'English Literature' as ideology

Michael Gardiner [1] 17 December 2010

This essay traces the cultural embodiment of the British state in ‘English Literature’ in the period from 1790 to 1810, its uses and abuses, and the demise of this seminal metaphor for the ‘nationless nation’ which began in the 1970’s. The latter period saw a post-imperial unravelling of the culture of the unwritten British constitution, where the former had seen its settlement.

Eng Lit (English Literature), as a discipline of study and textual circulation, is not English. On the contrary, English Literature is a thoroughly British discipline – in a sense the cultural form of the British state – and its greatest period of blossoming was during the Pax Britannica of the 1810s to the 1910s, and was dependent on the imperial export of highly idealised ‘organic’ English values.

If it was the horrors of 1915 that severely destabilised the imperial mission of English Literature, the inter-war period saw a contestation between on one hand English values which must be (re)created from the rubble of the British imperial mission (often based on action, physicality, anti-enclosure rambling, and the chance personal encounter); and on the other, an instrumental British defence taking various rearguard forms including New Criticism (as well as logical positivism, new eugenics, managed urban development, and a raft of enclosure-esque laws). This state-national discipline revives further with the cultural use of the fear of invasion in 1939-42, but gradually becomes overwhelmed by national factors from the late 1950s – not only in Scotland, far less only in Scottish political nationalism, but as a UK-wide phenomenon which gradually questions the form of the organic constitutional which was embedded after the 1810s.

For this was the period when English Literature was solidified, as a methodology for identifying cultural value, into the idea of a canon of civilizing texts. The form of empire upon which it depended could then become more rationally capital-driven rather than invasive, the dream of deep-unionists from Daniel Defoe onwards – who is sometimes lauded as Eng Lit’s first novelist, or first ‘realist’ [2] novelist, and who describes union [3] primarily in terms of ensuring global investment. This had only been made possible by the subduing of Jacobite Scotland – the Act of Proscription was only repealed in 1782 – of Jacobinism in the 1790s-1800s, of Irish nationalism in the 1790s-1800s, and finally of post-Revolutionary France in the 1810s. With this, state unification grew, with an increasingly strong insistence, an unusual and entirely reactive constitutional form apparently winning the pamphlet battle of the 1790s – specifically based on a Burkean conception of the state, which in order to avoid revolution also had to pointedly exclude a modern, participatory conception of the national. According to this constitutional form, for Britons, instead of personal action there was a principle of pure heredity, of the organic growth of what had always already been there, and so a continuant version of the state, or one which is maintained by avoiding present action [4]. The point about the conception of the state in Burke’s 1790 Reflections [5] lies not in the idea that tradition should have authority, but rather that the authority of a specific form of tradition cannot be reached, and represents a bond of past and future generations which can never become, will never be, and has
never been, present.

With the victory over France as the nearest and most dangerous of its imperial rivals, the anti-national and anti-historical grounds of the Burkean-British state needed to be codified for export. The primary carrier of this ‘stretchy’ (or in more literary terms, metonymic) export form of Britishness following a particularly vested form of free trade imaged as a-historical [6] became this idealising body of thought [7] known as English Literature. And with the conversions to deep-conservatism of Romantic poets such as Wordsworth and Coleridge, themselves keen to universalise a certain kind of canon with Shakespeare at its centre, the new disciplinarity proved extremely productive. Its coherence, despite its initial lack of much sense of the British national, was helped also by the fact that it followed a professionalisation and specialisation of cultural life, a growth in learned societies, and, in the 1790s especially, a glut of classic texts produced in cheap editions, adding to the sense of a coherent [8] canon [9] (Hilton 2008: 25; cf. Siskin 1997). So, as David Punter puts it [10], ‘the long-drawn-out war with France produced a curious kind of cultural Indian summer’.

Although the understanding of Britain as a set of class interests rather than a nation-state has always been an undercurrent in this, the embeddedness of cultural value in this type of constitution meant that this insight [11] could only re-emerge as a force when there was no empire to which to export, so that it was famously vocalised by a section of the New Left in the 1960s and 70s. According to this reading, whereas during the usual nation-state development an ambitious middle class might have forced an overturning of the constitution as in France, in Britain, long-established capital was left unchallenged by a too-early revolution concretised by the settlement of 1688, leaving no thinking-aspiring class to develop its own ambitions beyond the mere ambitions of capital. However, this settlement is really only given legitimacy by Burke in 1790 in the face of the last big challenge to Britishness, and is only given free rein after 1815.

**The return of the national**

After this, the national can be understood, contra this form of constitution, as the active and historical attempt to break, or at least to make visible, the bond between class and state. This structural and historical point is more significant to the typology of English Literature than are the fates of individual writers. So although Robert Crawford has stressed that ‘English Literature’ was first named as a chair at Edinburgh University in 1762, at this point there wasn’t the global cultural mission or the reinforced state form to call this a discipline in any meaningful sense. What concretises English Literature, rather, is the result of a 1790s - 1810s epistemological battle between two ways of seeing the state: either as an expression of experience which can be present-tense and personal (thereby open to the national), or as an untouchable principle of heredity (nationless and dependent on established interests).

For Burke, the authority of 1688 was based on heredity and so legitimate, whereas 1789 was a new and violent abrogation which was illegitimate because it opened the state up to action and history. This tied English Literature, as the export form of British civility, to a state form which was defined in terms of pure self-preservation. If action, present-tense, personal, and open-ended, became a threat (real or imagined), it could be countered by this Burkean conception of heredity claiming never to have been the product of any action by any person in any present. Living this Britishness, or trying to experience it as cultural, takes a particularly British form of doublethink which, as David Punter describes in his early study of Gothic [12], leads to the constant strain of repression.

Since it is left so completely outside of history, this Burkean-British-organic idea of legitimacy – whether in literary or political terms - could then only take on, by default, the shape of nature itself. After which, of course, ‘nature itself’ takes on a hallowed presence for an ideal England in the ‘stretchy’ British discipline called English Literature, while having no essential link to what England’s geography is really like. Britishness then becomes almost a kind of instinct [13] - as Burke says [14], ‘incapable of definition, but not impossible to be discerned’.

This highly abstract constitutional compact is somewhat unique in its refusal to admit that it is an abstraction. What this means it that ‘state culture’, imagined as natural, and as a carrier of
actionless activity and battling against historical consciousness, fits almost exactly the Marxian understanding of the term ideology. Moreover, ideology has a special significance for Britain, since it is Britain itself that stands against the national, insofar as the national is conceived in the civic and active sense denied by Burke.

As with all ideology, in its beginning is its end. Even in the 1790s, the Burkean compact also accidentally encouraged the counter-Burkean nightmare that the authoritative dead might become active, rising and walking the earth, living and acting in the present – vividly depicted in a boom of Gothic writing. What the ‘terror writing’ in anti-Revolutionary pamphlets of the 1790s does is reveal the violence otherwise silently locked into the unwritten constitution. Moreover this is more generally seen as a function of writing as writing, rising at the end of a century during which vested interests increasingly feared mass literacy, and reading was associated with political self-determination. In the Jacobin novel, typified by William Godwin’s Caleb Williams [15], literacy is often linked to critical access to the hidden world of hereditary power. Burke perceives the danger of writing in the French Revolutionary attempt to codify human rights in terms of ‘blurred shreds of paper’ [16], which attempt to stand against the greatness [17] of tradition; the Jacobin is misguided in his attempts to rewrite the national rules to ‘consider his country as nothing but carte blanche, upon which he may scribble whatever he pleases’ [18].

So, paradoxically, for English Literature right up to New Criticism and beyond to the 1980s Scottish fiction renaissance, writing has been an especially dangerous form of action, troubling the apparently natural bond between cultural value and the unreachability of tradition. If the safety of the British constitution lies in the fact that it is not written, then Britain must be defended from writing. When the imperial export form breaks down, therefore, there also rises, in England as well as Scotland, an ‘illegitimate writing’ which refuses to obey the received rules of civility – as well as a new critical [12] interest in the Gothic [19]. And just as the dissenters of the 1790s had fled to Edinburgh to hold counter-constitutional conventions, the same process after empire led to the Scottish Constitutional Convention of 1988, as part of a process whose importance was noted by the more perceptive reaches of the left in national terms throughout Britain.

Not coincidentally, at the same time a new radical right once more appealed to the natural, or ‘organic’ British bonds which spread from the individual, and which should be used instinctively to resist systems of thought threatening invasion – in this case not Jacobinism but the Soviet communism then imagined [20] to have footholds in the United Kingdom. What nationalist anti-Thatcherites then began to aim for was a description of how national experience over time is cohered by civic consciousness, and is concretised in institutions which are open to active change and redefinition. One such institution would be a national literature both drawing on bottom-up values and defining itself in terms of hard-edged political bodies in order to enable comparison. These days Scottish universities do have the germ of such a body of thought (called Scottish Literature [21]), while there is no equivalent body for the literature of England, precisely because the ideology of Eng Lit gets in the way.

Such was the power of the Burkean constitution reinvoked by Thatcherites that even with repeated promises of ‘shrinking’ the state, it became more powerful, more secretive, and more exclusive. The state was seen as too big and unwieldy but also as too weak: in need of strengthening against Europe and against the Soviet Union. In terms of literature, it needed reinforcement against theory in general, and even against ‘culture’, which duly morphed into ‘heritage’ [22].

Nature as the absence of writing made it difficult to voice coherent English opposition to this, and as a result more formal statist secrecy came into place just as it had in the 1970s. Indeed a ‘Secret State’ trope immediately preceded the 1988 Constitutional Convention, seen in the piloting of CCTV in 1984-85, and concretised perfectly in Duncan Campbell’s Secret Society [23] TV series of 1987, itself a product of the 1980s ‘pamphlet wars’, describing little-known emergency powers which had been in place since 1982. The Burkean fear of invasion by foreign systems was again identified as a necessary trope of the unified state, and was successfully tested by the Falklands [24] conflict of 1982, fought in a Churchillian [25] ‘Blitz Mode’ and supported consensually by an apparently left-wing British Labour Party. Britain’s constant ‘wartime footing’, its dependence on threat for unity, of course represents an admission of a crisis of democracy. And despite press implications otherwise, the strong and fearful state is also deeply anti-English: Thatcherism for example policed a
miners’ strike like a civil war; revealing the state just as starkly as had the Revolutionary French
terror – or indeed ‘Pitt’s Terror’ of the 1790s. Despite heroic attempts, the Burkan
abstraction-that-was-not-an-abstraction made it particularly difficult to popularly articulate English
action. Nevertheless, the thoroughgoing constitutional criticism which followed this moment
demonstrates the self-destruction of the nationless state at the far side of the Burkan process,
when the organic English ideal can no longer simply be evacuated into empire.

As in the constitutional battles during the Napoleonic Wars, this was also fought in small
literary-political journals. In the Scotland of the new constitutional crunch, English nationalism was
discussed in a British-constitutional frame. As early as Spring 1977 New Edinburgh Review ran an
‘English Nation’ number, in which Tom Nairn’s [26] essay used as its epigram Chesterton’s ‘The
Secret People [27]’, long before that poem’s later abuse. By the mid-1980s, writers like Cairns Craig,
Owen Dudley Edwards, and David Gale, had somewhat modernised the ‘Nairn-Anderson thesis’,
and had led into the political mainstream the idea that Britain was not a nation but a social class. In this
sense, the late 1970s and early 1980s rivalled the 1790s to 1810s, except that the latter period saw
a post-imperial unravelling of the culture of the unwritten British constitution, where the former had
seen its settlement.

**Neo-secrecy**

Although it was once a norm to describe the process undergone by the 1980s Conservative Party as
an ‘Englishing’ one (e.g. McCrone [28] 1992), in reality something like the opposite process was
happening, as the thinness of the ideal, British form of Englishness which had prevailed under the
Pax Britannica was finally revealed. The appropriation of silence and secrecy as supposedly English
traits during the devolutionary era, paradoxically boosted by a Thatcherte, and ultimately Burkan,
commitment to state nationalism, was particularly galling given that there had been so many
genuine traits to [re]discover [29] about England [30] in twentieth-century British literature, from the
fiction-travelogues of HV Morton, Cyril Joad, and George Orwell, to the critical social realism of the
post-Suez generation of critical realist novelists and film-makers. Nevertheless, as a reaction to the
shock of the uncontrollability of devolution, the British-Burkean trope of systematic foreign attacks
on instinct and heredity again came up as if it were English; as David Starkey’s 2004 claim put it,
‘England became the country that dare not speak its name’ (Telegraph 30 Dec 2004 [31]).

The new secrecy claims to have to go underground to avoid the state. But on the contrary, since it
aims for organic bonds underwritten by hereditary capital, it is there precisely to allow the British
state to prevent the framing of the national question. A real desire for an English national writing,
rather, would require an active politics and a constitution, while neo-secrecy sneaks its ‘English’
terms from the more serious national attempts of the past. Within the first term and a half of
devolution, Chesterton’s poem had been mangled by, amongst others, Martin Bell after his victory
over Neil Hamilton, Iain Duncan-Smith on behalf of farmers facing foot-and-mouth disease, and even,
perhaps most tellingly [32], by the Scottish Tory MP James Gray to bemoan the ‘West Lothian
Question’. Put more strongly, the ‘Anglo-British trope of neo-secrecy’ describes the very victimology
which it often seeks to denounce, since it represents a refusal of active politics via special pleading.
Indeed, neo-secrecy has become a kind of industry, presenting England misleadingly in the very
terms of the British state form in order to complain that nothing can be done about it (this is the
modus operandi of UKIP, for example, as well as numerous Telegraph columnists). Neo-secrecy helps
any managerial British government to describe England in ethnic, rather than civic terms, and to
smother the active, lived-experience of Englishness. This England will not speak its name not
because it can’t become national, but because it refuses to become national. And this is the default
position of most of the British press, which is anti-national, anti-action, and also peculiarly
anti-English.

In everyday experience, of course, England dares speak its name quite often. As Robert Hazell points
out [33], English people and local organisations are relatively well disposed to devolution. However
as national issues have regained active valency, so the British media more or less across the board,
left and right, state-owned and private, have worked hard to smear the civic-national (as in, for
example, The Guardian’s 2009-10 obsession with the BNP). As the national became more real,
active, and threatening, much of the media approached a kind of ‘soft totalitarianism [34]’ in its
It drive to render national action unthinkable.

In this sense, the linking of the terms Britain and Nation on the National Lottery draw, is the same Burkean vested-capital state-organicism on which English Literature was built. The categorising and managing addiction is retained from the workings of Burkean civility in empire and especially through Eng Lit; and as is now abundantly clear, this nationless ideology will try to hang on not only via constitutional means but via financial ones, or alienation via debt, the modern equivalent of the Burkean separation of the person from present-tense experience. As sections of the New Left have struggled to point out, this repetition compulsion on the part of the state is not merely a passing crisis, but a systemic crisis – and a more open-ended, inclusive, internationalist, and comparative ‘literature of England’ will identify it as ideology.

Both this piece and the OurKingdom post ‘Shakespeare, neither simply English nor British’, originated in the Warwick conference on Literature of Independent England. openDemocracy readers may be interested in the following reading list compiled for students.


Country or region: UK

Topics: Civil society
Culture
Democracy and government
Ideas

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