Devolution and Cultural Catch-Up:

Decoupling England and its Literature from English Literature

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In a paper published shortly before the first referendumsaumse on devolution in Scotland and Wales in 1979, Raymond Williams drew attention to two possible kinds of English reaction to the nationalist movements in those nations. The first of these was what Williams referred to as the 'unity backlash,' through which, Williams explained, a governing elite would seek to forestall and prevent other groups of people from gaining control of their own resources and working out their own futures in their own ways (Williams 1978: 189). The 'unity backlash' would, Williams warned, be carried out in the name of a spurious British unity, combining emotional appeal with political rhetoric capable of masking the particular economic interests of a minority served in that name.

The second possible English response Williams identified was a 'why not us?' response (Williams 1978: 189ibid.). Williams used the rhetorical phrase 'why not us?' to draw attention to the fact that what many of the things left-wing nationalist groups in Scotland and Wales were aiming to achieve were also real material aims for socialist political movements in England: control over communal decision-making and access to resources. Accordingly, Williams stated that the 'why not us?' response in England was one that 'every genuine nationalist would welcome' in Wales (Williams 1978: 189ibid.). Implicit in the views expounded by Williams is the idea that devolution in Scotland and Wales provides a model that, by campaigning in the same material areas, oppositional political and cultural groups in England might positively seek to emulate.

Much of Raymond Williams's work in the sociology of culture was concerned with

exploring how the ideas of culture, and more, specifically, literature, had developed in Britain along ideological lines, so that English Literature itself had partly created the conflation between a narrow, primarily privileged sector of the population and one version of British identity as a whole. This chapter will ~~explore the idea of devolution as a model that might potentially be emulated in certain areas of English life. It will~~ draw on Williams's devolutionary frame and his sense of how the conflation of a dominant political class with British identity as a whole ~~need to~~should be decoupled from each other. It will also ~~and~~ suggest that because historical constructions of English Literature provided some of the means for the original conflation, ~~to be generated~~ literature ~~also~~ can provides an appropriate means for critically re-assessing that conflation and carrying out that necessary act of cultural decoupling. In England specifically, this entails a recognition that just as the old imperialist canon of English Literature is~~was~~ unrepresentative of the peoples of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, so too it ~~was~~ is unrepresentative of the majority of the English people. Decoupling writers who are English from the canon of English Literature presents an opportunity for a post-imperial and post-Union England to develop a confident national sense of itself.

The Rejection of English Literature

One of the nineteenth-century assumptions behind the construction of a canon of English Literature was that literature could function as a didactic art form, capable of providing moral guidance, cultivating spiritual growth and generating respect for the social and political order. In the tradition developed by Matthew Arnold and T.E. Huxley there was a strong imbrication of English Literature with English education in which each combined to foster those humanistic virtues. With the growing recognition that neither literature ~~tout court~~ nor literary education is free from the ideological prerogatives of the imperial period, more recent

writers have increasingly used their fiction to reanimate the debate about civic values and literary culture.

Robert McLiam Wilson's novel *Ripley Bogle* (1989) depicts the rejection of both a humanistic education and the canonical study of ~~L~~literature. For Wilson's Ulster Catholic Bogle, mastering the canonical works of ~~L~~literature by the age of eight does not bring successful participation in either the education system or the civic structure of Northern Ireland. He ~~lights out~~moves on ~~to for~~ Cambridge, where again prodigious literary understanding brings neither a sense of belonging nor a sense of civic responsibility. The novel portrays the gradual decoupling of literary education from the fostering of effective citizenship, a process that culminates in Bogle's slipping out of civic structures altogether:

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> My early years were spent exposed to the punitive moral guidance of Victorian novels. In these tomes, the young hero, a likeable, well-favoured lad […] sets out from the stasis of his usual life on a journey of supposed maturity. He starts his travels well-stocked with every kind of fault, egoism and mean sophistry […] encounters figures imbued with stronger and older wisdoms and they guide him to some degree […] of wisdom […]. It's a simple enough system but hasn't gone too well for me[....].
>
> (Wilson 1989: 323-4).

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The understatement implied in the words 'it hasn't gone too well for me' underlines the positive zest with which Wilson portrays the failure of an ideological literary practice left over from the imperial era. Through Bogle's rejection of the institutions of literary education, the novel explicitly interrogates the assumptions on which Arnold's humanistic approach to English Literature was based: that the dissemination of a morally controlling and quasi-spiritual literary culture could maintain social order by instilling a sense of moral duty and

responsibility in its readers. *Ripley Bogle* portrays the failure of that assumption. Coming out of Ireland, the failure is all the more pointed if we remember Terry Eagleton's suggestion that Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) could have been subtitled 'Britain and Ireland' because it was written during the long and drawn out struggles for land reform in Ireland (Eagleton 1990: 33).

The Ulster setting of *Ripley Bogle* is highly significant for another reason. Tom Nairn argued in *The Break-Up of Britain* (1977) that an end to the sectarian violence of the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland could only be envisaged if instead of being viewed as the apparently intractable division between two competing nationalisms – British and Irish – the situation be viewed as a complex interaction between three distinct kinds of nationalism, with Northern Ireland emerging as a national entity of its own rather than existing endlessly as the object of competition between two other nationalisms. To Nairn, this emergence gives Northern Ireland a 'paradoxical self-definition' because it resembles a nation on the one hand, but has been historically unable to articulate a national culture on the other (Nairn 1977: 240). I To put it another way, the specific feature of Northern Ireland is that although supposedly incorporated into Great Britain, it is also a remote outpost of it and its culture is therefore not the same as the culture of which it is presumed to be an outpost. Generations of occupying frontier status, coupled with the siege mentality attached to the religious divide, have made for a distinct culture and a separate consciousness unlike those of Britain or Ireland.

In *Ripley Bogle,* Wilson portrays the difficulty in taking the imaginative leap from seeing Ulster as a combat ground between two other nations to viewing it as a site of interaction between three distinct nationalisms. He imbues Bogle with an ambivalent sense of belonging to each community: 'the occasional Misguided Soul would try to call us British but […] of all the things to call us – this was the wrongest. No matter how the Misguided Souls cajoled, insisted or pleaded, our names would remain Irish to the core, whatever that meant' (Wilson

1989: 16). In the final question – 'whatever that meant' – Wilson gestures beyond the entrenched siege mentality of two counter-posed nationalisms and allows his character to wonder how Northern Ireland's paradoxical self-definition could ever come to realisation. Bogle goes on to reflect, '[o]ur errors past and future gather in the streets, jostling and officious. They want to be heard… What will they get?' (323).

Wilson's rhetorical 'What will they get?' reprises an open question Nairn had asked in *The Break-Up of Britain:* should Northern Ireland be seen as a relic of old imperial conflicts or as portent of new kinds of civic community based on newly developed kinds of national identity? This is a question with far-reaching implications for other nationalisms in the British Isles, including a post-British England.

The fundamental argument that Nairn presented ~~in *The Break-Up of Britain*~~ is that following the restoration of 1660 and the compromises of 1688~~,~~ British society has been governed by a counter-revolutionary patrician class. The failure of those would-be revolutionary moments in English history cut England's national culture off from any mobilising myth of nationalism rooted in an idea of the English people themselves, so that what passes for English national culture is no more than ~~a text book~~an image of the people who govern it. ~~When Nairn was writing in the 1970s, he noted that it had become commonplace to attribute a range of violent public conflicts, from racial antagonisms to labour disputes and domestic violence between genders, to a chauvinistic, right wing English nationalism.~~ Nairn's contention ~~, by contrast,~~ was that violent public conflicts, from racial antagonisms to labour disputes, ~~these things had happened not because of an excess of English nationalist feeling, but as a result of an~~came not from an excess ~~from a lack~~ of ~~insufficien~~national feeling in England ~~as often suggested,~~ but from a lack of a positive, confident, popular nationalism ~~cy of that feeling~~. ~~The constitutional absence of any mythical sense of what the English people have achieved in the past and might achieve again in the~~

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Or as Nairn put it:

> There is something wrong with the logic. And the mistake is probably in the ascription of racist sentiment to an undefined mass 'nationalism.' It is much more the symptom of *an absence of* popular nationalism among the English. There is no coherent, sufficiently democratic myth of Englishness – no sufficiently accessible and popular myth-identity where mass discontents can find a vehicle.
>
> (Nairn, 1977: 294 emphasis in original)

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Where other countries may derive their popular, mythic sense of self understanding from a conception of the people, including their revolutionary potential as in France or America, ~~In other nations,~~ Nairn suggests that ~~, the accessible and popular myth identities that he describes come directly from an idea of the people. For example, French or American nationalisms derive their power in large part from a myth of what the French or American people achieved at a revolutionary moment during the histories of those nations. In his account of nationalism, the distortions of history inherent in the mythical use of the revolutionary past is less important than the affective structures that are cultivated by it. A mythical past founded on a (perhaps mythical) effort of the people enables the popular imagination to go on believing in the possibility of the efficacy of the people.~~ ~~I~~in Britain ~~, by contrast,~~ the political state has been patrician and counter-revolutionary rather than populist; and in England specifically there are few available models ~~in the popular imagination~~ for what the English people might achieve: 'Not the self-action of the *Volk*, but the inexhaustible wisdom of Institutions and their custodians; not a belief that the People can do anything, in

the last resort, but the conviction that popular aspirations will always, in the end, be attended to *up there*' (Nairn 1977: 296, italics in original).

Though there are few available historical precedents for utilising an idea of the English people as a cornerstone of a newly defined English nationalism, Nairn is anxious to point out that such models are not altogether non-existent. His argument is that the political state had been able to provide compensation for England's lack of national definition during the imperial period, primarily through the promise of a certain material standard of living. As Britain has moved away from its imperial history and global economic ascendancy is far from guaranteed, this material reward has been increasingly unable to compensate for the absence of a positive self-image in the popular English imagination and hence for the absence of an English national culture as such. He suggests that these things but that England, as a nation with a national culture will need to be discovered – and in some cases re-invented – – in England after the 'prolonged global detour and development' of empire (297).

One of the central tenets of socialist political thought is that people do not only find themselves in situations, they also create situations. For this reason, the return of an idea of the English people to a renascent sense of English nationhood is not something that can be expected to happen passivelypassively awaited. On the contrary, it will only be possible if it is actively worked for. This is why the question of whether Northern Ireland will end up as a relic of imperial wars or a portent for new kinds of civic structure has important implications for other nationalisms in a post-Union Britain. Wilson's *Ripley Bogle* portrays a Northern Irish society poised between relic and portent, and aAs with the comparable case of Northern Ireland's paradoxical nationhood, the new and confident English nationalism that Nairn advocates requires above all the taking of a significant imaginative leap:

Intellectual opposition to such an essentially non-populist structure, to a tradition so

overwhelmingly 'from above', must necessarily lean very hard in the contrary direction, that is, of eliciting every possible popular or mass contribution to the fabric of English development, emphasizing every discoverable heroism or neglected workers' initiative.

(Nairn 1977: 303).

The imaginative step that Nairn outlines is one capable of envisaging an English nation and an English nationalism based on an idea of the English people and their achievements rather than on the separation of an elite political class from popular involvement. It is because this step will run counter to three hundred years of state history that it needs to occur in the popular imagination before anything else; and it is because it needs to occur in the imagination before all else that English writers have a particular relationship to the new forms of English nationalism that Nairn advocates. As the case of *Ripley Bogle* demonstrates, the new kind of writing practice will depart from the imperialist discipline of English Literature as one that polices a particular social and political order. In Nairn's account, an effective model for nationalist revival is provided by 'the attempt to find strength for a better, more democratic future by re-examining (on occasion re-inventing) a mythic past' (304). In addressing this challenge to historical construction and imperial ideology, English writers are entering a new phase of cultural catch-up, specifically in the practice of 'writing back.'

English Writers Writing Back

Arguably, 'writing back' is a kind of writing that could only have originated in former colonies articulating a culture and consciousness on the world stage, rather than in the former imperial homeland of Britain itself. WithIn texts such as Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), Derek Walcott's *Omeros* (1990) and Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* (1997), 'writing back'

~~had become~~has become a common literary practice ~~that~~ challeng~~ed~~ing the political structures of empire through 'the rereading and the rewriting of the European historical and fictional record' and thereby offer~~ed~~ing to change them (Ashcroft et al 1989: 196). British writers have started to 'write back' to the canon of English Literature, particularly in Scotland and Wales since political devolution, with Alisdair Gray's *Poor Things* (1992) and Malcolm Pryce's *Last Tango in Aberystwyth* (2004) as prominent examples of Scottish and Welsh 'writing back' to the highly canonical text, *Frankenstein*. 'Writing back' is a more recent practice for writers in England, seeking to develop the kind of confident populist idea of the people through myth and narrative that Nairn advocates. The challenge for writers in post-imperial and post-union England is to try and separate precise literary practices from the ~~overall~~ canon of English Literature – a canon which is ~~, for historical reasons, has been~~ inculcated with a pan-British ~~nationalist~~ ideology and an imperial prerogative. For English writers, ~~As a result, 'W~~writing back' is a more recent practice for writers in England, seeking to develop the kind of confident populist idea of the people through myth and narrative that Nairn advocates. ~~With such work being done in~~ Such work had already began to develop in the cultural nationalisms of Scotland and (especially) Wales, so that the political process of devolution has ~~extended. after decolonisation, the need~~ brought into focus even more clearly than the period of decolonisation the need to decoupl~~ed~~ing the conflation of ruling class from a singular British identity~~,~~ involves developing new literary practices that depart from the older imperial assumptions, and in this sense catch~~ing~~ up with the cultural opportunities ~~presented by the cultural politics of~~ within post-union Britain.

Graham Swift's 1996 novel *Last Orders* is an example of the ~~causally belated~~ 'writing back' that started to develop in England at approximately the same time as devolution in Britain – a generation after it had already been developed in decolonising societies. ~~In~~ *Last Orders* carries. ~~Swift creates~~ an intertextual relationship with Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury*

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Tales, the significance of which is two-fold. Firstly, *The Canterbury Tales* are an unfinished text, so that to enter into an intertextual relationship with them is to enter into a ~~long-term and~~ gradually unfolding process of exploring ~~specifically~~ English writing. Secondly, Swift aligns his work with a prior text from a period when England was an independent country and not the lead player in either a wider union or an empire.

By reprising the unfinished journey undertaken by Chaucer's protagonists, Swift hints at the rediscovery of English cultural geography as a process that had become occluded during the period of imperialism because English Literature had become too tightly associated with the British Empire and that has only recently started to be reactivated as English writers address the post-British phase of English history. Swift's protagonists do not 'end' their journey at Canterbury Cathedral because they are 'going on' to 'Margate' (Swift 1996: 192).

~~). In other words, the journey undertaken by his travellers is physically longer than that of Chaucer's,~~ as if the text is extending or enlarging our understanding outside of, or beyond the canon ~~Swift is interested in enlarging our understanding of the myriad lives involved in it~~. While creating a specifically English narrative and journey ~~While he is interested in creating a narrative that is specifically English, not British, he~~ Swift is also at pains to portray the incongruity that exists between contemporary English cultures and the 'King's List' version of English history (Harman 1998: 10). Accordingly, ~~he endows~~ Vic and Jack's visit to the tomb in Canterbury Cathedral of Edward, the Black Prince ~~with an~~ carries an ambivalent resonance. On the one hand, the Black Prince is an indicator of heroism belonging to ~~a specifically~~ English ~~(as opposed to Welsh or Scottish)~~ history; on the other, the historical figure of the prince is as remote from Jack and Vic as would be a Welsh or Scottish prince: they have never heard of him and struggle to pronounce 'Edward Plant – Edward Plant – Edward Plantagenet' (Swift 1996: 206).

During the period of the British Empire, the tradition of English Literature became

endowed with a level of national self-imagining – with *The Canterbury Tales* retrospectively assimilated as a leading, sometimes instigatory marker. *Last Orders* enacts the cultural work of memory and remembrance, but without the assimilation of the narrative to a putative British canon. ~~without the imbrication of narrative function with national self-imagining with which the tradition of English Literature became endowed during the period of the British Empire – with *The Canterbury Tales* retrospectively assimilated to its head~~as a leading, sometimes instigatory marker. Where ~~That~~ Swift puts into the mouths of each of his ~~characters their own monologues creates the effect of a private relationship between speaker and reader, where the reader is now re-imagined by the text as a listener or confidant.~~ Chaucer's pilgrims' ~~tell tales of other people, and the~~ tales are ~~they tell~~ ~~become part of the texture of their narrative and its~~part of a collective self-imagining and public performance. Swift's travellers~~, by contrast~~, tell their 'own' stories in~~a~~ private relationships between speaker and listener ~~that is not laid down for public utility and which serves as a kind of history from below~~.

For example, ~~during the sections~~while in Chatham~~, Swift portrays a slight deviation from the narrative track of the journey to Margate by putting into the mouth of his character~~ Vic~~ a~~ suggest~~sion to~~ visit~~ing~~ the naval memorial ~~in that town and. R~~ rather than capturing a moment of ~~depicting this section as a moment of~~ collective commemoration for the lost heroes of bygone British ~~imperial~~ wars, Swift ~~instead~~ portrays the encounter with the naval monument from a series of individual, fragmented and contradictory viewpoints. Vic is struck by remembrance of the ship on which he served during the Second World War, and by implication, of a whole series of naval myths from the period of empire. Yet the solemnity of this memorial logic is fractured by Vince's reaction to seeing the names on the monument – 'old buggers' (Swift 130) – and by Lenny's distinctly unheroic muttering, 'Bleeding hill

nearly finished me' (131). The effect of this fracturing of a single emotional response into a series of disparate voices is to decouple the memorial function of the monument from what is being commemorated, ~~and allows~~allowing Vic's emotional response to stand in for no more than itself, so that the narrative is not freighted down by the burden of a national self-imagining at the pan-British level ~~and is de-transcendentalized~~. Individual names on the memorial resonate rather than the ~~Swift's characters are individual rather than part of a putative British whole. It is individual names on the memorial that resonate with them, rather than the~~ memorial as a whole or the British wars that it commemorates. Perhaps for this reason, on beholding the British naval monument, Swift ascribes to Ray the words, 'I reckon Vic's not going to tell us the names which matter, he's just going to look and keep quiet' (~~Swift~~ 127).

That the location for this episode should be Chatham is highly symbolic, suggesting as it does to the reader a setting in which Chatham House Rules apply and therefore hinting at a narrative in which everything is off the record and private rather than public and collective. ~~Moreover, Swift attributes to Ray the idea that Vic had only proposed the diversion to Chatham as 'diversionary tactics' because during the long and arduous journey, old grievances between Lenny and Vince had threatened to spill over into violence (119).~~ Our understanding of the grievances between Lenny and Vince ~~them~~ is only created through the individual monologues spoken by those characters, as if at a level of private confession rather than public testimony. ~~The irony Swift mobilises is that~~ Chatham House Rules historically developed to enable the ruling class to retain a certain level of confidentiality in its operations, thereby protecting its ~~own~~ members from potential populist rebellion. Ironically, Swift's working class characters employ those very rules in order to reject a narrow, singular definition of British history based on the interests of its rulers. Having rejected the 'King's List' approach to British history and national culture, his portrayal of the use of ruling class

practices by a social class outside the ruling elite moves towards a new attempt at English self-definition based on an idea of the English people.

A similar technique is used in Stella Duffy's 2008 novel *The Room of Lost Things*, a novel that can be ~~seen as a contemporary, urban and working class response~~said to 'write back' to Virginia Woolf's highly canonical works *Mrs Dalloway* (1922) and *A Room of One's Own* (1929). Rachel Bowlby has argued that Woolf used the metaphor of ~~a~~the bus to symbolis~~z~~e increasing female mobility and empowerment on the part of *Mrs Dalloway*'s daughter, as if such empowerment were incrementally increasing through the generations and was mainly restricted to women of independent means (Bowlby, 1993: *passim*). In a subtle and powerful re-write of *Mrs Dalloway,* Duffy represents her protagonist Marilyn through physical mobility, symbolised by a bus: 'this bus that travels from black to brown to white to white to white and back again brown again, black again, crossing the lost River Peck and the enclosed Effra, touching estates and trees and looking over fences into lawns and car yards and parks and the fast dirty Thames…' (Duffy 2008: 21). In *The Room of Lost Things,* the historical transition towards greater female mobility and empowerment has reached a broader section of the population in cultural and economic terms. This is possibly why the emphasis Woolf placed on the financial independence of women in *A Room of One's Own* is reprise~~frame~~d in Duffy's titular room of lost things: a place where the past raises certain challenges for cultural belonging in the present, and mutual collaboration rather than economic individualism is a necessary element in social cohesion, helping to generate the idea of the English people that Nairn suggests is a necessary ingredient for a new and functioning English civic nationalism.

A third example of 'writing back', ~~must suffice.~~ Jim Crace's 2010 novel *All That Follows* ~~can be seen partly as a work of 'writing back' because it~~ responds to Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* (1900) in its portrayal of the transition from imperial ideology at the pan-

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Explain whether the privacy/confidentiality here is helping a national English culture in any way or challenging this etc

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British level to civic duty in a specifically English context.

Conrad's Jim makes two fundamental decisions relating to his duty in the service of imperial ideology and gets it wrong on both occasions: jumping ship when he should stay (and hence demonstrating cowardice); and staying when he should jump (thus demonstrating incompetence). Neither of these failings can be tolerated by the imperial ideology, ~~so that~~and Fredric Jameson has argued of *Lord Jim* that it uses the sea itself as the testing ground for a metaphysical conception of imperial duty (Jameson 1983: 252-55).

All That Follows ~~is~~ set ~~both~~ in ~~the year~~ 2006~~,~~ and seventeen years in the future ~~from this date, also shows.~~ ~~At its heart is a~~ juxtapos~~itione~~s ~~between~~ two decisions taken ~~by Lessing~~ in the 'present' and the 'past.' In the past, Lessing had become drawn into an act of political resistance, offering to stage an impromptu protest against American imperial practices at a meeting attended by George and Laura Bush. At the climactic moment, however, like Conrad's Lord Jim, he has failed to act. In the present, by contrast, Crace shows Lessing again getting drawn into an act of political resistance, when his ~~brief~~ former comrade Maxie Lermontov manages an anti-capitalist kidnapping. After initial reservations, Lessing finds himself helping Maxie's daughter to find a way to end the siege and hence 'rescue' Maxie from the consequences of his own actions. Like Conrad's Lord Jim, the latter decision~~, though contrasting with the earlier decision,~~ again proves ineffective ~~so that Lessing also gets it wrong on both occasions~~. Conrad's Jim is shown to be wrong for failing to fulfill imperialist ideology; Crace's Lessing is shown to be wrong for failing to resist it. This movement points ~~to an interest in~~towards something like civic – as opposed to imperial – participation. For the portrayal of Lennie Lessing's impotent political activism contrasts sharply with that of the other activists in the novel and in this contrast can be found at least the beginning of an idea of what the people – the people of England in specific contrast to both the people of Britain and to their political leaders – might achieve.~~–~~ To Nairn, such an idea of the people is the

necessary starting point for a new and confident English nationalism. With its publication thirteen years after the successful referendums in Scotland and Wales, *All That Follows* points to a gradual but necessary shift in

All That Follows was published thirteen years after the successful referenda in Scotland and Wales and the opening of the new power-sharing executive in Northern Ireland. Reading it in the context of other English works of the post-devolutionary period reveals a gradual shift in emphasis both in political structures influencing a literary culture in, and of England. In other words, a contextual reading of English writing since devolution points to devolution itself as an ongoing process rather than a stable product and it is by generating new ideas and new myths of the English people that English writers contribute to that process.

Cultural Confidence and Cultural Catch-Up

By 'writing back' to canonical works, Swift, Duffy and Crace's novels suggest the possibility of decoupling the literature of England from 'English Literature' and thereby allowing more space for the diverse experiences of working class communities and people. Swift's portrayal of working class lives, and of the close association that exists between memory, identity and location, suggest a new political topology that moves towards an enlarged understanding of the cultural politics of place. In this sense, Swift embraces the opportunity both necessitated and enabled by the cultural politics of post-union Britain to generate new narratives of Englishness.

'Writing back' has provided an appropriate model for English writers responding to changes in the pan-British imagination because, although fully established in postcolonial writing, it is

a practice that devolution has only more recently enabled English writers to implement with regard to earlier hegemonic ~~and~~ definitions of Britishness perpetuated through the canon of English Literature. In other words, writers in a post-imperial ~~and post-British~~ England are in the cultural process of catching up with some of the techniques that developed first in postcolonial societies and then within the devolved nations of Britain because it has been the historical transition from British Empire to post-~~union~~ devolution Britain that has both necessitated and enabled such work.

There is thus a causal belatedness with which the cultural effects of devolution are registered in a certain strain of English writing. A novel like Wilson's *Ripley Bogle* came out of Northern Ireland in 1989 in the vanguard of rejecting the old Arnoldian and hegemonic assumption that the purpose of literature was to convert imperial ideology~~ical~~ into moral duty and hence ensure the stability of the social and political order of the time. Sebastian Faulks's novel *Engleby* repeats~~s~~ many of the portrayals, rejections and debates on literary practice implicit in *Ripley Bogle*, but did not come out in England until 2008. Faulks's Engleby, like Wilson's Bogle, moves from a working class background to Cambridge, where he fails to get ~~the~~ his desired girl and drops out angrily. Faulks, like Wilson, uses the technique of an unreliable narrator to involve readers directly in the personal rejections of his protagonist. In each case, the gradual demise of the protagonist is portrayed through murderous violence that implicitly associates the death of the literary discipline with a broader social death in the cultural consensus of Britain. ~~The fact that Faulks employs almost all of the same strategies and plots as Wilson almost twenty years later underlines the extent to which the nascent writing of a post-British England is in the process of catching up with the other cultural nationalisms of Britain by decoupling a pan-British definition of English Literature from the diverse, varied and precise practices of writers who are English.~~

One of the stimuli for decoupling literary practices from the mainstream of English

Literature originated in the devolving nations of Scotland and Wales. Writers and critics became increasingly frustrated with the unrepresentative nature of the ~~purportedly~~ British canon which rarely contained works from Wales and only marginally less rarely those from Scotland. Not finding representative inclusion in the canon, such writers have increasingly rejected the idea of the canon outright. ~~In other words, the canon itself has been perceived in those nations as being too Anglo-centric and as such attaching ideological value to other lives, communities and cultures while marginalizing the experiences of working class Welsh and Scottish people. In as far as it goes, this is quite true.~~ ~~Wbut w~~hat this response ~~it~~ fails to account for is the fact that the canon ~~– as constructed along Arnoldian middleclass and imperial assumptions~~ also denigrates and marginalises the majority of English lives. This is why, as Nairn suggested, there are few available positive myths of the English people on which an articulate English nationalism could be founded. What Nairn says about the elitist and ruling class make-up of the British governmental apparatus could apply equally to the old fashioned sense of a British canon in literature: 'The contradiction between the form of the United Kingdom state and any would-be English nationalism can be resumed in a word: class' (Nairn 1977: 298). Class barriers hinder populist participation in the functioning of the state just as class barriers place certain limits on the kind of lives and experiences that have been valued in the literary canon. In Nairn's account, the two points feed into each other: lacking a positive myth or narrative of what the English people have achieved and might achieve again, there is no opportunity for the development of a confident, populist English national culture.

This point about confidence was fundamental to ~~Raymond~~ Williams's and Nairn's ~~advocacy of both political devolution in Scotland and Wales, and diversification of the literary canon. As with Nairn, the literary point gradual blurs into a political point~~ argument: Scotland and Wales were both countries of low cultural confidence, and the ~~the product of a~~

Comment [MG20]: There is a contradiction here that needs to be resolved: the essay seems to be arguing both for fair incorporation into a British canon and for English writers' separation from it

~~majority working class population and the consequence of centuries of invasion, defeat and penetration. The~~ socialist nationalist movements in those countries could only hope to succeed if they managed to generate within their own populations sufficient cultural confidence to move towards staking affective claims for management of their own resources and places. _The new kinds of literature produced in those nations are one of the means by which such cultural confidence can be increased._ ~~Such cultural confidence could not be found if it was not actively generated – in new, counter-canonical, literary representations of the Welsh and Scottish people.~~

To Williams, support for the nationalist movements in Scotland and Wales was part of a broader socialist agenda about giving people genuinely democratic access to systems of control and maintenance in their own societies. As we have seen, one of the reactions he envisaged in English communities to the separatist national movements was a reaction of, 'Why not us?' The question is timorous, almost diffident in nature, and ~~this~~ relates to the fact that political structures in a state system that has been wholly non-populist can only be changed and democratised if the general level of cultural confidence in England is increased in a way that would enable the populace to articulate such demands in a mature and effective manner. In other words, 'Why not us?' is a potential reaction to devolution that hints at the need for increased cultural confidence on the part of the English working class as a pre-requisite for a new and articulate form of English nationalism and new forms of English representation – both literary and political. ~~Or to put it another way, the majority of Welsh and Scottish people had been excluded from representation both in the machinery of the British state and in the canon of English Literature because, coming from working-class backgrounds, they lacked the cultural confidence to challenge those structures. The same argument is also true of the majority of English people.~~

Williams expressed the confusion that exists between class, confidence, political

representation and cultural representation in a story about an English colleague, Fred Inglis:

> A friend from the north of England said to me recently that the Welsh and Scots were lucky to have these available national self-definitions, to help them find their way out of the dominance of English ruling-class minority culture. In the north, he said, we who are English are in the same sense denied; what the world knows as English is not our life and feelings, and yet we don't, like the Welsh and the Scots, have this simple thing, this national difference, to pit against it.

(Williams, 1975: 10)

In Williams's account of Inglis's view of Scotland and Wales, separatist nationalist movements provided a focal point for the grouping of several related political movements. In certain English communities, Inglis suggested, the absence of a focal point provided by a counter-nationalist movement made such political movements more difficult. In other words, the nationalist movements in the devolving nations were working for many of the same things as many English people, but in the latter case, without the ease of self-identification provided by a nationalist movement. That This is why Williams referred to the most positive English response to devolution as a response of 'why not us?' Implicit in the views expressed by Inglis and expounded by Williams is the idea that nationalist movements in Scotland and Wales provide a model that, by campaigning in the same material areas, oppositional political and cultural groups in England might positively seek to emulate.

Given the imbrication that exists in Scottish and Welsh nationalism of political consciousness with cultural production, the same argument can be made about the literatures of each nation. Faulks's *Engleby* emulates in specifically English writing what Wilson's *Ripley Bogle* did in Northern Irish writing nineteen years earlier. Both reject what Inglis calls

'English ruling-class minority culture,' but the crucial development is that whereas Inglis in 1975 thought that there was no English national self-definition to pit against that minority culture, more recent English writers have started to articulate a specifically English national idiom and hence to catch up with the cultural nationalisms of Scotland, Wales and also Northern Ireland. The comparative relationship of the English *Engleby* to Ulster's *Ripley Bogle* is precisely one of 'why not us?'

In Inglis's account of the contrast between Northern English communities and minority English ruling-class culture, there is an implication that any English culture that is not Northern must be ruling-class and minority. In other words, it repeats with regard to the South of England the same uninterrogated and simplistic set of assumptions that Williams warned against committing in Wales and Scotland with regard to England as a whole; it essentialises both the working class aspects of the 'North' and by implication the minority class culture of the 'South.' But if Inglis's Northern English communities could view Welsh and Scottish nationalist movements with an attitude of 'Why not us?', then the same is also true of Southern English non-ruling class communities. For example.

In a sense, 'Why not us?' is the question rhetorically asked of southern English working class communities by Alan Kent's 2005 novel, *Proper Job, Charlie Curnow!* The novel challenges dominant images of Cornwall as a wealthy, privileged and Edenic part of the country and therefore attempts to bring onto the literary record a kind of working-class experience. Kent attempts to articulate through Charlie's musical dreams a new cultural confidence on the part of the southern English working class and hence to give the English people an idea of themselves as a confident and functioning nation. This is envisaged as distinct from the earlier sense of British identity which, as Nairn showed, was really based on class exclusion and on lack of cultural confidence among the English working class due to the lack of available models of a confident English people. This 'selective' version can be seen in

Beverley's highly romanticised idea of Charlie's Cornish identity;

In another age he'd have been inventing steam engines, or discovering lodes of copper, or smuggling whisky in from the coast. Now, he was making modern rock music an' after world domination of the album charts. She hadn't met anyone like him.

(Kent, 2005: 100)

Kent depicts Charlie and his band aspiring to use their music to transform external images of Cornwall because the working people of Cornwall have been subjected to a highly selective and distorting version of who they are and therefore of what their economic interests represent. The received, romantic imagery of Cornwall as a land of railway engineers such as Richard Trevithick, or of miners or smugglers, creates an impression of a landscape of opportunity and of a people full of unbridled frontier spirit. It is an image that contrasts with the economic conditions, educational availability and professional un-fulfillment that Charlie represents and which Kent wishes his readers to see as how a different version of contemporary relationships in Cornwall. In this sense, the name of the title character is highly symbolic: Charlie Curnow, or Charles Cornwall, appears to suggest an ironic contrast between the urban working class people of the peninsula, and that other Charles, Prince Charles of the Duchy of Cornwall. Just as Swift and Duffy reject the 'King's List' version of national history in *Last Orders* and *The Room of Lost Things*, so too Kent rejects the 'King's List' version of contemporary cultural nationhood and tries to foster an articulate, populist idea of the English people on which a new and confident English nationalism might be based.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented three principal arguments. Firstly, that the process of political

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devolution in Scotland and Wales throws up new and unanswered questions about the politics of representation across the UK as a whole, in a way that requires new definitions of England and English representation. Secondly, that in addition to making such definitions necessary, the political conditions surrounding devolution also present a set of circumstances in which the generation of those definitions becomes possible. And, thirdly, that the category of English Literature itself is historically over-determined, fraught with an ideological imperative on the one hand and defined as much by the writing that it excludes as by the texts it includes on the other.

———Just as devolution has created an opportunity for writers in Scotland and Wales to interrogate or re-negotiate their own positioning with regard to a British mainstream of 'English Literature' that is in the process of becoming obsolescent, so too the same opportunity is available for English writers to depart from the unitary, nationalist and imperial cultural monoliths that characterised an earlier historical period. In other words, the unfolding of devolution is simultaneously a political process and a cultural process, which in turn both necessitates and enables a new cultural politics of Englishness, decoupling contemporary writers from a canonical, unitary and hegemonic Englishness and hence indicating a subtle shift in understanding, from the writers of 'English Literature' to 'writers who are English.'

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