CHAPTER 1

The nineteenth century: pastoral versions of England

To use the word ‘pastoral’ in a modern context is not necessarily to imply all the affectation and evasiveness it carries with it from earlier periods. Dr Johnson considered it the most insipid form of poetry but, conceived as a contrast to the new England of mills and railways, it could be as serious as more hard-bitten kinds of literature. There is nothing sentimental about Blake’s ‘rural pen’. In the sense in which it is used in the present chapter, ‘pastoral’ is as likely to be radical in import as conservative. In relation to the ‘real’ England of the time, far from being distanced and poetical, it was often a writer’s means of confronting what was most problematic in the present. This does not mean, of course, that the pastoral of the period was free from nostalgia, though the word ‘free’ surely begs the question. For the nostalgia of writers like, say, George Eliot or William Morris, dissimilar as they seem, was itself a way of raising questions.

With an idea as large as ‘England’ there is always some earlier source to go back to: Drayton, Spenser, even Chaucer. Yet continuity cannot be taken for granted. Are Shakespeare’s John of Gaunt and Sir Henry Newbolt really speaking about the same thing when they invoke ‘England’? Every idea of England predicates a slightly different England. Only interested parties who have a large material stake in it need to pretend that it is one indivisible entity. Politicians may like to think it is but, when they do so, they usually take care to appeal to its past – to ‘Victorian values’ or ‘the age of Drake’ or the ‘spirit of the Blitz’ – rather than to the present where it is still in contention. Tradition can be an effective weapon against present doubts and divisions; most periods of English history have looked back to some earlier period to exemplify what England really is. Being finished, the past can be made to seem complete. Yet the idea of England has been more revealing when it has remained problematic, when, for instance, one version of it has been used to exclude
another. Thus, an Edwardian writer like Hilaire Belloc contrived to make the England of the South Downs stand for the whole country. More profoundly, Dickens’s later novels came increasingly to define one England against another. *Bleak House* depicts a society made up of several quite different Englands, which seem to have grown up in total ignorance of each other, and then makes them collide. Part of its interest (and its ‘romantic side’), for its first readers, must have been that these Englands very rarely collided in their own lives. (They would not have wanted them to.) What Dickens tells us, more fully than any other writer of the period, is that England is not something that is simply there but something that we have to construct for ourselves. This process of construction was, however, well under way long before him. A better starting point is the poetry of Wordsworth, which already records—and tries to resist—the process of fragmentation that had become so acute by the time of *Bleak House*. For the disorientating shift from the country to the town that is central to the problems of characters like Trooper George and ‘The Man from Shropshire’ is already clear from a poem like ‘Michael’.

In the sonnets he wrote during the Napoleonic wars, Wordsworth made a determined bid to revive the Miltonic notion of England as a ‘noble and puissant nation rousing herself like a strong man after sleep’. But the continuity he hoped to cement was already broken:

Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour:  
England hath need of thee: she is a fen  
Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen,  
Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,  
Have forfeited their ancient English dower  
of inward happiness.

Even if such poems are more than the ‘declaratory claptrap’ which Leavis dismissed them as being, they hardly succeed in creating a real sense of Milton himself:

Thy soul was like a Star, and dwelt apart;  
Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea

This lofty apartness is what really stirs the poet of solitude, not the prospect of national consensus. Milton may also be lowly, like Wordsworth’s own shepherds, but what at first seems his ‘majestic’ public voice comes to seem very like a private one, though on the grand scale. Wordsworth’s deepest versions of England, on the other hand, focus on some single haunting figure—a discharged soldier or
The nineteenth century

a leech-gatherer – seen in some empty English landscape and evoked in language much less conscious of its audience, without the afflatus of a spiritual call to arms. This England is local and mundane, not clad in the formal robes of nationalism. A poem like ‘Michael’ describes a much closer attachment to place than any of the sonnets dedicated to ‘National Independence and Liberty’.

This is not to say that the England of ‘Michael’ does not have its distance too. Though seemingly immemorial, it is in reality dying out. The sheepfold remains unfinished at the end and only nature, not human society, has any permanence:

the estate
Was sold, and went into a stranger’s hand.
The Cottage which was named the Evening Star
Is gone – the ploughshare has been through the ground
On which it stood; great changes have been wrought
In all the neighbourhood

Only the ‘boisterous brook of Green-head Ghyll’, the non-human part of England, is unchanging. In the poem’s closing lines it brings home to us the veil of distance through which we see the events of Michael’s life. Nostalgia becomes a possibility, for all the poem’s unique concreteness. More than that, the pathos of the ending encourages us to make a selection in our minds from what has actually happened: all the regret is for what had befallen Michael himself. There is none to spare for his son Luke who has come to a bad end in the city. It is as if that distant city, which has accelerated the passing of Michael’s way of life, were not itself an authentic part of England. That is why Wordsworth is so unspecific about it despite the meticulous realism which he brings to the sheepfold. One England has cancelled out another and his allegiance is to the one that is disappearing.

Poetry after Wordsworth was to be full of contrasts between opposing Englands in which the absent one would also be the most poetically real. In ‘Michael’, though, both Englands are still real. The difference between them is simply that Michael’s England is more English than Luke’s is. That is a good enough reason for calling the poem a ‘pastoral’. It is also what makes it such a pregnant anticipation of later literary Englands, such as Lady Chatterley’s Lover (where one England ‘blots out’ another) or that of Orwell in The Lion and the Unicorn (‘a family with the wrong members in control’). But
by that time it was even clearer that the word ‘England’ was more likely to divide than unite the English people who tried to meet each other in it. ‘Michael’ is usually seen as a poem about actual rural life, purging pastoral of its previous artificiality, but in the century after it – from Tennyson’s ‘Dora’ down to the bucolic escapism of the Georgians – simplicity became increasingly hard to tell from artifice. Whereas country life is essentially real for Wordsworth, his successors came to see it as a refuge from reality. Already Arnold’s Scholar Gypsy loves ‘retired ground’:

For early didst thou leave the world, with powers
Fresh, undiverted to the world without,
Firm to their mark, not spent on other things.

The attraction of his life is that it is ‘unlike to ours’, marginal and elusive. England is on the way to being Housman’s ‘land of lost content’, not real but imaginary. But Rupert Brooke’s Grantchester, which would have seemed like a fantasy to any farm worker who actually lived there, was luminously present to Brooke himself. Nostalgia could masquerade as observation, even if England had become as faraway as the ‘foreign field that is forever England’. Not that Brooke’s poem is only artificial, false as it seems now. Its version of England clearly answered to an emotional need and the emotion itself was real even if its embodiment was precious. Nostalgia may be insidious but it would be puritanical to repress it altogether. Without it, would there be any versions of England at all?

One of the revolutionary features of ‘Michael’ (but forgotten in Brooke) is the prominence it gives to hard manual work, not simply labour but work as a community’s chief means of finding a cultural identity for itself. Such work becomes an intrinsic part of ‘Englishness’ after Wordsworth. Adam Bede, Gabriel Oak, even Sturt’s real-life Bettesworth, are all offspring of Michael, grounded in reality on one side and shading into myth on the other. At a time when English workmen were leaving the land in droves to become railwaymen and industrial ‘hands’, such figures were offered as exemplary in their ‘Englishness’. As late as Howards End and Edward Thomas’s ‘Lob’, writers were prone to seeing the old yeoman class as more English than any other. By introducing its purposeful work – so unlike the songs a hundred leisureed Strephons had sung to a hundred Chloës – pastoral could be renewed and a changing countryside immobilised whilst seeming real and unliterary. Not for nothing does Silas Marner
The nineteenth century

take its epigraph from ‘Michael’. Though steeped in actual rural experience (as the young George Eliot had been herself) its version of England is also a highly literary one. The two things were not necessarily incompatible. Part of the novel’s complexity is that it circumvents the facile juxtaposition of the real and the ideal, as if they belonged to different realms. In Silas Marner, social history and legend are emotionally indissoluble, perhaps more strikingly than in Adam Bede or The Mill on the Floss but in a similar way. George Eliot clearly found this no more foreign to the spirit of realism which she had learnt from Ruskin’s Modern Painters than Ruskin himself saw any contradiction between typology and naturalism in his interpretation of Turner. Yet it is impossible to dissociate George Eliot’s picture of ‘Englishness’ in Silas Marner from the fact that she chose to set her novel in the past. More subtly, she has made the progress of her story a reversal of actual English history between the time when it was set and the time when it was written. Unlike the majority of workers in that period, Silas moves from the town to the country. Moreover, having begun life a dissenter, he ends it in the bosom of a reassuringly broad Anglican Church. At the end of the book, he discovers with relief that Lantern Yard – the origin of all his troubles – has been ‘swept’ away’. Unlike less fortunate Englishmen, he runs no risk of having to work in the factory that has taken its place. His past (for them, the future) recedes and traditional Raveloe life comes to seem the norm. In other words, George Eliot has used social history to turn an exception into a rule. Her novel still glows with a conscious nostalgia. One readily understands why James spoke of its ‘delightful tinge of Goldsmith’. In the past, rural life seemed both mellow and more substantial.

Silas himself may be a very special case beside Michael but George Eliot nonetheless assimilates him to the same England. What is more, she invests his story with some of that ‘healing power’ which Victorians like Arnold and herself went to Wordsworth for. If the novel says that this is what rural England was really like (as Mrs Leavis argued) it also speaks of how we would like it to be. In much the same way, Arnold could praise Wordsworth’s poetry for its plainness and go on to single out its ability to turn sorrow into a form of consolation:

The cloud of mortal destiny,
Others could front it fearlessly,
But who, like him, could put it by?
One answer to Arnold’s question could be, ‘George Eliot, when she treats history as she does in Silas Marner.’ Her strategy, in a time of agricultural change and depression, of identifying rural England with the past has done yeoman service since then. Kipling’s Puck of Pook’s Hill and Edward Thomas’s ‘Lob’ are just two versions of England which depend on a similar starting point. Not all conservatism sticks narrowly to the status quo. There is also a kind which exists to side-step it.

This is not to say that all Victorian Wordsworthians took a merely complacent view of country life. Ruskin, who used Wordsworth for the epigraph to all five volumes of Modern Painters, clearly had doubts about the sort of consolation that could be derived from figures like the Leech-Gatherer. In the final volume of that book he gives a brilliant and disturbing account of meeting an old watercress-picker in Derbyshire hill country. The passage is a pointed rewriting of ‘Resolution and Independence’; the old man, who is from Skye and was ‘bred in the Church of Scotland, sir’, tells a harrowing tale of his life as a sailor and the death of his wife in childbirth: ‘I never cared much what come of me since’. Ruskin never thinks of comparing him to a stone or sea beast or laughing his own ‘despondency’ to ‘scorn’ at the thought of him. He just attends to what the hills are really telling him:

Truly, this Highland and English hill-scenery is fair enough; but has its shadows; and deeper colouring, here and there, than that of heath and rose.

Now, as far as I have watched the main powers of human mind, they have risen first from the resolution to see fearlessly, pitifully, and to its very worst, what these deep colours mean, wheresoever they fall; not by any means to pass on the other side, looking pleasantly up to the sky, but to stoop to the horror, and let the sky, for the present, take care of its own clouds. However this may be in moral matters, with which I have nothing here to do, in my own field of inquiry the fact is so; and all great and beautiful work has come of first gazing without shrinking into the darkness.

Some readers will wonder if Wordsworth doesn’t begin his poem by ‘gazing ... into the darkness’ and then, in the inimitable way envied by Arnold, ‘shrinking’ from it or, rather, putting it by. Ruskin, the only great Victorian who could have written this fine passage, begins where Wordsworth began only to go in a quite different direction: a page later we are in the thick of a comparison between the idea of ‘fate’ in Greek and Shakespearian tragedy. But the immediate point is that one can never see life’s ‘deeper colouring’ without facing its
The nineteenth century

‘darkness’ and this is a condition for understanding not just tragedy but ‘the spirit of the highest Greek and Venetian art’ too. For Ruskin, Wordsworth, great as he is, is in danger of missing both, meeting ‘darkness’ but ‘seeking pleasure only’ from it. This is why, indirectly, the word ‘pastoral’ can still be applied to him. In the end, he is a modern – as the famous chapter on the ‘Pathetic Fallacy’ argues – and Ruskin chooses the ‘impassive’ Dante instead for his ideal of the great poet.

What is impressive in the account of the watercress-gatherer is Ruskin’s alertness to suffering. Unlike Arnold, who was seduced by Wordsworth’s ‘healing power’, he is more drawn to the sickness than the cure. Does anyone have the right to be uplifted by the fortitude of a man whose life has been so harsh? By the time he wrote volume v of Modern Painters in 1860, the year of Unto This Last, Ruskin not only knew that rural England was no longer the reassuring pastoral of the poets but that it could no longer be taken to epitomise modern England at all. In his final years, he became increasingly obsessed with the ‘storm cloud of the nineteenth century’, with the industrial pollution which he claimed to be able to see even over Lake Coniston. Whereas George Eliot still tried to cement the idea of England’s traditional unity of culture – presenting it as distant but still accessible – the Ruskin of Fors Clavigera was haunted by his sense of its fragmentation.7 Where she speaks for continuity (in broadly Wordsworthian terms), he tells of rupture. It has been a frequent debate since their time, as a comparison of, say, Howards End and Lady Chatterley’s Lover also reminds us. After all, Wyndham Lewis’s Blast came out only a few years after the National Trust was founded.

Though Ruskin gazed hard into England’s ‘darkness’ (until he went mad with what he saw) he did not gaze in the spirit of a realistic novelist. As the founder and Master of the Guild of St George, he too mythologised England, every bit as much as George Eliot did. Both Raveloe and the land Ruskin bought for the Guild shared one thing in common with the creations of many other Victorian writers and artists: a need to re-constitute England in terms of another historical period. Tennyson did it in his Idyls of the King and Browning disguised all manner of current issues in renaissance drapery in Men and Women. When a pre-Raphaelite painter like Hunt did it in The Light of the World he made sure that his allegory was topical. For Tennyson, setting England in a remote past was a means of preserving the idea of its unity. It became notoriously easy to divide his poems
into public and private versions of England – ‘Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington’ or Maud, for instance – though that kind of split was already present in Wordsworth. It is far from clear what Charles James Fox was expected to get from ‘The Old Cumberland Beggar’ since the social issues Wordsworth outlined in his letter to him hardly come up in the poem itself. But England is still a thinkable idea for Tennyson and Wordsworth, even if it rarely occasions their best poetry. By the twentieth century, few poets beside Kipling and forgotten figures like Newbolt, Austin and Sir William Watson attempted as much. Edward Thomas’s England, arguably the main theme of his poems, associates the rural with the private. At a time when more and more people had come to live and work in the towns, the country which Thomas himself had left London for became more and more identified with the solitary, Wordsworthian individual. Though it still seemed ‘English’, the England it stood for actually included less and less of England as it was, the England Thomas had escaped. Thomas, of course, probably owed more to Wordsworth than to any poet and he was also old enough to have heard William Morris speak at a street corner and to say that Morris was the only man he would have liked to be himself. Not that Morris’s England was inevitably Utopian, simply because its language was a far cry from the Victorian novel’s, but one can see how his romances followed on from the Ruskin who criticised Wordsworth. For, by 1860, Ruskin had already foreseen what England would become and the only way poets would be able to make it tolerable.

To point out that the Victorians liked to see their England in terms of its past is not to say that they all used it in the same way. Browning clearly turned it to much more radical effect than Tennyson did. But even the old pastoral version of England could be deployed in quite different ways by the poets from Clare to Arnold. Ruskin himself invokes it, at the end of Unto This Last of all places, not out of nostalgia but to dream a dream of hope in troubled times. It is the kind of passage that mattered a great deal to Morris:

The desire of the heart is also the light of the eyes. No scene is continually and untringly loved, but one rich by joyful human labour; smooth in field; fair in garden; full in orchard; trim, sweet and frequent in homestead; ringing with voices of vivid existence. No air is sweet that is silent; it is only sweet when full of low currents of under sound – triplets of birds, and murmur and chirp of insects, and deep-toned words of men, and wayward
The nineteenth century

trebles of childhood. As the art of life is learned, it will be found at last that all lovely things are also necessary: — the wild flower by the wayside, as well as the tended corn; and the wild birds and creatures of the forest, as well as the tended cattle; because man doth not live by bread only, but also by the desert manna; by every wondrous word and unknowable work of God."

The whole passage is one which probably speaks more clearly today than it did fifty years ago. The extraordinary charge of hedonism that Ruskin was able to inject into his idea of England, without betraying his sense of its communal and spiritual effort, is something few of his contemporaries knew how to cope with. Pastoral is usually an aristocratic form, or at least a way of upholding the class structure, but Ruskin’s robust way of introducing the idea of class into it is deliberately unsettling:

What is chiefly needed in England at the present day is to show the quantity of pleasure that may be obtained by a consistent, well-administered competence, modest, confessed and laborious. We need examples of people who, leaving heaven to decide whether they are to rise in the world, decide for themselves that they will be happy in, and have resolved to seek — not greater wealth, but simpler pleasure. (p. 227)

Perhaps the implications of this exhortation are conservative (though there is an important distinction between being at the bottom of society and deciding not to rise in it) but what is most striking is Ruskin’s energy of tone. There is none of the usual wistfulness of pastoral. Arnold employs a very similar imagery in ‘The Scholar Gypsy’ but his ideal is located firmly in the past, somewhere between an old book in the Bodleian and the myth of ‘Merrie England’. Ruskin’s voice is positively abrasive in comparison with Arnold’s urbane and impotent pensiveness. Yet it has, of course, been much more common for poets since Arnold to situate England in the past than in the future, as Ruskin does. I am not thinking simply of a poet like Betjeman. The attitude persists as recently as Donald Davie’s collection about England, The Shires, which came out in 1973, the year of the three-day week:

Slow and vocal
Amber of a burring baritone
My grandad’s voice, not Hardy’s, is what stays
Inside me as a slumbrous apogee
Meridional altitude upon
Pastoral England’s longest summer day.
O golden age! Bee-mouth, and honeyyed singer."

© Cambridge University Press
It is a lovely poem but it has more to do with our memories than our lives. Would even a peasant of Hardy’s day have recognised this glowing Dorset? ‘Honeyed’ is a word one more readily associates with Elizabethan poetry. One also senses the presence of Virgil being used to much the same effect that Arnold used him, for that classical resonance which enables a modern poet to pass his feelings off as universal. Enticing as Davie’s Dorset is, there is no room in it for ‘pleasure’ in Ruskin’s sense.

Though they are very different, it would be a mistake merely to contrast Ruskin and Arnold as if one could only subscribe to one of them and not both. Arnold the poet is not really Arnold entire. As a prose-writer, he was as capable as Ruskin of putting his finger on what made the usual sort of middle-class ‘Englishness’ rebarbative. He pointed out everything narrowly provincial in the Englishman’s pride in his country (and even, in Essays in Criticism, what was provincial in Ruskin himself). Both writers were well qualified to relish Dickens’s Mr Podsnap; indeed, they spent much of their own time hunting down his absurdities too:


‘Pardon,’ said the foreign gentleman; ‘I am alwiz wrong!’

‘Our language,’ said Mr Podsnap, with a gracious consciousness of being always right, ‘is Difficult. Ours is a Copious Language, and Trying to Strangers. I will not Pursue my Question… It merely referred, ’Mr Podsnap explained, with a sense of meritorious proprietorship, ’to our Constitution, Sir. We Englishmen are Very Proud of our Constitution, Sir. It was Bestowed Upon Us By Providence. No Other Country is so Favoured as This Country.’

Mr Podsnap is still with us, wherever there is a four course dinner and a politician with a speech to be made, but no one, save Dickens himself, has been better at guying provincial self-congratulation than Arnold was. What was less obvious was the provinciality of those who, aghast at this public face of England, sought refuge from it in its more congenial rural aspect. It seldom struck them that they might be vulnerable to the charge of being provincial offshoots of something that was already provincial. For if the public England was provincial, wouldn’t the private one be even more so? If the Arnold of the criticism, the champion of French and German literature as well as the classics, did not take this path it is arguable that the Arnold of ‘The Scholar Gypsy’, the friend of Clough who had such trouble