

This passage criticizes the intellectual Left (which includes the narrative voice) and suggests that the ineffectiveness of the opposition has contributed to the success of Thatcherite policies. *Downriver*, then, is both a critique of Thatcherism and of the form of resistance taken amongst sections of the Left during the period. Like Martin Amis's *London Fields*, this is presented with a sense of millennial doom and imminent catastrophe. Some of the scenes, for example, take place in 'The World's End' pub and there is a sense throughout the novel of the passing away of several groups (such as the Tilbury Group) as well as the disappearance and death of several characters. These people are untraceable but live on as ghostly figures populating the imagination as a series of underground narratives, some historical, some fictional – figures such as Todd Silleen, Adam Tenbrücke, Edith Cadiz and David Rodinsky.

Sinclair's novel, then, has a complex narrative structure and self-consciously employs a rich rhetorical and stylistic use of language. These formal devices enhance the evocation of a dark psychogeography of the East End of London, an area that is rich in historical narratives, but is shown to be suffering from the economic policies of the 1980s. The political context of Thatcherism in the 1980s also provides the basis for Julian Barnes's commentary on national identity, *England, England*.

### **JULIAN BARNES, *ENGLAND, ENGLAND* (1998)**

Julian Barnes's 1998 novel is centred on the creation of a theme park based on a collection of all things that are traditionally associated with the concept of Englishness. It traces the planning and development of the park, eponymously called 'England, England', and its eventual construction, which involves the taking over, wholesale, of the Isle of Wight. The novel's theme is clearly related to the way in which the nation is constructed and exists in the collective imagination of not only its inhabitants, but also the rest of the world. In preparation for the theme park, market research is carried out to identify what constitutes Englishness for the (mainly foreign) consumer. The results of this research is presented in the novel in the form of 'Fifty Quintessences of Englishness', and includes

such signifiers of national identity as the Royal Family, Big Ben, Manchester United and Robin Hood.<sup>14</sup> The project is the brain-child of Sir Jack Pitman (Pitco Industries), who represents a parody of a Thatcherite entrepreneur whose success has been established by the time of the main events of the novel, and for whom the theme park is his final project.

The novel is divided into three sections: 'England', 'England, England' and 'Albion', each of which has a distinctive narrative style that to some extent tries to mirror its subject matter. Barnes's text interweaves an analysis of the nation with an exploration into the way in which individual identities are constructed. This is focused through the main character in the novel, Martha Cochrane. Martha is eventually employed as Sir Jack Pitman's adviser, given the provocative title of 'Appointed Cynic'. The first section of the novel is concerned with her childhood, and provides an indication to the cause of her later cynicism. Her earliest memory is of doing a jigsaw puzzle made up of the counties of England. The process of constructing and re-constructing the nation is central to this image, but this is also overlaid with the development of Martha's individual identity in that she recounts how each time she did the jigsaw, her father would playfully hide one piece (usually a piece from the heart of England) and then supply it at the end (pp. 4–6). The image of the father providing the final piece is thus presented in terms of both completing the nation, but also of completing and fulfilling Martha's identity. Crucially, when he leaves her mother, she imagines he has taken the last piece of the jigsaw with him. This defining metaphor for the incompleteness of Martha's character is projected throughout the rest of the book and profoundly marks her adulthood as unsatisfied, unfulfilled and incomplete. This situation provides a link between a personal and national psychology and the jigsaw becomes a symbolic expression of the psyche of both Martha and the collective consciousness of the nation. The first section of Barnes's novel, then, emphasizes the overlapping themes of personal memory, national history and geographic space. Although Martha recounts the story of this memory, it is stressed that firstly, memories are always unreliable, and secondly, that articulating a memory as an ordered narrative is bound up with the construction of identity. Martha produces her memory as a narrative to give it

form and meaning, which allows her to articulate it not only to others, but also to herself.

English history is similarly turned into a narrative by the teacher Martha remembers at school who would encourage her pupils to recite mantras of English history, with rhyme and hand claps:

55BC (clap clap) Roman Invasion  
1066 (clap clap) Battle of Hastings  
1215 (clap clap) Magna Carta  
1512 (clap clap) Henry the Eighth (clap clap)  
Defender of Faith (clap clap). (p. 11)

This educational strategy succeeds in implanting within the pupils a logical order (or grand narrative) of English history, one that is poeticized through rhythm and rhyme. This fixes itself in Martha's memory and thereby becomes one of the ways in which she 'knows herself' as throughout the book Martha repeatedly questions self-understanding by comparing personal to national identity. Towards the end of the second section of the novel (also called 'England, England'), Martha ponders the question: 'An individual's loss of faith and a nation's loss of faith, aren't they much the same?' (p. 243). The combination of part-fictionalized and constructed narratives of the self and of the nation are seen as inseparable indices in the formation of identity. That these narratives are based on memories is also crucial to the novel's exploration of the way in which the nation is produced. As Sarah Henstra has argued, in *England, England*, 'memory is a sign that only ever points back to another sign'.<sup>15</sup> The text stresses that memories are, in fact, essentially unreliable, and that they are constructed and re-constructed:

If a memory wasn't a thing but a memory of a memory of a memory, mirrors set in parallel, then what the brain told you now about what it claimed had happened then would be coloured by what had happened in between. It was like a country remembering its history: the past was never just the past, it was what made the present able to live with itself. The same went for individuals [. . .] an element of propaganda, of

sales and marketing, always intervened between the inner and the outer person. (p. 6)

Here, the combination of the unreliability of memory (and the necessary element of fictional re-construction involved) with the language of consumerism and commodities, parallels the way in which England is re-constructed in the second part of the book, in the theme park.

Part II is concerned with the ideas of replicas, simulations and simulacra that form the theoretical basis for the project of 'England, England'. It is also concerned with the way in which the nation is commodified and re-presented as a marketable, reified object. This again involves a process of turning the nation into a narrative, which can then be told (and sold) to consumers, who buy both the story and the commodities associated with it. When developing the project, Sir Jack relies on the marketing consultant Jerry Batson, whose narrative articulates this sense of the nation as commodity:

'You – we – England – my client – is – are – a nation of great age, great history, great accumulated wisdom. Social and cultural history – stacks of it, reams of it – eminently marketable, never more so than in the current climate. Shakespeare, Queen Victoria, Industrial Revolution, gardening, that sort of thing. If I may coin, no copyright a phrase, *We are already what others may hope to become*. This isn't self-pity, this is the strength of our position, our glory, our product placement. We are the new pioneers. We must sell our past to other nations as their future!' (pp. 39–40)

The cultural, economic and fantasy space that is created as 'England, England' is also perceived as a paradigm of a pure capitalist environment: a place where the mixed economy of post-war England has finally been replaced by the triumph of the market. A financial analyst in the book comments:

'It's [the theme park] a pure market state. There's no interference from government because there *is* no government. So there's no foreign or domestic policy, only economic policy.

It's a pure interface between buyers and sellers without the market being skewed by central government.' (p. 183)

The second part also parodies the postmodern effects of a total victory of the market economy articulated through an 'end of history' image, in particular, the end of the history of England ('There was no history except Pitco history' p. 202). The accumulation of paradigmatic images of England's past – the Royal Family, Dr Johnson, Nell Gwynn, the Battle of Britain pilots, et cetera – results in the removal of any sense of a future England, and the cultural space of the theme park reduces history to the immediate present and to the ephemeral transience of the now. In this way it reflects Fredric Jameson's concerns about the way postmodern culture threatens to 'weaken historicity' as discussed in Chapter 4. This critique of postmodernism is dramatized most clearly in the figure of the French intellectual who Sir Jack invites to speak to the project team. This intellectual theorizes the contemporary preference for the replica over the real, the simulacrum over the original, and is a clear parody of theorists such as Jean Baudrillard. In fact, the French philosopher in the novel presents us with an argument that is an adaptation of Baudrillard's theories on simulacra.<sup>16</sup> Baudrillard identifies what he calls the 'third order of simulacra' as that being most closely related to postmodernism, which is the stage when: 'It is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself'.<sup>17</sup> There is a clear comparison here with what the French theorist says in Barnes's novel:

'It is well established – and indeed it has been incontrovertibly proved by many of those I have earlier cited – that nowadays we prefer the replica to the original. We prefer the reproduction to the work of art itself, the perfect sound and solitude of the compact disc to the symphony concert in the company of a thousand victims of throat complaints, the book on tape to the book in the lap [. . .] the world of the third millennium is inevitably, is ineradicably modern, and that it is our intellectual duty to submit to that modernity,

and to dismiss as sentimental and inherently fraudulent all yearnings for what is dubiously called the “original”.’ (pp. 53–5)

The irony, of course, is that the theories of Baudrillard, the post-68 *enfant terrible* of the Left, are here being invoked for the support of Sir Jack Pitman’s capitalist project. Baudrillard’s critique of postmodern culture is recycled as a celebration of the market economy.

What remains ambiguous, however, is how far the novel dismisses the French critic’s ideas. The end of the chapter in which he appears details how the great philosopher is flown in, gives his speech, stops off in London to buy fishing waders, flies and a quantity of aged Caerphilly with his conference fee, and then flies off to his next international conference. But despite satirizing this contemporary high-flying intellectual, the ideas expressed in the first part of the novel concerning the unreliability of memory and the impossibility of recovering any sense of an original or authentic representation of the past fit well with the postmodern theorizing of the French intellectual. What is being satirized is not the ideas or theories themselves, but the way in which they have been incorporated into a commodity culture – where intellectualism has become a commodity in the pay of corporate projects such as Pitman’s theme park. In fact, Dr Max, the English historian in the novel, who in many ways represents an English academic tradition in opposition to poststructuralist continental theory, ultimately agrees with much of what the French theorist says:

‘[. . .] is it not the case that when we consider such lauded and fetishized concepts as, oh, I throw a few out at random, Athenian democracy, Palladian architecture, desert-sect worship of the kind that still holds many in thrall, there *is* no authentic moment of beginning, of purity, however hard their devotees pretend. We may choose to freeze a moment and say it all “began” then, but as an historian I have to tell you that such labelling is intellectually indefensible. What we are looking at is almost always a replica, if that is the locally fashionable term, of something earlier.’ (p. 132)

It is Dr Max and Martha's discussion of a particularly natural-looking English landscape that precipitates this moment, and the focus on the artificiality of 'nature' emphasizes the sense in which England as both a geographical and historical concept is dependent on the artificial manipulation of time and place, rather than essential and permanent. The artificial construction of England, England, therefore, is presented as an extreme case of the processes involved in any construction of what appears to be the natural world. The idea of the nation and of national identity is always artificial, with no authentic moment of beginning. This is reminiscent of the Marxist critic Benedict Anderson's description of modern nations as 'imagined communities'. According to Anderson, the nation is '*imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion [. . .] it is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship' (italics in original).<sup>18</sup> Although Anderson is not a postmodernist, his ideas about the imagined nature of the nation concur with postmodernism's sense of the artificiality of constructed grand narratives such as that represented by the cultural discourse of Englishness. Although Barnes's novel does not celebrate this sense of England as merely an artificial construct, it is more accurate to see the novel not as a critique of postmodernity, but as a lament that the theories underpinning postmodernism are likely to be the most accurate for the contemporary world.

The novel, then, laments the fact that it is impossible to identify an authentic place of origin for the nation or for personal memory, whilst it simultaneously critiques those who celebrate this position. It presents the preference for the replica alongside the psychological desire for the original, and, in fact, these are presented as the same thing. What Martha discovers in the last section of the book is that the desire to recover a lost past – a garden show, our image of rural England, Cornish smugglers, Robin Hood – is in fact a desire not for the original or the authentic (because there is no original), but for the artificial construction of these objects and signs that are products of the imagination. Paradoxically, it is these

artificial copies that appear authentic to our memories of the past. To use Baudrillard's phrase, it is the hyperreal that is recovered, because to talk of the reality of a memory becomes non-sensical.<sup>19</sup> If the past is a series of memories of constructed images, then recovering those reconstructed images operates as a kind of recovery of what masquerades as the authentic. The novel, therefore, is a lament not for lost Englishness, but for the fact that the 'real' past can never be recouped, as it is always artificial. As James J. Miracky argues, 'Just when one suspects that Barnes is validating postmodern theory, he incorporates elements that reach for an authentic human experience of the real ultimately leaving the novel positioned somewhere between homage and parody of the dominance of the "hyperreal"'.<sup>20</sup>

The form of the novel is interesting in this context. In terms of narrative modes, the novel can best be described as hybrid. The first section, 'England', appears to use what literary critic Catherine Belsey calls a classic realist mode.<sup>21</sup> There is a third-person narrator, who presents the narrative with what appears to be little self-consciousness in terms of the mode of address used. In addition, what Belsey calls a 'hierarchy of discourses' is established with Martha as the central consciousness of this section. There is a recognizable, even familiar social setting located in a post-war English past. The fact, however, that Part II shifts from this realist mode to what might be described as postmodernist, emphasizes the constructedness of the first section. There is a clear case of form attempting to parallel content in Barnes's novel. The first section is presented as realist because it is concerned with an evocation of a traditional English past. The form of the writing, therefore, evokes the sense of that past as much as the details it supplies us with. This, of course, is different from saying that it is un-self-conscious writing: Barnes uses a realist form because it seems most appropriate to the subject matter in that part. As Matthew Pateman has suggested, Barnes appears to be, 'deploying the strategies of simulacra, inauthenticity, and fake in order to tell a story of simulacra, inauthenticity, and fake'.<sup>22</sup>

The second part is more distinctly postmodern in style. It uses situations and characters that become increasingly grotesque and unbelievable, including the metamorphoses of the actors playing,



for example, Dr Johnson, Robin Hood and the Cornish smugglers in the theme park, as the identity of their adopted characters actually takes over their consciousness. There are a variety of different textual forms in the second part – for example, the French intellectual's speech, and a newspaper review of the theme park – and there are knowing side references to contemporary theorists such as Baudrillard and Michel Foucault. The elements of parody, pastiche, magic realism and knowing self-referentiality mark out the section as postmodern in style. This mode of narration fits well with its subject matter: the presentation of the postmodern theme park. It could also be argued that this section represents a departure from a form associated with an English literary tradition. Postmodernism, despite many British novelists using the form, is still most associated with American novelists, both North and South. The encroachment of this foreign mode into the text, therefore, parallels Sir Jack's Disneyfication of England on the Isle of Wight.

In this context, the final section of the book, 'Albion', seems formally to return us to a more recognizably English form – the pastoral elegy. The elegy, in this case, is for the passing of the old England, but also for Martha, who now appears as an old woman. 'Old England', as it is now called, is represented as a pastoral idyll and it is as if the market economy has been drained off into the theme park on the Isle of Wight leaving behind a pre-capitalist society on the mainland. In terms of form, however, the situation is not as straightforward as it appears. The opening description of the pastoral scene is exaggerated to the point of parody (p. 241), and fictionalized narratives still supply the main way by which identity is formed. This latter point is represented in the character of Jez Harris (formerly Jack Oshinsky) who was formerly a junior legal expert with an American electronics firm, but who has now adopted the persona of an English yokel who provides made-up 'tales of witchcraft and superstition, of sexual rites beneath a glowing moon and the trance slaughter of livestock' (p. 243). The artificiality that fuels the second section contaminates the third, and Jez's tales form an artificial narrative of Englishness in much the same way as the theme park.

The novel, then, addresses issues of national identity by undermining the basis on which they have rested in the past. If there ever was a grand narrative of Englishness, then the novel is keen to

undermine the philosophical basis on which such a story was produced. It does not celebrate, however, what Jean-François Lyotard describes as 'incredulity towards grand narratives'.<sup>23</sup> Rather, it wistfully reflects on what appears to be a simpler, if naïve version of Englishness, without the complexities of postmodern experience.

## SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

- Contemporary British fiction is keen to explore the cultural representation of geographical spaces, especially in relation to the urban environment and national identity.
- The relationship between narrative fiction and the representation of space has proved a fruitful area in terms of formal experimentation in the novel.
- Postmodernism and postcolonialism in fiction have both served to loosen traditional discourses of Englishness.
- The changes made to social and cultural landscapes have provided a good source for fiction that is critical of social and political changes over the last thirty years.

## NOTE

1. See, for example, Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark: A Novel* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1996); Niall Griffiths's *Sheepshagger* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2001); Adam Thorpe's *Ulverton* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1992); and Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1993).
2. Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 63. All subsequent references in the text are to this edition.
3. Susan Brook, 'Suburban Space in *The Buddha of Suburbia*', in *British Fiction of the 1990s*, ed. Nick Bentley (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 209–25, p. 216.
4. Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (London: Hutchinson, 1987).

5. Jago Morrison, *Contemporary Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 184.
6. Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), pp. 133–4.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 115.
8. The band Karim and Charlie see are a fictional version of *The Sex Pistols*; the singer's aggressive attitude on stage and his 'carrot topped hair' is a clear reference to Johnny Rotten. Charlie's exploitation of the punk subculture is an analogy to the way in which Malcolm McLaren, *The Sex Pistols*'s manager moved the band away from its original anarchic politics to the lure of 'filthy lucre'. See Julien Temple's film *The Filth and the Fury*, dir. Julien Temple (Film Four, 2000).
9. See Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, [1979] 1988), pp. 100–27.
10. Iain Sinclair, *Downriver* (London: Vintage, [1991] 1995), p. 29. All subsequent references in the text are to this edition.
11. The references to Joseph Conrad and his novel *Heart of Darkness* have a particular resonance here. Conrad's novel opens on the Thames, and although set at the beginning of the twentieth century, when London was arguably the greatest metropolis on earth, Marlow, the narrator of the book, invokes his audience to consider that London has also, 'been one of the dark places of the earth': Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, [1902] 1973), p. 29. The sense that the river is both contemporary and outside of history is something that *Downriver* shares with *Heart of Darkness*.
12. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 66.
13. Peter Brooker, *Modernity and Metropolis: Writing, Film, and Urban Formations* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 97.
14. Julian Barnes, *England, England* (London: Picador, [1998] 1999), pp. 83–5. All subsequent references in the text are to this edition.
15. Sarah Henstra, 'The McReal Thing: Personal/National Identity in Julian Barnes's *England, England*', in *British Fiction of the 1990s*, ed. Bentley, pp. 95–107, p. 97.
16. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983).

17. Ibid., p. 4.
18. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 7.
19. Baudrillard, *Simulations*.
20. James J. Miracky, 'Replicating a Dinosaur: Authenticity Run Amok in the "Theme Parking" of Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park* and Julian Barnes's *England, England*', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 45(2) (2004), 163–71, 165.
21. Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London: Routledge, [1980] 1987), pp. 67–84.
22. Matthew Pateman, *Julian Barnes* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 2002), p. 75.
23. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Condition of Postmodernity: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, [1979] 1984).