carpet bombing of] Nottingham had done far more than inflame the North. It had inflamed people everywhere against an act of ruthless oppression by a central authority” (140).

“The City” is the name usually given for the financial centre of England (as Wall Street stand metonymically for the same in the United States), rather than merely the conurbation.

Marjorie concurs: “At any rate I shall always have dreams,’ was her last coherent thought before she fell asleep. ‘But it can't be very healthy to find one's only happiness in unreality.”’ (158)

See also p.8: “[...] when on a raw and frosty morning I get up at five o'clock and stand shivering my belly off on the stone floor and all the rest still have another hour to snooze before the bells go, slink downstairs through all the corridors to the big outside door with a permit running-card in my fist, I feel like the first and last man on the world, both at once, if you can believe what I'm trying to say.”

See also Kinkead-Weekes and Gregor 169: “Sammy cannot accept any determinism in which causes lead to effects by unalterable laws,” and Bernard 49: “Sammy must reconcile himself to the disconcerting intimation that all reassuring sense of closure has departed from a world sentenced to uncertainty and relativity, that the only solution to the riddle of experience lies in the dissolution of all patterns.”

See also Boyle 5: “Halde has fooled himself into believing that Sammy possesses vital information concerning the escape plans... It is clear, however, that Halde is mistaken” (Boyle 5).

Note here the “row” of Nations dismissed by this projection of Halde, a parallel with Sammy’s own row of useless socio-cultural forces – both seek to overcome forces which oppose the power of their respective centers: the German nation and Sammy’s independent will.

See Hansen 46, “…the cell is a projection of Sammy’s ailing conscience,” Delbaere 100, “This is what Sammy is now doing, climbing the different steps that will lead him to a full confrontation with his own nature” (Delbaere 100), Halio 127, or, for a Lacanian perspective on the same issue, Redpath 127.

“Coster finds the concluding sections of the novel inconsistent with the rest. He argues that an authoritative narrative is offered in this final part, while earlier sections have demonstrated that no such thing is possible” (Malcolm, 133).