

INTRODUCTION

Albion

Of the English imagination there is no certain description. It has been compared with a stream or river, in the same manner as English poetry. It may be a fountain perpetually fresh and perpetually renewed, as in the Marian hymn of the early sixteenth century: 'Haill! fresh fontane that springes new . . .' It can also be seen in close affinity with the flow of English poetical cadence:

In the hexameter rises the fountain's silvery column;
In the pentameter aye falling in melody back

It can be compared to an aeolian harp, of which

. . . the long sequacious notes
Over delicious surges sink and rise

These words of Coleridge suggest in turn the drawn-out melodies and vast chromatic harmonies of the English musical tradition. And yet, if a literary metaphor is required, then the most powerful may be taken from Henry Vaughan in the seventeenth century: 'Like a great *Ring* of pure and endless light'. The English imagination takes the form of a ring or circle. It is endless because it has no beginning and no end; it moves backwards as well as forwards.

Albion is an ancient word for England, *Albio* in Celtic and *Alba* in Gaelic; it is mentioned in the Latin of Pliny and in the Greek of Ptolemy. It may mean 'the white land', related to the whiteness of the cliffs greeting travellers and suggesting pristine purity or blankness. But the cliffs are also guardians and Albion was the name of the primaeval giant who made his home upon the island of Britain. He is the 'elemental and emblematic giant' whom G. K. Chesterton observed in his study of Chaucer, 'with our native hills for his bones and our native forests for his beard . . . a single figure outlined against the sea and a great face staring at the sky'. His traces can be seen in the huge white horses which populated the primitive landscape, inscribed in the chalk of the hills. Today, like those fading memorials, Albion is not so much a name as the echo of a name.

There is clear evidence that the concept of Englishness – the ‘Englishness’ of the Anglo-Saxons, as opposed to the ‘Britishness’ of the Celts – circulated widely in the Anglo-Saxon world. Bede composed *Historia Ecclesiastica Gens Anglorum* (The Ecclesiastical History of the English People), where the ‘Gens Anglorum’ were deemed to be a specific and identifiable race sprung out of Saxon and Old English roots. In Bede’s history, ‘the English were God’s new “chosen” nation elected to replace the sin-stained Briton in the promised land of Britain’.¹ (This belief in God’s providential choice, most ably expounded by Milton in the seventeenth century, survived until the latter part of the nineteenth century.) The notion of Englishness itself was a religious one from the moment Pope Gregory sent Augustine to England with the mission of establishing a Church of the English, in the light of his celebrated if apocryphal remark ‘*non Angli sed angeli*’ (‘Not Angles but angels’). A late seventh-century biography then declared that Gregory would lead ‘*gentem Anglorum*’ into the sight of God at the time of the Last Judgement. One of the reasons for the success of the Reformation, and the formation of the Church of England, lies in this national zeal.

King Alfred is associated with ‘the councillors of all the English race’ in a late ninth-century treaty, and defined himself as ‘*rex Anglorum et Saxonum*’. In the preface to the translation of Gregory’s *Cura Pastoralis* he alludes to ‘*Angelcynn*’, or Englishkind, and ‘*Englisc*’. The ‘D’ and ‘E’ texts of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* evince the spirit of English nationalism with reference to ‘this nation’, ‘all the people of England’ and ‘all the flower of the English nation’.²

The nationalism of the Anglo-Saxon period has been maintained by the fact that no other European nation has kept its boundaries intact over so many centuries. English literature, too, is among the oldest in Europe. It has been remarked that the heroic poetry of England after 900 strikes a singularly patriotic note, and we may regard that date as significant.

Archbishop Wulfstan’s ‘Sermon of the Wolf to the English’, of 1014, continually invokes *theodscipe* or the nation in an act of sympathetic if admonitory communion. As one historian has put it, ‘Englishness was the creation of the Anglo-Saxons, and it was they who made England’.³ It was of crucial importance, in this context, that many charters and wills were composed in Old English; the language itself becomes an image of unity and identity. In that most important of Old English poems, *Beowulf*, the voices possess ‘eloquence and understatement’, a

‘melancholy’ and ‘firm resolve’,⁴ which were bequeathed to subsequent English literature. In the art of the ninth and tenth centuries, too, there is an unmistakable Englishness in the employment of light and delicate outline. In the architecture of the same period irregularity and the pragmatic assembling of parts have also been deemed to be essentially English in spirit.

Yet from the beginning there are ambiguities and paradoxes. In painting, for example, the Anglo-Saxon style was inspired and modified by continental models before it could achieve maturity; the insular idiom was most fully expressed and developed precisely in relation to Mediterranean art of the same period. It could not exist without its continental counterpart. The power of Anglo-Saxon culture springs in part from absorption and assimilation, thus emphasising a more general point concerning ‘the susceptibility of the English artist to alien influences . . . and his willingness to tolerate and even adapt to his own purpose any acceptable new elements’.⁵ This has been the pattern of the centuries, and indeed it can be maintained that English art and English literature are formed out of inspired adaptation, like the language, and like the inhabitants of the nation itself, they represent the apotheosis of the mixed style.

We may identify here a sense of belonging which has more to do with location and with territory, therefore, than with any atavistic native impulses. There has been much speculation on the subject of location theory, in which the imperative of place is more significant than any linguistic or racial concerns. In *The Spirit of the People: An Analysis of the English Mind*, published in 1912, Ford Madox Ford suggested that ‘it is absurd to use the almost obsolescent word “race”’. He noted in particular the descent of the English ‘from Romans, from Britons, from Anglo-Saxons, from Poitevins, from Scotch . . .’ which is perhaps the best antidote to the nonsensical belief in some ‘pure’ Anglo-Saxon people. In its place he invoked the spirit of territory with his belief that ‘It is not – the whole of Anglo-Saxondom – a matter of race but one, quite simply, of place – of place and of spirit, the spirit being born of the environment’. In Ford Madox Ford’s account that tradition is in some sense transmitted or communicated by the territory. It is a theory which will also elucidate certain arguments within this book.

And so the enterprise is begun. This study will concern the origins, and not the history, of the English imagination. It will not deal proportionately, therefore, with every period and every author or every

artist. Beginnings will be granted more importance than endings. I will mention other literatures only in passing, and for this I offer no excuse. There will no doubt be many errors and omissions, to which I plead guilty in advance. I am fully aware that certain qualities defined here as peculiarly English are not uniquely so. Russian melancholy, and the Persian miniature, are cases in point. Yet such qualities flourish within an English context in singular and particular ways; I have simply endeavoured to trace their formation. There may also be faults of a native hue. If this book is diverse and various, digressive and heterogeneous, accumulative and eclectic, anecdotal and sensational, then the alert reader will come to realise that the author may not be entirely responsible.

Peter Ackroyd,
London,
May 2002.

Patterns of eternity



'Trees V: Spreading Branches', 1979, by Henry Moore.

CHAPTER I

The Tree

When William Wordsworth invoked 'the ghostly language of the ancient earth' he spoke more, perhaps, than he knew. The mark or symbol of the hawthorn tree is to be found in the runic alphabet of the ancient British tribes, as if the landscape propelled them into speech. The worship of the forest, and of forest forms, characterised the piety of the Druids in whose rituals the spirits of the oak, the beech and the hawthorn are honoured. According to the texts of the classical historians the centre of the Druidical caste was to be found in Britain, from whose shores the practitioners of magic sailed to the European mainland. The forest worship of the northern and Germanic tribes, who were gradually to conquer Britain from the fifth to the seventh centuries, may derive from the Druids' ministry. That is why Hippolyte Taine, the French critic and historian who in the 1860s completed a capacious history of English literature, hears the first music of England in the fine patter of rain on the oak trees.

The poetry of England is striated with the shade that the ancient trees cast, in a canopy of protection and seclusion. Thus John Lydgate, in the fifteenth-century 'Complaint of the Black Knight', remarks of

Every braunche in other knet,
And ful of grene leves set,
That sonne myght there non discende

where the charm of darkness and mystery descends upon the English landscape. In the nineteenth-century Tennyson recalls how

Enormous elm-tree boles did stoop and lean
Upon the dusky brushwood underneath
Their broad curved branches . . .

and in that tremulous dusk the trees themselves are images of peacefulness and protection.

In the penultimate chapter of *Jane Eyre*, before her final awakening, the heroine passes through 'the twilight of close ranked trees' like a 'forest aisle'. 'The Knight's Tale' of Geoffrey Chaucer is set in Athens

but the funeral pyre of Arcite there is adorned with the trees of England rather than those of ancient Greece – ‘oak, firre, birch, aspe, alder, holm, popler’ – in a refrain which was in turn adopted by Spenser in the first book of *The Fairie Queene* where ‘the builder Oake’, ‘the Firre that weepeth still’ and ‘the Birch for shaftes’ are among ‘the trees so straight and hy’. For Spenser in the late sixteenth century the trees prompt mythical longings, as if their ancient guardians might still be summoned by the vatic tone of English epic. The hawthorn was the home of fairies, and the hazel offered protection against enchantment; the great oak itself descended into the other world. It is Milton’s ‘monumental Oke’. As a child William Blake saw angels inhabiting the trees of Peckham Rye; as a child, too, his disciple, Samuel Palmer, was entranced by the shadows of an elm tree cast by the moon upon an adjacent wall. Wordsworth stood beneath an ash tree in the moonlight and was vouchsafed visions

Of human Forms with superhuman Powers.

The same poet saw among yew trees ‘Time the Shadow’, and wrote other verses upon ‘The Haunted Tree’.

The magical talismans of Puck, in Rudyard Kipling’s *Puck of Pook’s Hill*, are the leaves of the oak, the thorn and the ash which afford the children access to earlier times. As the Roman poet, Lucan, apostrophised the Druids of the English isle in the first century – ‘To you only is given knowledge or ignorance (whichever it be) of the gods and powers of heaven; your dwelling is in the lone heart of the forest.’ In *Piers the Plowman*, composed in the fourteenth century, the divine edict of a later god ensures that ‘Beches and brode okes were blowen to the grounde’.

These sources fill with vigour and energy the legends of Robin Hood, hiding himself among the trees of Sherwood Forest; he may be descended from the English imp, Robin Goodfellow, but he is more akin to the formidable figure of the Green Man. The fable may have begun in 1354 with the incarceration of a ‘Robin Hood’ for the poaching of venison in the forest of Rockingham, but no local or secular origin can account for the power which this green figure among the trees has been granted.

By 1377 the ‘rymes of Robyn Hood’ were as familiar as household tales, and as late as the sixteenth century the local festivals of the Thames and Severn Valleys, and of Devon, were still associated with plays of Robin Hood. It is not necessarily an old, or forgotten, piety. In

Women in Love D. H. Lawrence’s twentieth-century characters, Ursula and Birkin, drive among ‘great old trees’. “Where are we?” she whispered. “In Sherwood Forest.” It was evident he knew the place. He knew it spiritually, atavistically. “We will stay here”, he said, “and put out the lights.”

And then in the darkness they may have seen the Ash Tree of Existence, the Tree of Jesse and the Golden Bough. The Tree of Jesse was ‘the first design to be integrated in England to fill a large window’.¹ As part of the mournful decorations upon English tombstones, shields hang from trees. The palm-tree vault in Wells Chapter House, begun c.1290, endures as a memorial of sacred stone beyond the depredations of rain and wind and frost. In the biblical narrative of the *Cursor Mundi*, composed in English in the early fourteenth century, there are holy trees which owe more to English folklore than to biblical tradition; a heavenly light shines upon them, and they have an innate virtue which wards off evil and heals sickness. In an old English carol Jesus talks to a tree while still in his mother’s womb, and images of the cross in English art are generally those of a lopped tree-trunk. In *The Dream of the Rood*, a meditation upon the crucifixion of Christ, the tree speaks:

*ic waes aheawen holtes on ende . . .
Rood waes ic araered . . .
eall ic waes mid blode bestemed*

‘I was cut down, roots on end . . .
I was raised up, as a rood . . .
I was all wet with blood.’

Some lines from this Anglo-Saxon tree poem were carved in runes upon the great Ruthwell Cross, one of the English stone crosses which create a sacred topography of the nation. The Ruthwell inscription can be dated to the late seventh century, while in its surviving state the poem is believed to derive from eighth-century Northumbria; yet still the stone speaks, and the tree sighs.

On the territorial charters of Anglo-Saxon kings a hawthorn tree is generally employed as a boundary marker; it becomes the root of time and space, as a measure of continuity and ownership. In *The Child that Books Built* Francis Spufford remarks that ‘there was a forest at the beginning of fiction, too. This one spread for ever.’² The tree encloses a communal memory – ‘beyond the memory of anyone now living’, as the medieval rubric was later to express it – and from it derives that sense

of place, of literal rootedness, which is one of the great themes of the English imagination.

So in *The Mill on the Floss* George Eliot describes a country town 'which carries the traces of its long growth and history, like a millennial tree'. In 'The Hollow Tree' John Clare, the nineteenth-century poet who laboured with the land, celebrates the 'battered floor' of an anciently hollowed and hallowed ash:

But in our old tree-house rain as it might
Not one drop fell although it rained all night

Constable claimed that he could see Gainsborough 'in every hedge and hollow tree'; the remark expresses an identification with the offspring of the earth itself, that local genius or deity to which we are bound and towards which we ineluctably travel. Of Gainsborough's landscapes, of trees and forests in profusion, Constable also wrote: 'on looking at them we find tears in our eyes and know not what brought them.' Gainsborough himself remarked that there 'was not a picturesque clump of trees, nor even a single tree of any beauty . . . that I did not treasure in my memory from earliest years'. And what of Constable's own paintings? 'The trees', he wrote, '. . . seem to ask me to try and do something like them.' An enthusiast once created an enclosure in which were to be planted all the trees of Shakespeare's plays.

The destruction of trees creates dismay and bewilderment among the English poets. When Clare's favourite elm trees were condemned, he explained that 'I have been several mornings to bid them farewell.' There is an English legend of a dying stag, sobbing when for the last time it enters its own familiar glade; this, too, is part of the *genius loci*. When Gerard Manley Hopkins watched an ash tree cut down, 'there came at that moment a great pang and I wished to die and not to see the inscapes of this world destroyed any more'. 'Inscape' is of Anglo-Saxon derivation, from 'sceap' meaning creation with a passing obeisance to 'instaep' or threshold. The ash represents a threshold of creation, for Hopkins in the nineteenth century no less than for the ancient priests of Britain. There is, here, a continuity. In sixteenth-century tapestry the antlers of stags resemble the trees upon a hillside, as if all nature were animated by one aspiring spirit; fifteenth-century English mystics saw trees as men walking, a vision recalled by Tolkien in his legend of moving trees or Ents in *The Lord of the Rings*. 'Ents' derives from the Old English word meaning 'giants'. Tolkien also refers to them as the 'shepherds of the trees', thus reintroducing the shepherd

as another figure beloved in the English imagination.

It was remarked of Thomas Hardy, in 1883, that he 'is never more reverent, more exact, than when he is speaking of forest trees'. The tree represents life itself, and his characters are often identified by it. There is, for example, Gabriel Oak in *Far From the Madding Crowd*. In *The Woodlanders*, Hardy himself dwells upon the 'runic obscurity' of the language of trees, yet 'from the quality of the wind's murmur through a bough' the local inhabitants could name its species. In *Far From the Madding Crowd*, humankind 'learn how the trees on the right and the trees on the left wailed or chaunted to each other in the regular antiphonies of a cathedral choir'. It is not difficult to understand, therefore, how the trees of the ancient landscape became images of British liberty and of primitive Christianity itself.

When Tess of the D'Urbervilles remarked that the trees had 'inquisitive eyes' she was exclaiming upon that same preternatural insight which the 'Tree of Truth' possesses in nineteenth-century pantomimes; whenever a character told a lie, a large acorn fell upon his or her head. When Jane Eyre accepts Rochester's fanatical passion, 'little Adele came running in to tell me that the great horse-chestnut at the bottom of the garden had been struck by lightning'.

The folklore of England has many interesting ramifications. When in 1922 D. H. Lawrence wrote that 'I would like to be a tree for a while', he was expressing his need for deep and yet deeper absorption into the earth; it represents that descent into the layers of past time which is very like the journey into his own inner self where all unacknowledged fantasies and unknown powers lie hidden. That is why, in ancient poems, the woods are places of refuge and sanctuary. When Will Brangwen, in *The Rainbow*, carved two angels out of wood they 'were like trees'. In Blake's 'A Vision of the Last Judgement', Jehovah is 'The I am of the Oaks of Albion'. So the tree grows through the literature of the English.

CHAPTER 2

The Radiates

In 'A Letter to a Friend upon Occasion of the Death of His Intimate Friend', composed in the 1670s, Sir Thomas Browne noticed the change in the human countenance just before death; the man about to die began to resemble his uncle 'the Lines of whose Face lay deep and invisible in his healthful Visage before'. Thus before our mortal end 'by sick and languishing Alterations, we put on new Visages: and in our Retreat to Earth, may fall upon such Looks which from community of seminal Originals, were before latent in us'. Our ancestors shine through at that moment of quietus and we are but a palimpsest of past times.

And is this the condition of the world itself? As the lachrymose eighteenth-century poet Edward Young asked, in his *Conjectures on Original Composition*, 'Born originals, how comes it to pass that we die Copies?' It is a question of absorbing interest for those who contemplate the persistence through time of certain patterns of behaviour or expression. It has often been remarked how the inhabitants of the Scottish Highlands retained such a primitive way of life that they remained in the ninth century for many hundreds of years. But more unequivocal evidence was discovered in Gough's Cave, Cheddar Gorge. Here was found the skeleton of a man who had expired at some moment in that great expanse of time known as the Middle Stone Age; his mitochondrial DNA was subsequently tested, and a close match found with a history teacher residing in the late twentieth-century Cheddar village. Thus a genetic link can be directly established over a period of approximately eleven thousand years. But can it also pose a question of place, rather than of tribe or family? Can dwelling become a form of indwelling or imaginative life? To attempt to elucidate the characteristics of the English imagination, over a period of two thousand years, may not then be a futile or unworthy task.

For over one thousand years the Celtic tribes were established all over England; these separate British tribes, or kingdoms, or *civitates*, survived *in situ* from the pre-Roman Iron Age to the sub-Roman period and the Saxon invasions. Their verses of prophecy and legend remain

in the Irish, Welsh and Cornish vernaculars but in no other source. While extant inscriptions and symbols 'make it certain that sub-Roman [British] literacy included both letters and poems'¹ none of them has been found in England; just as there are almost no Syriac manuscripts dating from the Macedonian occupation of Syria, no British Celtic texts survive from either the Roman or Saxon periods. One British manuscript survives, the *Vergilius Romanus* of the early sixth century which is 'the earliest British book known to us today'.² It is of course composed in Latin. Those who had mastered writing naturally preferred to employ the 'prestige' language. No music remains and, since early British churches were constructed of wood, no public architecture.

Yet the presence of a thousand years can never wholly die; it lingers still in the words that spring most easily and fluently to the lips, among them 'kick', 'hitch' and 'fudge'. Celtic words lie buried in the landscape, like their quondam speakers immured in round barrows, in such familiar names as Avon and Cotswold and Downs. The names of London and the Isle of Man are Celtic.

The settlement of the Saxon invaders was a more gradual and intermittent process than has generally been acknowledged; new scholarly emphasis is upon assimilation rather than conquest, and, for example, Celtic patterns of farming have been found in medieval surroundings.

There may have been some compact or understanding, then, between the indigenous population of the island and the invading Anglo-Saxon tribes of the fifth and sixth centuries. There is evidence, both in place-names and in personal names, of absorption or intermingling; there was an Anglo-Saxon term, '*wealhstod*', meaning one who can understand and translate native Celtic (British) speech. In the bleak and forbidding landscapes of the north, the Celts (the British) were often left within their own communal areas; there seem to have been British settlements just north of the Thames, also, and in the forests of West Suffolk and Essex. It is possible that the British language was being spoken as late as the end of the seventh century, in Somerset and Dorset. There are many who claim that in Northumbria, for example, there are still Celts, distinctive in appearance and even in behaviour, among the local population.

There are deep patterns of inheritance and transmission still to be found etched in the stone or metal of surviving Celtic objects. We need not call it 'art' because it furnished the texture of life itself. Consider the characteristic motif of the spiral in Celtic workmanship both secular

and spiritual; there are reverse spirals or whirls, and trumpet spirals, and 'hair-spring' spirals, circling like some persistent pattern or obsessive secret. It may come as no surprising revelation, therefore, to note the presence of the same spirals, or 'rings', carved upon sandstone rocks of the earlier Neolithic period. Here, chipped with hard stone tools, are the same symbols upon cremation covers or cist covers or outcrop rock, in locations such as Broomridge and Goat's Crag and Hare Law. They are sometimes known as 'radiates', and indeed they seem to shine from prehistory into the annals of recorded time. Some of them, marked upon stones beside burial cairns, were never meant to be seen; but they rise again, like the twelfth-century spiral markings in the church of St Laurence Pittington, Durham.

This is no archaeological reverie, however. The paganism of the Anglo-Saxon English, which survived for many centuries after Augustine had brought Christianity to England in 597, may in turn be traced to much earlier beliefs. The idols and demons, the spells and amulets, of the Anglo-Saxons may derive some of their power from Neolithic avatars. Just as the spirals are found within the Durham church, so concealed within the fabric of the church of St Albans were discovered rolls which contained magical invocations and the details of pagan rites.

The lineaments of a style and sensibility which have over the centuries been characterised as entirely English can be traced to Celtic work. The motif of the spiral, for example, is deployed within a severe and abstract patterning. The tendency towards elaborate pattern, aligned to surface flatness, will become increasingly apparent in this narrative of the English imagination. The vision of the Celts was an intense and graphic one, executed with a grave sense of form and a majestic, almost numinous, style. Theirs was not an art based on the representation of nature but one rooted in the essential truths behind appearance. Animals are depicted in long, flowing, ribbon-like movements; they become zoomorphs, or images of life as part of the calligraphy of significant form. This visionary capacity of the Celts is of the utmost importance in understanding the English genius.

There have been many theories about the persistent Celtic presence in native art and literature, the most eloquent of them embodied in *The Study of Celtic Literature* by Matthew Arnold in 1867. He proffers the observation that even if we no longer hear of the Celts after the Roman and Saxon invasions, that by no means proves they had ceased to exist; conquerors make their own history, while the vanquished must endure

in silence. There is no record of extermination or general exodus (despite the tendency of the old Britons to move westward) so that 'one would suppose that a great mass of them must have remained in the country . . . their blood entering into the composition of a new people'. Arnold noted among these early Britons 'a singular inaptitude for the plastic arts' yet also a 'turn for melancholy' and 'natural magic' together with a 'passionate, turbulent, indomitable reaction against the despotism of fact'. In his somewhat deterministic vocabulary this natural temperament of the Celts is different from that of the Anglo-Saxons which is 'disciplinable and steadily obedient within certain limits, but retaining an inalienable part of freedom and self-dependence', with a propensity for 'spending its exertions within a bounded field, the field of plain sense, of practical utility'. Succeeding chapters of this book will suggest the extent of this 'practical' or empirical genius, but it is worth noting that according to Arnold the conflation of Celtic and Saxon in the national temperament has produced a kind of awkwardness or embarrassment – a tendency to understatement – in the characteristic productions of England. We may trace it through Chaucer and Auden, and will find one of its earliest manifestations in the verse of *Beowulf*.



12th century spiral markings: church of St Laurence Pittington, County Durham

Faith of our fathers

In 'the Tale of the Sankgreal', as related by Thomas Malory, Sir Galahad witnesses the miracle of transubstantiation during the holy communion of the Catholic Mass. The bishop took up a wafer 'which was made in lyknesse of brede. And at the lyfftyng up there cam a figoure in lyknesse of a chylde, and the vysage was as rede and as bryght os ony fyre, and smote hymselff into the brede, that all they saw hit that the brede was fourmed of a fleyshely man. And than he put hit into the holy vessell agayne.' It is a strange scene, as the wafer of bread is transformed into a child and man before being dipped into the chalice, but it is fully consistent with the belief of Malory's contemporaries that in the miracle of the Mass the Word does indeed become flesh. There are many stories, or legends, of the eucharist turning into a burning babe, just as the miraculous properties of the consecrated host were endlessly attested. It is at the heart of Catholic England and, as a matter of instinctive practice and natural belief, at the centre of the culture which Catholic England manifested. The material world was relished with as much fullness as spiritual truths were venerated. It has been said of London customs of the fourteenth century that 'the drinking bouts and rough games had once been religious ceremonies in themselves: and the two ideas were still confused in the popular imagination'.¹ The remark is of the utmost significance for any understanding of medieval England.

From the reports of foreign observers it becomes clear that in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the English were notable for their piety; they rivalled the Romans in their love of ceremony, and the Spanish in their devotion to the Virgin. The bells of the London churches deafened those who were unfamiliar with them, and a continental observer noted of the citizens that 'they all attend Mass every day, and say many Paternosters in public, the women carrying large rosaries in their hands'. This was the dispensation and condition of England until the time of Henry VIII, and it is open to question whether the legacy of the last five hundred years will outweigh or outlast a previous tradition of fifteen hundred years.

We may begin by saying that England then was at the centre of Catholic Europe. It was a shared civilisation of ceremony and spectacle, of drama, of ritual and display; life was only the beginning, not the end of existence and thus could be celebrated or scorned as one station along the holy way. It was a world in which irony and parody of all kinds flourished, where excremental truth and holy vision were considered fundamentally compatible, where Aquinas could mount towards heaven with his divine dialectic and Rabelais stoop towards the earth with his gargantuan corporeality. It was a world of symbolic ceremony, with the processions of Palm Sunday, the rending of the veils in Holy Week and the washing of the feet on Maundy Thursday. Doors were released at Pentecost in St Paul's Cathedral, and the Resurrection dramatised on Easter Day in Lichfield Cathedral. It was a world also deeply imbued with symbolic numerology; this lies behind the preoccupation with form and ritual, as well as the fascination with pattern. There were the five wounds of Christ and the five joys of the Virgin, the five wits of the human self and the five principal social virtues of franchise, fellowship, cleanness, cortaysye and pite. The concern for pattern is embodied in the form of the pentangle, otherwise known as 'David's Foot' and created by the wooden swords of earl folk-dancers with the cry of 'A Nut! A Nut!' or a Knott –

... the English call it,
In all the land, I hear, the Endless Knot²

There are seven sins, seven sacraments, and seven works of mercy, of them part of the passage of humankind through earthly existence; the importance of allegory may here be glimpsed, with the allegorical 'reading' of texts and illuminations as a fundamental prerequisite for the understanding of *Piers the Plowman*, *Pearl* or the 'General Prologue' of *The Canterbury Tales*. We might suggest in turn that the history plays of Shakespeare, and the symbolic fictions of Chaucer and Dickens, owe something to this now buried or disregarded tradition. The day itself was the medium of ritual. The canonical hours of the Church – with the 'Great Hours' of Lauds and Vespers mingled with the 'Little Hours' of Prime, Tierce, Sext, None and Compline – materially altered the shape of time in medieval discourse. The hours were connected with the narrative of Christ's Passion, with scenes representing the crucifixion and entombment, but there was also a further litany of time with the hours of the Virgin as intercessor and intermediary for mankind. The sequence of hours then represents

passage of sacred events which are beyond the claims of time; linear duration is replaced by cyclical commemoration so that the elusive present moment is always hallowed by the presence of spiritual truth. Thus the drama of the medieval period is at once eternal and starkly contemporary, the shepherds both local men and emblems of wandering mankind. When in one of the nativity plays a sheep, stolen from a field near Bethlehem, is disguised as an infant child in a cradle the allusion to Christ as the Lamb of God might seem crude and even shocking; but, for the Yorkshire audience of 'The Second Shepherd's Play' in 1440, it would have seemed natural if decidedly comic. There was no aversion to things of the flesh but, rather, an understanding of them as tokens of the divine order. A prayer at the end of the Mass celebrates the fact that God blesses 'oure brede & oure ayl', where the bread of holy communion is seen to be equivalent to the bread upon the table of kitchen or tavern.

In a drama of the Crucifixion the 'pinners' or nail-makers re-enact all the physical details of Christ's suffering – 'He weyes a wikkid weght' – in comic corporeal re-enactment of the mystery. It will often be remarked, in this study, how the most ostensibly tragic and comic episodes are thoroughly intermingled in English drama and English fiction; here lies one of the explanations. When the fifteenth-century recluse, Julian of Norwich, saw the face of the devil, 'the color was rede like the tilestone whan it is new brent . . . his here was rode as rust'. Red was also the colour conventionally attributed to the hair of Herod and of Judas. So the more vivid the material of physical description, the more intense becomes the spiritual experience. Thus again in Julian's revelations, 'the blewhede [blue] of the clothing betokinith his stedfastnes'.

This equivalence between the material and the ideal can lead to irony as well as pathos, parody as much as melancholy; in a world where certain sacred truths are accepted without question, then parody and irony themselves become necessary devices. The great historian of the Middle Ages, Johan Huizinga, remarked 'that the line of demarcation between seriousness and pretence was never less clear than in the medieval period';³ it is a temperamental characteristic which has never entirely deserted what might be called the Catholic imagination. It has been said that Chaucer's fabliaux, in *The Canterbury Tales*, suggest that 'men's lives are seen as burlesque re-enactments of sacred prototypes'.⁴ But this equivalence might also encourage a sense of completeness or wholeness. In the ceremonies of Corpus Christi, when

the sacrament was carried down the principal streets with banners and crosses in attendance, wreathed in smoke and attended by joyous chanters, the physical communion of the faithful was joined in spirit to the heavenly community. The ritual then became a social and cultural performance, a form of outdoor theatre not unlike the mystery plays when the crucifix rather than the eucharist was carried through the streets of England's towns. This had been the message of St Augustine; the religion of the urban centres demanded an audience, just like that of the theatre, where a 'secret sympathy' is shared.

There is another connection with the English imagination, also in the context of 'the rhetoric of performance and the performance of rhetoric',⁵ whether in the debate poems of Chaucer or the declamations of Tudor drama. We cannot at this date, in other words, separate English sensibility from a Catholic sensibility. The world of miracles and marvels is still alive in Shakespeare's late plays.

What else might be expected from a Catholic sensibility? The delight in splendour is of course related to the intoxication with the marvellous, but resplendent pomp and display were also the means of celebrating the hierarchy and order of the universe. If the people of England gazed heavenward, and looked up at the night sky filled with light and harmony, they believed that they were looking inward as well as outward; the pattern of the heavens then became a paradigm for the orders of significance upon the earth, whether orders of interpretation, orders of human rank, orders of dream, or orders of perception. This was of some importance to the writer and artist, since the concept of personal personality was not far advanced; just as the personal sinfulness of a priest made no difference to his power upon the altar, so unique individual perception was less important than the corpus of approved and acquired knowledge. Authenticity was more significant than individuality or originality, so we may expect an art or a literature that rests upon things already known and understood. It is the essential reason why Pope translated Homer and William Morris translated *Beowulf*, why Tennyson modelled his verse upon Arthurian epic and why Alfred translated Boethius and Augustine. If in one aspect we describe the English imagination as antiquarian in instinct, animated by the delight in the past, then it is important to see how a predominant Catholic culture and sensibility may still dwell within it.

It is a nice point indeed to settle rival instincts and rival claims. There was an English Catholicism, with its rituals and its own local saints, and the Roman declarations at the Synod of Whitby and the arrival

Norman abbots steadily diminished its power; the names of its saints linger in Cornwall and Northumbria, but their shrines and relics have long gone. Nevertheless ecclesiastical historians have outlined a particular form of English spirituality which renders it distinct. It has been described as one of earnest practicality combined with a certain strain of optimism; it also manifests a native common sense and instinct for compromise. Its hermits and anchorites, so much a part of medieval life, illustrate both a tendency towards individualism and a distaste for regimentation or excessive display. The spiritual pragmatism may have begun with Alcuin who, at the court of Charlemagne, wrote out manuals of practical conduct for the Christian layman; but it was perhaps best summarised by Robert of Bridlington who wrote that priests ought also 'to plough, sow, reap, mow hay with a sickle, and make a haystack'.⁶ It has been called the *via media* of English spirituality. As William of Malmesbury put it, 'Best is ever mete', or moderation in all things. This, too, has been described as a 'distinctively English manifestation'⁷ of 'saving sanity and discretion'. It is perhaps the reason for the relative failure of the Carthusians in England, with their obsessive dedication to silence and penance. There had also been a movement away from excessive clericalism, and the medieval English priest was characteristically a comic figure lambasted for greed, drunkenness and lechery.

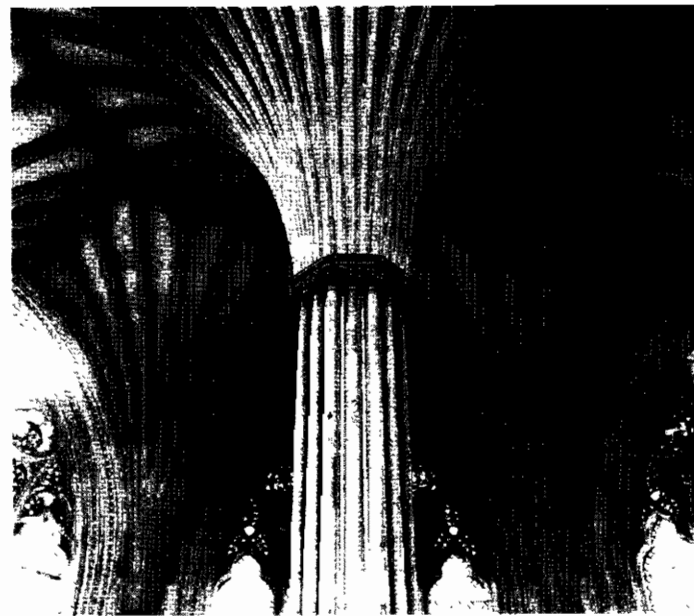
There has never been in England a tradition of theological speculation, in the manner of an Augustine or an Aquinas, or of devotional concepts divorced from practice; the nearest equivalent to the great '*summa theologica*' of European Catholicism are the short handbooks for English contemplatives or anchorites. It is of some significance that these treatises were always directed towards individuals and were concerned with the exigencies of the solitary life; they were not monastic productions or authoritarian edicts. They were instruments of personal direction, in other words, and were 'intensely English in that they combine unimpeachable orthodoxy with individualism'.⁸ The piety of the English was by no means a morbid piety; there has been no Savonarola or Luther but instead Wycliff and Tyndale. Pelagius refused to countenance the orthodox belief that humankind had inherited the primal guilt of Adam and that 'original sin' thereby damned the world to perdition without the intervention of divine grace; he was a thoroughly English heretic. The affective devotion of the English has also been free of lachrymose or penitential excesses; the manuals of prayer consistently invoke the Incarnation rather than the Passion. It is

an aspect of what has been called English optimism which, in native and foreign fashion, runs beside English melancholy. It is manifested in the benevolent expression upon the statues in Wells Cathedral and in the belief of Julian of Norwich that 'al manner of thyng shal be wel'. In the images of Spain and Italy the Holy Virgin is seen as a figure who sheds tears; in England she is characteristically represented as the loving mother of the divine babe. It has been described as the difference of 'the clear lines of English perpendicular against both the baroque and the whitewashed shed'.⁹

It would be wrong to suggest, however, that English Catholicism represents an independent version of European Catholicism; the fact that the great monastic orders, the Benedictines and the Cistercians flourished all over England would disprove any such simple statement. The Dominican and Franciscan friars also helped to create the large body of English lyric, both sacred and secular, as well as a variety of English texts; among the great Franciscans can be numbered, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries respectively, Roger Bacon and William of Ockham. All of them, too, wrote in Latin for a European community of scholars. Nevertheless, it has often been maintained that their sensibility was of a distinct and distinctive English kind. Thomas Ockham believed that 'all knowledge is derived from experience',¹⁰ an argument which anticipates in an uncanny way the English predilection for empiricism, or logical positivism, or whatever term is used for a principled but pragmatic attitude towards all metaphysical speculation. Roger Bacon, too, has often been seen as the forerunner of his more famous namesake, Francis Bacon, in his emphasis on the importance of the scientific method in intellectual enquiry. So we have the paradox of a distinctively English sensibility working within, and gaining strength from, a European and Latin tradition of learning. When we read of that, in the twelfth century, English architecture and painting represented 'a great, at moments supreme, exponent of a European style'¹¹ the question of influence and identity becomes a difficult one.

If there is such a thing as a native cast of thought it can properly be understood only in the context of a broadly European sensibility. There was a great movement of 'humanism' in the twelfth century, for example, but the most significant contribution which England made to the new learning was historical and practical in nature. Has this not become a familiar theme? The great strength of English learning was not in course monastic learning, but from the English religious houses came tens of thousands of charters, annals and chronicles. Matthew Paris

who died in the middle of the thirteenth century, wrote a history of his monastery as well as a universal history entitled *Chronica Majora*. There is no English Aquinas, whose scholasticism rose into the empyrean, but rather John of Salisbury whose books were concerned with the art of government. The English writers were well versed in patristic texts and in classical literature but they applied their learning to administrative and diplomatic affairs. As R. W. Southern wrote in his *Medieval Humanism*, this 'mixture of philosophical interest and practical familiarity'¹² was unique to twelfth-century England. He compares their work to that of Jeremy Bentham and Walter Bagehot in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and traces a distinct native sensibility in this preoccupation with the art of government. We may draw a similar conclusion about the career of Sir Thomas More, a great humanist and companion of Erasmus who became a courtier and a statesman rather than a philosopher or a theologian. He was an English European. The English imagination, and the English sensibility, emerged out of both collusion and collision with European exempla.



The Chapter House of Wells Cathedral

CHAPTER 18

Old stone

The new rulers of England knew that there was power in stone. The cathedrals of Worcester, Canterbury, Winchester and Norwich were completed or at least consecrated by the end of the eleventh century. Paul's, Durham and Chichester were in the process of being built. Ely and Gloucester. The cathedral of Old Sarum had been completed by 1092. In the twelfth century the cathedral of Lincoln was being erected, and Wells begun. But this was also the century of monastic foundations, many of them with abbeys as large and as grand as any cathedral. It has been estimated that there were approximately six hundred of these communities in England, with sixty-nine in Yorkshire and fifty-one in Lincolnshire. These monastic foundations colonised the land about them, with pastures and sheep-walks, so it can truly be said that they helped to create the landscape of England. Of thousands of parish churches, many acquired spires so that the glory of faith aspired from the land to the sky. In the thirteenth century Salisbury and Westminster were raised in the Gothic style, while the great west front of Wells Cathedral was fashioned with its painted tableaux and gilded statuary gleaming like the gate of heaven itself.

When Julian of Norwich believed that she was dying her parish priest held a cross before her face saying, 'I have browte thee the image of our maker and saviour. Louke thereupon and comfort thee therewith.' This is a characteristic medieval scene, but the abbeys and cathedrals of England fulfilled the same purpose as the crucifix before the dying woman. The faithful saw them and were comforted.

Over four centuries the styles altered according to different modes of perception, with the broad movement of change from Romanesque to Gothic classified into the somewhat arbitrary divisions of English, Decorated and Perpendicular; but the statement of power and glory remained the same. Perpendicular has been described as a purely native architecture, without parallel in continental Europe, but in the central characteristics of English churches persist through time. The native predilection for patterning, and the delight in flat wall surfaces have already been suggested as aspects of English taste; the combination of ingenious or elaborate surface decoration with blank

and evenness might offer interesting material to those who study the pathology of nations. But the English cathedrals are also noticeable for their emphasis upon the horizontal rather than the vertical; their naves tend to be longer than their counterparts elsewhere, and their vaults lower, thus giving the impression of 'common-sense stability' which might otherwise be interpreted as solidity or dignity. They might have been fashioned by the architects of Stonehenge, so massively do they dwell and endure upon the land. Another historian has noted that 'the English national style is not elegantly Gothic . . . but sturdily plain and matter of fact'.²

They are a complete statement of artistic intent, therefore, and as a result the architecture of England has been used as a metaphor for its music and literature. Fifteenth-century English music, for example, has been characterised as 'the distribution of masses of sound in order to provide effective contrasts, the development of harmonic thinking, and the cultivation of a highly decorative superstructure'³ in the manner of Perpendicular building. C. S. Lewis compared the model of certain medieval books to that of 'cathedrals where work of many different periods mixed'.⁴ He names Chaucer and Malory in this context, both of them creating narratives which seem to grow incrementally and to expand according to some organic principle rather than to a well-defined logic of organisation. It has often been remarked how the structure of English cathedrals is comprised of discrete parts; presbyteries and chapels and transepts are added without any attempt at uniformity in their arrangement, so that different styles and different periods can be observed side by side. Lincoln Cathedral, for example, has been described as 'a building with a series of projections stepping out at right angles to the principal axis'. This strangely fluent and harmonious development 'is characteristic not only of Lincoln but of the English Gothic in general' and is 'in sharp contrast to the French Gothic cathedrals'.⁵ There is no logic or authoritarian code evinced here, but a kind of inspired practicality; it might be called the aesthetics of pragmatism, if indeed any aesthetic can be adduced from it. The conservatism of English architecture has often been discussed, but it is the conservatism of organic form – literally the need to conserve itself as it develops according to its own laws of being. That is why it is also such a natural expression of native aptitude and sensibility.

If these churches are instinct with the spirit of place, then they may come alive. One thirteenth-century poet wrote of the 'head' and 'eyes' of the church while the roof rears up 'as if it were conversing with the

winged birds, spreading out broad wings, and like a flying creature striking against the clouds'.⁶ The cathedral may also adopt the shape of other organic forms. The beginning of this history was concerned with the tree worship of the ancient Britons, and it is perhaps appropriate that the long naves of the English cathedrals have been compared to avenues of trees. Sculpted out of stone are the leaves of vine and ivy, oak and wild apple, hawthorn and maple. At Southwell, Canterbury and Christ Church Cathedral in Oxford, among other sacred places, are to be found carved effigies of the Green Man or 'Jack in the Green' with foliage curling out of his mouth and head; Jack is the tree spirit invoked in ancient ritual.

The green men are in fact only one of a number of pagan deities fashioned out of stone in the corners and recesses of cathedrals, like the spirits banished into the darkness. You cannot see them until you venture almost too close to them. Then you may notice fauns and satyrs, goats and dragons, carved upon bosses; there are capitals filled with the wild gaiety which seems to characterise one aspect of the medieval spirit. There are also scenes of matchless detail; a man with a toothache holds open his mouth in pain, in Wells Cathedral, and a farmer belabours a thief with a pitchfork. In Beverley a man carries a scolding wife in a wheelbarrow, and a fox is hanged by geese. In Manchester a hare grills a huntsman over a fire, and at Blackburn a priest preaches to a congregation of hens. These scenes are conceived in the native spirit of mockery; if humour and pathos can be effortlessly mingled in English drama and fiction, so the sacred and the profane are deemed to be natural companions. It is a question of not adopting one emotion, or manner, too seriously or for too long.

This is nowhere more evident than in the grotesque miniatures which obtrude in the margins of sacred books; they are known as 'babooneries' and according to Nikolaus Pevsner in *The Englishness of English Art* they represent a wholly native convention - 'if one tries to trace the baboonery to its source,' he wrote, 'one finds that it originates in England'.⁷ It is a remarkable, but not unexpected, fact. In 1382 Wycliff denounced 'peyntings and babwyneries', and in *The House of Fame* Chaucer celebrated 'subtil compassinges . . . Babewynnes pynacles'. There are monkeys disporting themselves in the margins of illuminated psalters, and on the top of a page illustrating the Passion of Christ are two medieval wrestlers; villagers are fighting 'pick-a-back' among a Jesse Tree, while on the Beatus page of the Gorleston psalter ten rabbits solemnly and decorously conduct a funeral complete

candles and crucifix. A duck is taken off by a fox, with the word 'queck' issuing from its beak, and there was a vogue for depicting men with wooden legs (a vogue which Charles Dickens would adopt at a later date). These 'grotesques', often described as 'hideous', appeared at the end of the twelfth century but spread rapidly in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The secular mind may even be tempted to conclude that the real artistic interest is to be found in the margins rather than in the illuminations themselves. They are marked by bizarre medieval humour, the visual equivalent of Thomas More's verses on farting and eating excrement, but they are also characterised by an informality and liveliness that seem decidedly English in spirit; the love of fantastic detail, too, animates them as well as a passion for fine or delicate outline. This celebration of the grotesque and the ridiculous of course resides in what one art historian has described as the 'strangely English spirit that sets comic relief even in a tragedy',⁸ but perhaps it also represents defiance of a divine order which consigns humankind to misery in this world and possible damnation in the next. In a world of illness, pain and epidemic plague, what other response is there but mad laughter?

The provenance of many babooneries is taken to be London, and that locality emphasises the fact that illumination was now a secular rather than monastic art; part of the craft guild was reserved for 'lymenours', professional artists pursuing their trade in workshops or as part of itinerant groups which toured the country. Three or four artists gathered together, like masons, and set up shop wherever they were required; it is likely, also, that each individual contributed a different skill to the enterprise so that the illuminated page was the product of several hands. This may in turn account in part for the secular appearance of the babooneries themselves, not the least of which depict scenes of ordinary medieval life with that attention to intimate and familiar domestic detail which plays so large a part in the English imagination. Henry Fielding described it well when he extolled the 'exactest copying of Nature' in his fiction, and John Dryden expressed an admiration or affection for the 'distorted face and antic gestures'. Hume remarked that 'if we copy life the strokes must be strong and remarkable'.⁹ So in medieval miniatures we see workmen clambering up ladders, farmers ploughing, boys leaping and women dancing.

A great deal of attention is paid to foxes and geese, hens and rabbits; this might be ascribed to the notorious English fondness for animals

(which is perhaps a means of displacing fondness for each other), but there may be other sources. Human senses and familiar sins were often given animal shape or 'bestiarized', where the sow becomes gluttony and the fox covetousness, and this form of caricature has left a lasting inheritance. In eighteenth-century satirical prints the Duke of Cumberland was depicted as an ox, and the Duke of Newcastle became a goose; Henry Fox was necessarily portrayed as a fox, and James Boswell as a lecherous monkey. In masquerades in the early decades of that century, also, guests were dressed 'some, in the shape of Monks and Baboons, others, of Bears, Asses, Cormorants, and Owls'. The effect seems to be some primitive force at work.

There are other medieval patterns implicit in later English productions. One historian has noted that in the manuscript illuminations there is no essential concern with 'human experience, human drama and emotion'.¹⁰ There may be spectacle and crowded action, but there is no interiority of feeling; the outline, rather than the three-dimensional figure, is presented only. But these are precisely the criticisms aimed by contemporaries at Fielding and Dickens, at Smollett and Sterne. It seems to be a native fault, if fault it be, that attention is often reserved for the surface.

'Babooneries' or miniature domestic scenes arrayed in the margins of the illuminations often act as a kind of frame around the sacred text. A Chaucerian critic has in turn concluded that 'the frame' of the *Canterbury Tales* 'gives us that strong sense of real life that the picture affords'.¹¹ In a fifteenth-century Book of Hours the central figures of the Virgin and Child and worshipper, are depicted in grandiose but formal attitudes; the frame around it, however, is replete with human life and activity as a pilgrimage makes its way.

The transpositions from illumination to text are natural and inevitable. In 1250 the artists working upon the murals in the 'quill room' at Westminster requested a copy of the *Gests of Antioch* in order to illustrate scenes from it. In turn the devisers or creators of medieval drama directly copied scenes and images from wall-paintings, stained-glass windows and roof-bosses. In a Catholic culture where visual icons or *exempla* are universally recognised, and can in every mode of art. The illustration of a royal pageant, dated 1500, shows the principal guests with costumes and attitudes taken from the stages of the 'cycle drama' of Chester or York. In a culture of spectacle the appropriate costume or uniform will be displayed. The scene 'Christ among the Doctors' is depicted in manuscript and stained glass

with the child in a seat raised higher than the doctors themselves; there is a stage direction to the same effect in a miracle play, where 'they lead Jesus into their midst and make him sit in a higher seat, while they themselves sit in lower ones'. It is possible that after this movement the players remained still for a moment, forming a silent tableau as if they had become carved or painted figures. English Catholic culture was mediated through these images. In the roof-bosses of the English churches Herod 'is shown contorted with rage, his legs grotesquely crossed',¹² while the same character is depicted in the Coventry mysteries in the same posture as a sign of 'crossed' or thwarted human energy. These cycle plays conducted their audience through the history of the universe, from Creation to Doom, but that sacred chronology was also depicted in the wall-paintings and stained glass of the churches. It was the unifying myth, the grand context for the creation of art and literature alike. And it survives still. Stanley Spencer's twentieth-century paintings, *The Resurrection in Cookham Churchyard* and *The Resurrection of the Soldiers*, where all emerge at the sound of the final trumpet, seem to derive from medieval images of the Apocalypse; the same artist's *Christ delivered to the People* and *The Crucifixion*, with the leering faces of the workmen putting the hammer to Christ's nails, might be a detailed transcription of a scene from one of the medieval mysteries. Spencer was an English artist filled both with a mysterious sense of place and with an encompassing vision that accommodates a medieval as well as a modern sensibility. 'When I see anything', he once wrote, 'I see everything.' In this context it is perhaps interesting to note that 'he found it very important to paint what is in the extreme foreground. . . . It seemed to him all wrong to start at an arbitrary plane say 10 feet distance rather than at the nearest plane in one's line of vision.'¹³ He recaptures, or retrieves, an essentially medieval painterly vision.

CHAPTER 19

Part of the territory

'It is not surprising', Walter Oakeshott wrote in *The Sequence of Medieval Art*, 'that East Anglia should in the fourteenth century have been the centre of artistic production in England.'¹ Another historian emphasised 'the predominance of East Anglia over all other regional theatrical traditions in late medieval England'.² A unique form of 'rhyme stanza' has been located in romances derived from that region. The two greatest female writers of the fourteenth century, Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe, both came from East Anglia. So there exists a pattern of activity, which at a later date manifested itself in the 'Norwich School' of painting.

Its two principal counties, Norfolk and Suffolk, are named after North Folk and South Folk of the Anglo-Saxons but the topographical boundaries of those tribes are uncertain; we may also include parts of Cambridgeshire and Essex in what was the most fertile and, excluding London, the most densely populated region of the country. East Anglia was to a certain extent isolated from the rest of England by its fenland, but commerce with Europe flourished, however, since it was open to all the trade routes of northern Europe and the Netherlands; the wool trade prospered, in particular, as the emergence of the great 'wool churches' of Long Melford and Lavenham may testify. Another topographical aspect lent a particular tone to the area. There were few great 'manors' but instead a large number of villages and towns filled with merchants and a farming population. In turn this seems to have created, or helped to create, what has been described as an 'economically precocious and religiously radical area'.³ The area was radical in more than one sense; however; anti-monarchical in tendency, it gravitated towards parliament or the barons rather than to the king. It possessed a flourishing merchant economy, 'involved in a capitalist and cash-market system',⁴ and out of it sprang a distinctively local art and literature.

The illuminations of what has come to be known as the 'East Anglian School' are of an unmatched liveliness of outline. Whether the subject-matter is taken from bestiaries or literary romances, Bibles or lives of the saints, they are all domesticated within a native idiom which combines naturalism with grotesquerie. There are East Anglian da-

in abundance and, in the Luttrell psalter, domestic scenes which might almost illustrate a novel by Samuel Richardson. The influences of northern Europe have been assimilated, but they have also been coarsened and simplified. They have turned native, in other words.

The burgeoning of religious theatre in East Anglia was primarily due to the commercial success of the region. There were many monasteries and many great churches but, equally significantly, there were more than one hundred East Anglian areas where dramatic performances were conducted. Just as the illuminations of the 'East Anglian School' were characterised by a diversity of influences and sources, so one historian of medieval theatre has described East Anglian drama as possessing 'a richness and diversity of theatrical practices unmatched in any other region of the country'.⁵ On the basis of vocabulary and dialect several individual plays can be traced to their source in East Anglia, among them *The Castle of Perseverance* and *The Killing of the Children*. Characteristically these dramas were highly local affairs, run by individual parishes and performed for local profit. (One of them, at Snettisham, was known as a 'Rockefeste' in anticipation of later festivals.) Just as grotesques and writhing figures play so large a part in East Anglian books, so East Anglian drama can be recognised by its emphasis on spectacle and by its general theatrical effectiveness; the characteristics are those of ribaldry, grotesquerie and 'shameless manipulation of audience sympathy'.⁶ It is a local art within an international context.

Julian of Norwich can also be placed in this unique setting. She was known as 'the Recluse atte Norwyche', and was born towards the close of 1342. It seems likely that she inhabited a cell outside the church of St Julian, near the centre of Norwich, which belonged to the Benedictine nuns of Carrow. The rest of her life is known only through her own words. In her thirty-fourth year, at her mother's house, she lay close to death; on the seventh night of her agony, after the priest had placed the crucifix before her face, she was granted sixteen 'shewings' or revelations within two nights. It is believed that, after this pilgrimage of the spirit, she entered the Benedictine community as a recluse or devoted laywoman. Then, out of her epiphanies, came her reflections in *Revelations of Divine Love*. She wrote in an East Anglian dialect, with northern additions, and her writing possesses a local savour. She vividly describes the drops of blood upon Christ's face, which 'were like to the scale of heryng in the spreadeing on the forehead'; his dying

body was 'lyke a dry borde' and he was hanging 'in the eyr as men be
 a cloth to drye'. When the devil appears to her 'anon a lyte smoke
 in the dore with a grete hete and a foule stinke'. These powerful im-
 mages might have come directly out of East Anglian drama; when Julian
 declares, 'Methought I would have beene that time with Marye
 Magdalene', at the Crucifixion, she may be recalling her experience
 watching the dramatic and sensational Passion plays of her ne-
 ighbourhood. When she describes how 'halfe the face' was covered
 'drie blode', she might have been watching a theatrical scene. She
 is granted a vision of a very English St John of Beverley as if he were
 'a hende neybor', a dear neighbour, and of course the actors in
 liturgical drama were in a literal sense neighbours and acquaintances.

The spiritual dimension of life on earth could not be better
 exemplified. When she confirms that she studied the pains of Christ
 they were depicted in painting or in stained glass, a particular quality
 of art or theatre can be seen to inform a particular kind of devotion.
 Indeed, in any just analysis, art and devotion cannot be separated.
 The same, also, is part of the Catholic inheritance of England.

Just as the art of East Anglia is derived from many different sources,
 English and European, so in turn the lineaments of Julian of Norwich
 piety have been traced to European spiritual mentors such as Bernard
 and St Catherine of Siena, St Thomas Aquinas and William of
 St Thierry. Yet it has been said that 'Julian perfectly expresses
 English spiritual tradition' because 'she combines all the strands of
 patristic lineage into something new'.⁷ It is the characteristic English
 procedure of assimilation and change, expressing itself in what has
 been described as Julian's native cheerfulness and common sense.
 Her 'optimism' and her 'prudence' are 'inherent in all English spiritual
 life'. Her methods are practical and her metaphors pragmatic; the peasant
 must labour as does the gardener, 'delvyn and dykyn, swynking
 sweten, and turne the earth upsodowne'. Thus she rejects 'the
 juridical categories of scholastic moral theology, and the exaggerated
 penitential rigours of the Franciscans',⁸ arriving at a wholly English
 East Anglian compromise.

Another native of that region has added significantly to English
 religious history. Margery Kempe came from Bishop's Lynn in
 Norfolk, and was a contemporary of Julian of Norwich whom she
 visited for spiritual consolation. Her father had five times been mayor
 of this prosperous 'wool' town, and her husband was elected

chamberlain in 1394. She was an East Anglian woman of wealth and
 competence, who tried her hand at both brewing and milling; yet *The
 Book of Margery Kempe* is primarily concerned with her spiritual and
 visionary experiences in which she encountered, and conversed with,
 Christ himself. The experience of the Passion would overwhelm her
 'sumtyme in the cherch, sumtyme in the strete, sumtyme in the
 chaumbre, sumtyme in the felde', so that East Anglia becomes the site
 of eternity. But if Julian of Norwich was influenced by continental
 theology, Margery Kempe was in more literal fashion affected by
 continental travellers. Lynn was the port to which pilgrims came from
 Scandinavia and Europe, on their way to the sacred sites of England.
 Hers is again a local, and universal, story; Margery Kempe, very much
 the literal-minded daughter of East Anglian devotion, was able also to
 witness the details and forms of continental piety and, within certain
 limits, to adopt them. She knew the people of 'Deuchlond' and a friend,
 Alan of Lynn, had already indexed the works of St Bridget of Sweden.
 Yet once more, in native fashion, she mingles the ideal with the real, the
 sacred with the profane, with an almost Chaucerian eye for significant
 detail. Her career as a brewer did not flourish 'for, whan the ale was as
 fayr standyng undyr berm as any man mygth se, sodenly the berm wold
 fallyn down'; the froth, in other and more modern terms, would go flat.
 When she asked a man to have sexual intercourse with her he replied
 that 'he had levar ben hewyn as smal as flesch to the pott!' This matter-
 of-fact dialect could be effortlessly turned to spiritual matters. Jesus
 came to her in vision and informed her that she would be 'etyn and
 knawen of the pepul of the world as any raton knawyth the stokfysch'.
 Sometimes the voices of those people of the world can be heard. 'I wold
 thu wer in Smythfeld,' one London woman told her, 'and I wold beryn
 a fagot to bren the wyth.' The same vivid detail, seen in the margins of
 the psalteries or on the scaffolds of liturgical plays, animates Margery
 Kempe's East Anglian account of her visionary experiences.

Out of that native soil sprang other writers and artists, among them
 John Skelton of Diss whose rough and exuberant 'Skeltonics' became
 once more influential in the twentieth century:

To wryte or to indyte,
 Eyther for delyte
 Or elles for despite

John Lydgate of Suffolk was the most prolific and popular poet of the

fifteenth century; there are writers such as John Bale, Gabriel Harvey and Nicholas Udall who together emphasise the fact that no region of the country 'could boast of so many prominent, identifiable bookish figures'.⁹

So in the fourteenth, fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries the had been set on the prolificity and variety of East Anglia in imitation, drama and literature. Some may interpret that superiority in terms of wealth; where mercantile profit leads, the arts will follow. Others have discerned a local passion. One historian of art has concluded that the 'flat expanses' and 'rolling outlines' and 'wide spaces' of East Anglia 'have had a curiously powerful hold on the English creative intellect and have been a striking stimulus to it'.¹⁰ It might be remarked here that 'flatness' of surface and the bounding of the landscape have also been the defining characteristics of English art; it is as if the landscape itself adopted the form of the English imagination.

The poetry of England



'Sir Jeffery Chaucer and the Nine and Twenty Pilgrims on their Journey to Canterbury.' By William Blake

CHAPTER 39

An essay on the essay

The art of fictional dialogue imitates the practice of conversation. In the middle of the eighteenth century, when the novel emerged fully armed upon the stage of the world, there were in London 'conversation assemblies' and *conversaziones*. In high art 'conversation pieces' were considered to be distinctly modern, because conversation itself had become the single most important medium for understanding. The idea of conversation, as the proper form for public and socialised truth, was pre-eminent in a culture of coffee-houses, clubs and weekly periodicals.

London had of course always been the centre of political and economic debate. But the notion of polite conversation, making judgements and recording opinions, spread as rapidly and as widely as the newly emerging 'middling classes' of London merchants and professional men. The discussion of essays played a large role in these informal debates where, by general report, the latest *Spectator* or *Idler* would be commended or disparaged. The *Spectator* was primarily designed for readers 'in Clubs and Assemblies, at Tea-Tables and in Coffee-Houses', with the assumption expressed by the Earl of Shaftesbury that 'All Politeness is owing to Liberty. We polish one another, and rub off our corners and rough sides by a sort of amical collision.' The civic virtues of the seventeenth century had been those of hardy frugality and moral independence, but these in turn gave way to condescension and civility. The unamiable rigours of Hobbes's *Leviathan*, for example, were replaced by a blander benevolence. The martial spirit was outmoded and unfashionable; the new key-word was sensibility not untouched by sentimentalism.

The success of the essay depended upon a shared set of values and assumptions, therefore, in turn allowing an intimacy or familiarity of tone; a certain *rapprochement* between author and reader was to be desired. Johnson, in one of his own essays in *The Rambler*, associated himself with Francis Bacon. 'Bacon, among all his pretensions to the regard of posterity, seems to have pleased himself mainly with his essays, "which come home to mens business and bosoms" and of which, therefore, he declares his expectation that they "will live as long as books last".' It is this desire to reach 'bosoms' as well as 'business'

which suggests a connection between the essay and the novel, but its unique form and its formidable strength the essay itself takes place as a true feature of the English imagination.

The first collections were published in the 1780s, the great tributors being Johnson and Goldsmith, who had succeeded Addison and Steele; after them came Hazlitt, Lamb, and the series of *Essays* published between 1802 and 1810. Samuel Johnson, a natural and prolific essayist, so there is more than a touch of humble self-abasement in his remark that a writer 'needs only enter the performance an essay, to acquire the right of heaping together the collections of half his life, without order, coherence, or propriety'.¹ Again is the English aptitude for variety, even if it is ironically expressed. Essays were not only conversational and various, however they were also practical and useful. They were modes of instruction and exhortation; where once the circulation of learning was maintained by the pilgrimage to European libraries or by the work of school exeges, the demands of knowledge were now amplified and communicated in the various journals and periodicals of London and the house society. Matters of theology and of physics, of medicine and economics, were now the subject of the 'easy' and 'familiar' style of English essayists. The contribution of the essay to moral and historical literature was therefore immense. As Addison remarked in the first number of the *Spectator*, 'I shall be ambitious to have it said of me that I have brought Philosophy out of closets and libraries, schools and colleges, to dwell in clubs and assemblies, at tea-tables and in the houses'. The other merit of the essay lay in its brevity; as one writer of the early eighteenth century put it, it was more appropriate to 'the Impetuous Humour of the English, who have naturally no patience for long-winded performances, for they have no sooner begun to read but they desire to see the End of it'. That is perhaps why the *Essays* of Montaigne, translated by Florio in the early seventeenth century, acquired such an enormous popularity at an earlier date. So the first popularised in English by Francis Bacon, sets its seal on the eighteenth-century civilisation. It has been concluded that the essay 'the only literary form used by every major author of the century' and its influence can be traced in the more fluent and informal style of dialogues and sermons, treatises and poems. And, of course, that was all.

The Hogarthian moment

Samuel Johnson wrote poetry and essays while also attempting drama and fiction; Fielding and Smollett began as dramatists before they ever considered writing novels; Defoe mastered every single form of the eighteenth century, and invented several new ones. This variousness can of course be studied as part of the English appetite for heterogeneity in all its forms, but variety is also an old London dish. Dryden's dramatised version of *Paradise Lost*, *The State of Innocence*, has been described as that of 'a London citizen and his wife mixing on familiar terms with angels and archangels',¹ a dialogue which has less to do with seventeenth-century London than with the inheritance of the medieval mystery plays on the streets of Clerkenwell and Cheapside. It is the same appetite which Dryden himself apostrophised in his dedication of *Love Triumphant*; he declared that the mixture of tragedy and comedy was 'agreeable to the English Genius. We love variety more than any other Nation; and so long as the Audience will not be pleas'd without it, the Poet is oblig'd to humour them.' The condition of London itself encourages a life, or sense of life, in which contraries meet. Without contraries, one Cockney visionary once wrote, there is no progression.

Yet when everything is contiguous, there is danger of so close a contact that distinction ends. This was conveyed by metaphors of the plague, when in one essay Fielding suggested that public assemblies in the city were 'as infectious by Example, as the Plague itself by Contact'. The same vision was promulgated by Charles Dickens when he surmised that it is certain 'that the air from Gin Lane will be carried, when the wind is Easterly, into May Fair, and that if you once have a vigorous pestilence raging furiously in Saint Giles, no mortal list of Lady Patronesses can keep it out of Almacks'. It was often observed that in London the living must keep close company with the dead. Hogarth depicted this in *Gin Lane*. The same sense of mortal contagion infects the dramatic and novelistic representations of urban life, where 'fever' and 'fevered dreams' are constantly invoked.

In a world where all marks of rank and distinction can also be blurred, as if in masquerade, there is the danger of social slippage. That is precisely why the novels and plays and paintings of the period are

concerned with the ambiguities of gentility and criminality, as well as by the urgent aspirations of one or another character to move forward in the social hierarchy.

The role of chance meetings and unexpected events, generally against the background of the 'mob' or crowd, is as integral to the fiction of Fielding or Smollett as to that of Dickens. Thus in Fielding's *Amelia* (1752) a 'trifling adventure', a perambulation in 'the green fields of London' by the heroine and her husband, is capable 'of producing the most unexpected and dreadful events'. Such is the quality of chance fortune in London, where a population of socially fluid characters is engaged in incidents over which they have no control; the 'events' are 'unexpected' because they conform to no observable plan or pattern. This mutability is mimicked by the novels themselves, which slip unexpectedly from allegory to history, from heroism and high sentiment to pantomime and melodrama. Pierce Egan's *Life in London* is a narrative adventure diverted and diffused by verse, philosophical speculation, topographical enquiry, romance and passages of social criticism. Egan even manages to include an operatic score. This vision of the world is comprehensive and capacious without necessarily being complex or profound. It accommodates arbitrariness, inscrutability and endless change.

Yet Charles Dickens, of all novelists, knew that the city was not necessarily random or inscrutable; rather, that the mystery of London lay in its interconnectedness. His own novels represent by means of image and symbol such an interpenetration of lives and destinies that London itself is packed to blackness with accumulations of suffering and shared experience. 'Draw but a little circle', he wrote in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, 'above the clustering housetops, and you shall behold within its space everything, with its opposite extreme and contradictions close by.' Here 'life and death went hand in hand; wealth and poverty stood side by side; repletion and starvation laid themselves down together' and here also were 'wealth and beggary, vice and virtue, guilt and innocence . . . all treading on each other and crowding together'. He described 'the restlessness of a great city, and the way in which it tumbles and tosses before it can get to sleep', as if it had somehow to encompass its multitude before it rests; if it ever can rest, that is, when the 'streams of people apparently without end . . . jostling each other and hurrying forward'. Spectacle and melodrama are intrinsic aspects of the London vision and thus, by extension, of the English imagination itself. Yet it is not a false or ignoble sensibility

allows pathos and sublimity no less in the canvases of Turner than in the pages of Dickens where 'every voice is merged, this moonlight night, into a distant ringing hum, as if the city were a vast glass, vibrating'.

Hogarth's *Night*, executed in 1738, is very much a stage-set or a nocturnal tableau in which the tall buildings of brick are its 'wings'; crowded upon the stage of stone and cobbles are vagrant children, drunks and an overturned coach. Gin is being poured into a keg, while urine is discharged from a chamber-pot out of a first-floor window. Fire is spreading in the foreground, and in the background are signs of a larger conflagration. 'We will therefore compare subjects for painting,' Hogarth wrote, 'with those of the stage.' In his graphic works action and contrast thrive in dramatic chiaroscuro; exits and entrances are manifold. Healthy 'Beer Street' and noxious 'Gin Lane' exist side by side; the purse-proud milliner passes a wretched whore, and the plump child of esteemed parents struts beside a vagrant girl eating broken crusts out of a gutter. Here dwell incongruity and difference but, curiously, in the light and atmosphere of London they are for a moment united. It may be wrong, then, to conclude that London artists are not capable of profundity.

In every respect Hogarth conceived of himself as a distinctly and defiantly English artist. He was born at Smithfield in 1698, and his art became identified with the raucous streets of the city. He began in a hard trade, that of a goldsmith's engraver, but quickly realised the commercial possibilities of political satire. He was a wonderful artist, who excelled in the realm of portraiture, but he managed to combine genius with business in an exemplary manner. He secured the passage of legislation, known as 'Hogarth's Act', to protect the copyright of engravers. Like Blake and Turner, he was short, stocky and pugnacious. In a letter to the *St James's Post* in June 1737, he condemned those dealers in art who 'depreciate every English work, as hurtful to their trade, of continually importing shiploads of dead Christs, holy families, Madonnas . . . and fix on us poor Englishmen the character of *universal dupes*'. He declared that he would rather depict an 'English cook-maid' than a Venus, and in one print displayed crowds attending an Italian opera while the works of Dryden, Congreve and Shakespeare are cried out as 'waste paper for shops'. So Hogarth aligned himself with an English dramatic tradition at the same time as he promulgated a wholly native art. That is perhaps the reason for the marked

resemblance between some of his caricatures or grotesques and 'babooneries' in the margins of medieval psalters; the same spirit of gross and popular art is abroad. It is of course in the nature of English genius that it steals from foreign compositions even as it disparages them, and Hogarth borrows from European artists as disparagingly as Raphael and Watteau; there is always this sense, in even the most defiantly 'nationalist' art, that the English imagination has been quickened and revived by contact with European sources. Ultimately the scene is that of contemporary London, and the tradition Hogarth invokes is that of Shakespeare and Pope, Swift and Defoe.

His first paintings were of scenes from Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, in which 'high' and 'low' are confounded, but his gift for naturalistic portraiture can be seen most clearly in relation to Langland or Chaucer. Only in the city can true drama and allegory be discovered. 'In his compositions,' he wrote, 'those subjects which will both entertain and improve the mind, bid fair to be of the greatest utility, and therefore be entitled to rank in the highest class.' That emphasis on 'utility' might of itself be enough to characterise his English genius; his demotic and egalitarian temper is also pertinent. He dwelled less upon the details of 'low life', and crowded his engravings with the wretched and helpless. In part it represents a Hogarthian defiance of 'high' attitudes and a kind of embarrassment at the striking of heroic or historical attitudes; in practice, too, it relies upon the representation of homely and familiar details rather than the grandly or generally expressive painterly gesture. The deflation of magnificence has always been part of English imagination.

Hogarth also depicts pantomimes and masquerades on the streets of London, as if in implicit homage to the theatrical reality by which the city is surrounded. In an engraving completed in the early months of 1724, *Masquerades and Operas*, the London crowd is seen to patronise a pantomime entitled *The Necromancer*; in the same street, near the market, is displayed the notice for a midnight masquerade. Hogarth also drew Punch, whom in *The Analysis of Beauty* he called 'drunkenness being the reverse of all elegance, both as to movement and figure'. The same may be concluded of the Londoners in his engravings, who are often rendered as caricatures or as types.

Hogarth is of London, too, in his disregard for the conventional pieties of Christianity. Turner died murmuring that the sun was pagan and this pagan spirit is very much part of the city's instinctive and energetic life. In the fifth plate of *Marriage-à-la-Mode*, Hogarth

parodies the Descent from the Cross in the dying posture of a nobleman; he also parodied the effects of sermonising in *The Sleeping Congregation* and burlesqued William Kent's altar-piece at St Clement Danes Church. One curious detail may be mentioned in this context. In *The Sleeping Congregation* Hogarth has included an hour-glass, but this is only one of the many time-pieces which he incorporates within the scenes of London. In the work entitled *Morning* the clock of St Paul's Church is clearly visible, with an image of Father Time above it and the legend 'Sic Transit Gloria Mundi' below. Smoke rises from a chimney pot towards these emblems of time, as if to represent the elements of transitoriness and forgetfulness in the passages of London life. In such paintings as *The Graham Children* and *The Lady's Last Stake*, clocks appear as emblematic features of a rushing or decaying world. In his last completed work, *Tailpiece*, or *The Bathos*, he again depicts Father Time with his scythe at a ruinous tavern in Chelsea known as 'The World's End'; here on the edge of London is the broken portal of eternity. So Hogarth was vouchsafed an intuition of London existence in the context of time and evanescence. It has been remarked that, the more local and specific a sensibility, the more it may aspire to universality. It is appropriate, therefore, that, in the words of one historian of art, Hogarth 'was the first British artist ever to achieve international fame'.² We may go further, and suggest that he was one of those Cockney artists who saw real visions in the streets of London.

His influence was profound, but also particular. Rowlandson, Gillray and Cruikshank were the three principal English caricaturists who considered themselves to be in the Hogarthian tradition of London portraiture, combining a fluency of line with a gift for grotesque or comic observation. The cartoons of Gillray and Rowlandson are vigorous and energetic, filled with the life and variety of the city, savagely denunciatory or gargantuan and tumultuous. They were true London artists because they were entranced by the scenic and the spectacular; in a city built upon greed and upon commerce, Gillray in particular was preoccupied with the shadows of money and power. His great works are striated with light and darkness, as if he were an heroic artist of the streets. He was neither sentimental nor introspective; his power came out of caricature and theatrical display, even though a note of rancid poetry emerges in some of his more demonstrative compositions. Each one strikes a different attitude, some grave, some gay, with a readiness of wit and rapidity of association which are also

associated with urban life. As one historian of the national character has observed, the dweller in a great town 'is always receiving impressions; and he may readily fall into a longing for a complete renewal of his sensations'.³

The book illustrations of Cruikshank were perfectly equivalent to the early urban vision of Charles Dickens, too, with their fierce atmosphere of constriction and incarceration. There is a famous illustration of Fagin in the condemned cell at Newgate, of which Chesterton wrote that it does not merely look like a picture of Fagin; it looks like a picture of Fagin'. There is something feverish about Cruikshank's work, particularly apt in a city itself often described as fevered. In later years Cruikshank often declared that he had been the principal begetter of *Oliver Twist* and his sad history, and it is possible that he did indeed conceive of an Hogarthian 'progress' of the orphan from poverty and misery to wealth and happiness.

One critic wrote, in 1844, that anyone who wished to 'estimate the genius of Mr Dickens' should 'read the essays by Charles Lamb and Hazlitt, on the genius of Hogarth'. There is indeed a true and powerful affinity. Dickens was often described as 'Hogarthian'; the novelist and the artist were believed to possess the same strident urban sensibility. The resemblance is not fortuitous. Dickens was a keen admirer of Hogarth's work, and his imagination was partly trained by the absorption of Hogarth's engravings. Hogarth's depiction of *Gin-Shops* helped to create Rowlandson's *The Dram Shop* and Cruikshank's *The Gin-Shop*, for example, but it was also the inspiration for an early essay by Dickens entitled 'Gin-Shops'; the young novelist describes in terms precisely the same spot which Hogarth had depicted eighty years before. Just as Hogarth dwelled in loving detail upon the criminal mass of crowds in *March to Finchley* and *Southwark Fair*, so Dickens exclaimed that 'we revel in a crowd of any kind - a street "row" is our delight'. Hogarth and Dickens were both preoccupied with gaols and asylums, as if they represented a true image of London; the third part of *A Rake's Progress* is best and most fully interpreted in the account of Mr Pickwick's incarceration in the Fleet Prison. But they were also entranced by fairs and street carnivals so that Hogarth's *Southwark Fair* is amplified by Dickens's essay on 'Greenwich Fair'. In their work the city becomes both prison and theatre, fairground and madhouse. *Oliver Twist* has as its subtitle 'A Parish Boy's Progress' in direct homage to Hogarth, while the more pathetic scenes of *Nickelby* were described by Forster as 'like a piece by Hogarth,

judicious and terrible'. They both dwelled upon minute particulars. In Hogarth's third plate of *Marriage-à-la-mode*, for example, a quack's surgery is seen to contain a fish's skeleton, a tripod, an odd shoe, a sword, a model of a human head, a top hat, pill boxes, and so on. Dickens describes the interior of the old curiosity shop as containing 'suits of mail standing like ghosts in armour . . . fantastic carvings brought from monkish cloisters, rusty weapons of various kinds; distorted figures in china, and wood, and iron, and ivory; tapestry and strange furniture'. Both artists packed their work with strong detail, as if attempting to convey all the fragmentation and adventitious chaos of the urban world. It could even be argued that some of Dickens's success and popularity sprang directly from the fact that he rendered Hogarth's engravings legible and readable; he gave the artist's vision a literary life.

The example of Charles Dickens will in any case confirm that the influence of Hogarth's vision was not confined to artists. Just as Hogarth borrowed some of his satire from Pope - particularly from that visionary poem of London, *The Dunciad* - so in turn Hogarth influenced Samuel Johnson. One of Johnson's essays for *The Idler* is a direct commentary upon Hogarth's print of *Evening* in the city. Yet the artist's most formidable bequest was to those eighteenth-century novelists who shared his sense of the urban world. Hogarth and Samuel Richardson were on terms of familiar acquaintance, for example, and Richardson's *Pamela* borrows directly from *A Harlot's Progress* and *A Rake's Progress*. Richardson's *Apprentice's Vade Mecum* wishes that 'the ingenious Mr Hogarth would finish the portrait'. Henry Fielding called Hogarth one of the most 'useful Satyrists that any Age hath produced' and, in his preface to *Joseph Andrews*, praised 'the ingenious Hogarth' for his ability 'to express the affections of men on canvas . . . it is a much greater and nobler applause, that they appear to think'. In *Tom Jones*, also, Fielding interrupts his narration to exclaim 'O Hogarth! had I thy pencil!' Hogarth himself was not averse to borrowing from Fielding; his *Industry and Idleness*, which recorded the careers of industrious and idle apprentices, was clearly indebted to the novelist's account of criminality in *Jonathan Wild* published four years earlier. There is here a consonance of attitude and taste which surely belongs to the broader history of the English imagination.

It has been observed that Laurence Sterne is heavily indebted to Hogarth's *The Analysis of Beauty* - Corporal Trim's flourish with his stick copies the artist's 'serpentine line of beauty' - and Sterne's sermon upon 'Felix's Behaviour Towards Paul' serves as a commentary upon

Hogarth's *Paul Before Felix*. Tobias Smollett invokes Hogarth in his principal novels. 'It would take the pencil of Hogarth', he wrote in *Roderick Random*, 'to express the astonishment and concern of Smollett in an expression in *Humphry Clinker* 'would be no bad subject for the pencil like that of the incomparable Hogarth, if any such ever appeared again, in these times of dullness and degeneracy'. In the context of such admiration, then, it may be appropriate to consider the novel in its specifically London form.

CHAPTER 4 I

Some eminent novelists

Prose fiction, which is believed to be of Graeco-Roman origin in the centuries before Christ, is ancient and ubiquitous. The Anglo-Saxons translated *Apollonius of Tyre* into Old English prose, which can properly claim to be the first novel in the vernacular. But if it can be argued that a broad tradition of popular fiction began with the work of Defoe and Richardson, Smollett and Fielding, then the springs or sources of its inspiration are most likely to be found in the circumstances of eighteenth-century London. The city was the centre of novelty and of change, of social mobility and of sociable excitement; most eighteenth-century novels are set in London or send their characters spinning in that direction, as if they were being drawn ineluctably by a 'vortex' or a 'lodestone'. The conditions of the novels of Smollett or of Fielding are populous and multifarious, with characters led by chance or exigency into one another's company. The symbolic power of the capital was, therefore, immense. It was itself one giant novel.

Eighteenth-century fiction is hybrid and various, part realistic and part allegorical, combining heroism and farce in equal measure; it conflates epic with romance, and even includes critical theory. The tone is never constant, and the instability of the narrative mimics the fluidity of the action. At the time of the city's greatest expansion, the novel is endlessly prolific. It has no boundaries of form or genre, mingling fact and fiction indiscriminately; in that sense, too, it reflects the nature of the city. Masquerades are to be found in Richardson's *Pamela*, in Fielding's *Amelia* and *Tom Jones*, in Fanny Burney's *Cecilia*, in Smollett's *Peregrine Pickle*, in Defoe's *Roxana*, and in a score of other fictions.¹ Upon these occasions a 'strange medley' of persons in disguise disport themselves; this is the condition of the city, and also the nature of the novel. Masquerades represent the shifting crowd, an unnatural assembly in every sense which in *Cecilia* includes men dressed as 'Spaniards, chimney sweepers, Turks, watchmen, conjurors and old women'; these are of course the inhabitants of the city itself who are here portrayed in caricature as if in homage to the *genius loci*. The fear of enforced touch, and of contagion, is also evident in the descriptions

of untidy or unnatural couplings: 'a Devil and a Quaker, a Turk and a female Rope-dancer, Judge and *Indian* Queen, and Friars of several Orders with *Fanatick Preachers*, all pair'd'. There is a suggestion here of sexual licence underlying the incoherence and arbitrariness of the proceedings; the city itself is portrayed in eighteenth-century fiction as the haven for lusts natural or unnatural. As Addison remarked, 'the secret history of a carnival would make a collection of very diverting novels'.

Many fictions present a journey towards the city as a colourless pilgrimage – the most celebrated example being that of Tom Jones and in a similar spirit novelists such as Fielding and Defoe record disorder and mutability. Just as the 'low' can be disguised as the better at a masquerade, so in eighteenth-century fiction servants and masters often find their roles reversed; Pamela is transformed from chambermaid into a lady, even if her gentility is somewhat theatrical. But then this is also the condition of the city, where servants are chastised in pamphlets and tracts for dressing up as their employers imitating their manners. The novel was often criticised, in other terms, for the size and nature of its audience. There is no doubt that the vogue for fiction helped to create a 'reading public' but the most observed that fiction had become the especial delight of women, tradespeople and servants. The appeal to women is perhaps exemplified by the plethora of titles devoted to heroines – Pamela, Amelia, Cecilia – where the Anglo-Saxon and medieval tradition of female saints' is continued in another guise.

Despite the complaints of moralists, however, fiction was far from being simply an entertainment or diversion for servants and tradespeople; it acted, on the contrary, as an instruction manual or 'pamphlet book'. The fictions of the eighteenth century were on one level designed to 'describe manners, paint characters, and try to correct the public by an advertisement that *Pamela* was 'published in order to cultivate the principles of virtue and religion in the minds of the youth of both sexes by a narrative which has its foundation in truth'. Novels, however, were concerned with practice as well as principle. They were manuals of etiquette and guides to polite society. It is no simple coincidence therefore, that 'they depict more often than not attempts to acquire status (or wealth and power) through isolated and individual virtuous action rather than by inheritance or through corporate involvement'. So the elements of pantomime and masquerade also hold the sliver of glimmerings of individualism; just as the city is the true arena for

human striving after profit or power, so the novel celebrates individual and practical exertion.

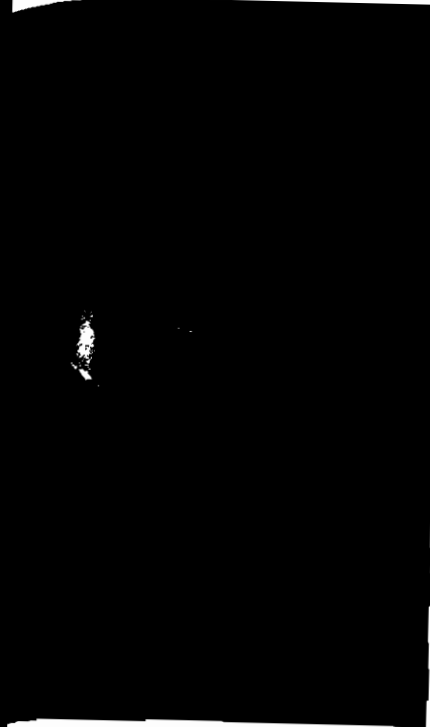

It is striking and significant that Daniel Defoe, for example, should select as the subject of his fictions solitary and generally fearful individuals. Robinson Crusoe, who has variously been described as the representative of 'economic man' and the Protestant conscience, has become a key figure of the English imagination; in that context, his earnest practicality and hesitant spirituality, as well as his position in 'the middle state, or what might be called the upper station of low life', are at least as important as the variety of his 'strange surprizing adventures'. He was as isolated upon his desert island as in any London garret.

Daniel Defoe was born in Cripplegate, in 1660, the son of a tallow chandler; he shared that shopkeeper parentage with William Blake, whose father was a hosier, and Defoe can best be seen in the light of a broad tradition of London dissent. It is an honourable and old tradition, which has continued into the present century. He attended a Dissenting academy in Newington Green before taking up the trade of hosiery. He was never a successful businessman, however, and soon adopted the role of journalist and pamphleteer in the cause of William of Orange and the Whigs; the new king had invaded England in 1688, turning out the Catholic James II in the process, and reinstated a Protestant dispensation. Yet Defoe was not successful as a creature of party politics; he was constantly imperilled by bankruptcy and the threat of prison. As one of his most recent biographers has suggested, he had turned 'from a conventional city merchant into a lonely, hunted and secretive outsider'.³ He had experienced all the splendours and disasters of the city, in other words, and out of that confusion created the rapid and avaricious careers of Roxana and Moll Flanders. Yet he did not turn to fiction until he had exhausted his influence as a journalist; he did not believe his novels to be a substitute for, but rather an extension of, his reportorial and polemical work. He wrote discourses on family life and on trade; he wrote stories about pirates and thieves and murderers; he composed political as well as economic treatises; he wrote biographies of Peter the Great and Charles XII of Sweden; he finished a history of the Church of Scotland and a history of the devil; he issued a great many pamphlets and wrote down many accounts of London 'marvels' such as hauntings and healings. Like many London writers, he tried his hand at anything.

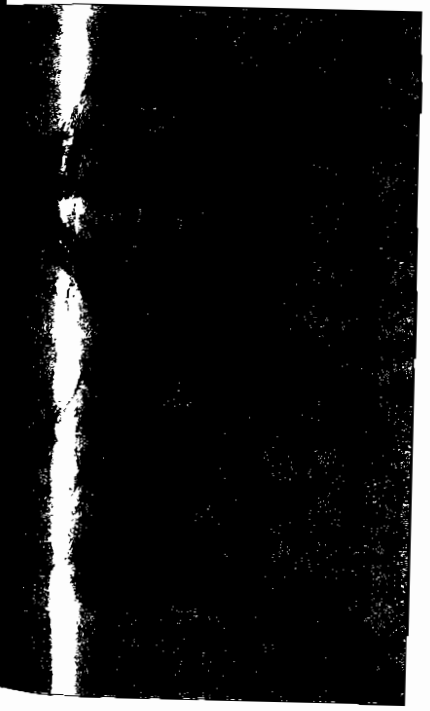
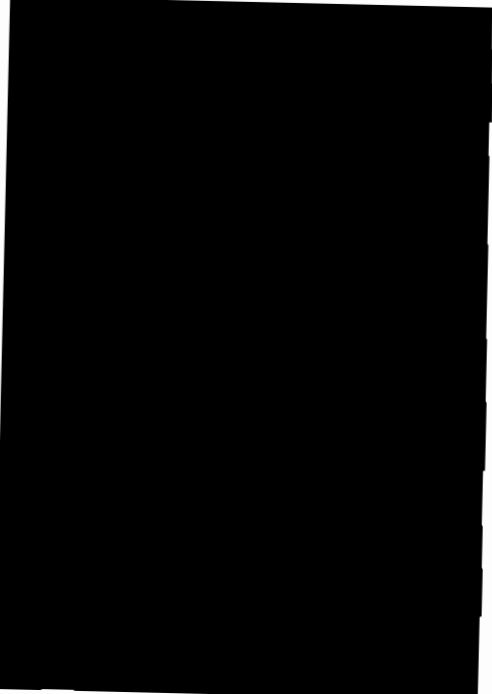
It is important, also, to note that the novels sprang out of this

prodigal inheritance and that they were conceived from Defoe's confusion of fact and fiction. *Robinson Crusoe* was advertised as a history 'Written by Himself', with Defoe's name absent from the frontispiece. *A Journal of the Plague Year* is nothing of the kind, but a rich concoction of true report and fictive imagining, while *A Tour thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain* was written from Newington Green. If fact proves to be fiction, then Defoe's fiction has often been granted a factual status. The adventures of *Robinson Crusoe* were taken to be literal truth, while in more recent years *Moll Flanders* has been identified as Moll King or Mary Godstone. Yet all of these characterisations and attributions are beside the point. In the eighteenth-century Daniel Defoe discovered the poetry of fact, and in that combination of the marvellous and the real he found his true subject. It is a token of more of that hybrid art which London seems to nurture; in an unstable and fluid society, where all may walk in disguise, there is no value to be found in generic identity and stability. It could be said that Defoe's fiction is a simulacrum of his journalism, but in truth there need be no distinction. This may be profoundly unsettling for the more sophisticated critics, who wish to find in 'the English novel' some intrinsic virtue, some reliable touchstone of excellence, but it is true to the mixed and various nature of the English imagination.

Defoe loved sensation and adventure, excessive delight and charm in violent action. The energy and motion of London fill his sentences with their rapid and impersonal beat, their digressions and divagations. All the fever and fearfulness of Roxana's life, for example, can be seen in the restless and repetitious cadences of her autobiographical narrative. The speed and acceleration of the London streets are vividly in *Moll Flanders's* quick way of explaining herself - 'for the next time I try'd it at *White-Chappel* just by the corner of *Petty-Coat-Lane* where the Coaches stand that go out to *Stratford* and *Bow* and *Side of the Country*; and another time at the *Flying Horse*, with *Bishops-gate*, where the *Chester* coaches then lay'. The language of the streets emerges, too, in Moll's strong phrases. 'So there was her man stopped. . . . That's by the way.' There is a wonderful scene in *Newgate* between Moll and a condemned woman. 'Well says I, and are you easy? ay, says she, I can't help myself, what signifies being sad? If I hang'd there's an End of me, and away she turn'd Dancing . . .' Here is further confirmation of the foreign belief that the English disdain death as a cheat or a thing of no moment, but it is also a tribute to Defoe's remarkable fluency. In recent years his tone has become

England is the only European country to have a national portrait gallery:
(Above left) John Milton. (Above right) Edward Gibbon. (Below left) Mrs Gaskell.
(Below right) Ralph Vaughan Williams.

matter of debate. Is he being ironic at his characters' expense, or does he expect the reader fully to sympathise with their respective fates? A similar question has been raised about his style, which has been praised as a triumph of literary artifice and condemned as artless and prolix. Yet these considerations need not apply, especially within the new form of prose fiction which confounds distinctions of every kind. Defoe was an instinctive and prolific writer who effortlessly combined all the materials that were closest to hand without any attempt to discriminate between them. In this context it is perhaps worth noting that 'Defoe's prose contains a higher percentage of words of Anglo-Saxon origin than that of any other well-known English writer except Bunyan'.⁴ The old language emerged naturally, almost instinctively.

The metaphor of London as a stage also came spontaneously to Defoe, so that Moll Flanders may declare that 'generally I took up new Figures, and contriv'd to appear in new Shapes every time I went abroad'; in particular, 'I dress'd myself like a Beggar Woman, in the coarsest and most despicable Rags I could get'. Defoe himself dressed in strange shapes, and was for a long period a paid political spy in the service of Robert Harley; like Moll herself, he was consigned to Newgate Prison which was 'an Emblem of Hell itself, and a kind of an Entrance into it'. So he was always drawn to the condition of the confined and the desperate, and the birth of individual character in English fiction can confidently be ascribed to the condition of London itself. As Moll Flanders observes while living in the Mint, a poor area of Southwark, 'I saw nothing but Misery and Starving was before me'. These are the afflictions which haunt Robinson Crusoe and Roxana, albeit in different guises. The general plot of Defoe's fictions, which include the 'true' histories of the criminals Jack Sheppard and Jonathan Wild, is of a provincial's journey to London; it is also a pilgrimage towards sexuality and crime, with the imminent threat of the gaol and the gallows.

Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year*, published in 1722, is itself a tabulation of fears. London 'might well be said to be all in tears', and Defoe's frequent image of the city as a human body takes on a piteous aspect. It exudes 'steams and fumes' so that its streets reproduce 'the Breath . . . the Sweat . . . the Stench of the Sores of the sick persons'. In this world of steam and suffering the inhabitants of the city run mad, 'raving and distracted', with others 'frighted into idiotism, and foolish distractions, some into despair and Lunacy, others into melancholy madness'. The *Journal* is in fact itself a narrative of melancholy



'Reliance upon practical detail and purposeful experiment seems to be an English spirit.' 'An experiment: Bird in the Air Pump' by Joseph Wright of Derby.

The open elaboration of the Lloyd's Building reflects an English love of surface decoration.

madness, that condition to which the English were most prone. London resembled an asylum, however, it was also compared to prison with every house its own gaol since 'here were just so many prisons in the town as there were Houses shut up'. Many people, naked and delirious, ran through the streets screaming or plunged into the Thames while others grew 'stupid with the insupportable sorrow'.

In Defoe's account we see as much evidence of the English imagination as of the London plague. It purports to be the work of a Citizen who continued all the while in London' but in fact Defoe was a small child at the time of the distemper, and this highly wrought account is essentially a fiction with details taken from contemporary annals and memoirs. It is literally a work of sensation in the most strident urban style, relying upon anecdote and adventure, filled with short character studies of the afflicted and suffused with practical detail. Defoe is always seeking for extremes, so that the sensational is effectively a literary device. Here we may make the connection with Hogarth or with Gillray, whose vivid and animated visions dwell in a region of sublime distortion. The artists employed a 'strongly engraved expressive line',⁵ just as Defoe coined a powerful and fluent style heavily influenced by short Anglo-Saxon derivations; all of them came out of a popular tradition of print or journalism, and all appealed to a varied and urban market. But if it was a London vision, it also rested upon a native spirit and tradition.

The theatricality and excess of Henry Fielding's novels are no doubt; he was a highly successful dramatist before he became a novelist. During his early career in London he wrote comedies and farces for the popular stage, composing some thirteen plays in less than three years, with titles such as *The Author's Farce*, *Rape Upon Rape* and *Tom Thumb*. In the tradition of Defoe, he also found employment as a journalist before he turned to fiction; he became assistant editor of *The Champion: or, The British Mercury* and wrote most of its leading articles. He created a character upon the model of Addison's 'Spectator', Hercules Vinegar, who with the members of his immediate family commented upon the affairs of the day. In fact he continued writing journalism for the rest of his life. He edited two political newspapers, *The True Patriot* and *The Jacobite's Journal*; even after the success of *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones*, he took on the editorship of a twice-weekly periodical called *The Covent-Garden Journal*. In this sense he shares a curious affinity with Charles Dickens, who edited

Household Words and *All the Year Round* while engaged upon his great works of fiction.

There is in fact a skein of associations and resemblances between these three London novelists. Dickens wrote for the stage, also, and enjoyed great success as an amateur actor for much of his life. And all three men were touched by the shadow of the prison-house. Defoe was incarcerated at various times in Newgate, the Marshalsea and the King's Bench, while Dickens's youthful experience of London included the imprisonment of his father for debt in the Marshalsea. In turn Fielding was arrested and imprisoned for debt; he may have escaped Newgate, but he could not have avoided the 'spunging house' or half-way house to gaol. Defoe's fiction is filled with images and scenes of imprisonment; the novels of Dickens are preoccupied with prison and prisoners; the opening chapters of Fielding's *Amelia* are set in a London gaol, and Tom Jones may be said to have been incarcerated with Moll Flanders in Newgate. It might also be mentioned here that for five years William Hogarth's father was imprisoned for debt in the Fleet.

Fielding, like Defoe and Dickens, also wrote essays on social and political matters – among them 'An Attempt Towards a Natural History of the Hanover Rat' and 'A Dialogue Between the Devil, the Pope and the Pretender'. Like Defoe, he composed poetical satires and dubious 'factual' accounts of famous criminals. His *Life of Mr Jonathan Wild the Great* is a classic of its kind, supplanting even Defoe's *True and Genuine Account of the Life and Actions of the Late Jonathan Wild*. These London authors were prodigal of genres as well as words so that urban writing becomes the stuff or material out of which are shaped novels, newspapers and pamphlets. Fielding himself called the novel 'a newspaper, which consists of just the same number of words, whether there be any news in it or not'; but he also described *Tom Jones* as 'this heroic, historical, prosaic poem'. Just as the eighteenth-century term 'cartoon' could be applied equally to a caricature and to an historical painting, so the word 'history' applied to *Joseph Andrews* as well as to more sober narratives. Out of many forms came that formless jumble, the English novel.

The truest metaphor for Fielding, however, remains that of the theatre. The master of burlesque and farce, once called 'the English Molière', he translated his talent for stage comedy into another sphere. In defending his heterogeneous entertainments, filled with the spirit of 'contrast', he invokes 'the inventor of that most exquisite entertainment, called the English pantomime' who mixes 'the serious and the

comic'. In Hogarth's frontispiece to Fielding's collected works, the image of the novelist is placed above the masks of comedy and tragedy in true interpretation of his genius. In *Jonathan Wild* he compares the political life of the nation to a street theatre – 'these Puppet-shows', he puts it, 'which are so frequently acted on the GREAT stage'. That is why his own work was often considered to be 'low'. His reputation as a writer of farce and burlesque was held against him, and he was accused of importing these qualities into his fiction. His characterization was implausible, his plots impossible, and his characters disgusting. 'Common charity, a f—t' exclaims Mrs Tow-Wouse. Tom Jones Squire Western declares that he regards his sister's politics 'as much as I do a f—t'. Which word 'he accompanied and graced with the very Action, which, of all others, was the most proper to it'. Whereupon the periodical *Old England* described *Tom Jones* as 'a Book so truly profligate, of such evil Tendency, and offensive to every chaste Reader, so discouraging to Virtue and detrimental to Religion'.

Dickens avoided any taint of obscenity and impropriety – there could be no Hogarth or Fielding in the nineteenth century – but his own fiction was also derided for inconsistency and implausibility. The plots of his later novels were considered to be unrealistic 'twaddle'. It is the response of earnest intelligence to an urban sensibility which embraces the pantomimic and the scenic, which revels in energy and adventure and which betrays little interest in psychological or moral complexity. It is no accident that both Fielding and Dickens, for example, defend their use of coincidence in plot-making as a natural device; the experience of the city convinced them that coincidence is a strong force in human life and that it reflects a greater underlying network of relations. Theirs is a London vision.

If we reflect upon the different virtues of Tobias Smollett and Samuel Richardson, however, we may understand the actual capaciousness of that vision. Smollett was born and educated in Scotland, but moved to London in order to pursue his career as a surgeon. Very quickly he assumed the role of a London writer, however, by becoming in quick succession a journalist, dramatist and pamphleteer as well as a novelist. He helped to edit the *Critical Review*, he compiled a selection of *Authentic and Entertaining Voyages* and wrote a history of England; he even tried his hand at farce and tragedy. A recognisable pattern of prodigious achievement once more emerges.

Charles Dickens had Smollett's novels by heart, having first

encountered them in childhood when living in lodgings beside the Marshalsea Prison. Smollett was himself imprisoned in the King's Bench, just south of the Marshalsea, affirming in his own life the connection between urban fiction and the London gaols. As a result, perhaps, his art is one of extremity and intensity. When Roderick Random, the eponymous hero of *The Adventures of Roderick Random*, meets his benevolent uncle who releases him from debt and confinement, 'I was utterly confounded at this sudden transition . . . and a crowd of incoherent ideas rushed so impetuously upon my imagination, that my reason could neither separate nor connect them'. This is a fair measure of the sudden and rapidly changing sentiments which invade Smollett's characters, and which prompted Sir Walter Scott to suggest that he 'loved to paint characters under the strong agitation of fierce and stormy passions'. His metaphor of the 'crowd' here suggests, in fact, how his sensationalism and excitation are related to the feverish life of the city. It is the life which he portrays in *Humphry Clinker*, where Matt Bramble remarks of Londoners that 'All is tumult and hurry; one would imagine that they were impelled by some disorder of the brain, that will not suffer them to be at rest . . . how can I help supposing they are actually possessed by a spirit, more absurd and pernicious than any thing we meet within the precincts of Bedlam?'

Smollett was aware of the violence and despair which are the condition of the city, London 'being an immense wilderness'. Roderick Random is beaten, robbed, press-ganged, swindled until he eventually languishes in the Marshalsea Prison with an 'imagination haunted with such dismal apparitions, that I was ready to despair'. One critic has written of this novel that there 'can be no movement but from one extreme to another, from shock to shock, from terror to hysterical laughter'.⁶ The life of the novel then replicates the life of the streets, filled with rapidly changing scenes and imbued with a certain spontaneity or incoherence of tone. All is action and confusion. When it is further concluded that, in the novels of Smollett, 'each statement is in competition with all the other statements; there is no remission from the struggle for attention'⁷ we are truly in the little world of London. Here are strident 'types' who may clamour for notice – 'There were also my Lord Straddle, Sir John Shrug, and Master Billy Chatter, who is actually a very facetious young gentleman' – but they must also struggle to be seen and heard among 'the modish diversions of the town, such as plays, operas, masquerades, drums, assemblies, and puppet-shows . . . surprisals and terrifications'.

Prison and pantomime, death and excremental farce, are in consort together. The city then becomes a kind of dream or hallucination in which irreconcilable states are jumbled together. 'I could not believe the evidence of my senses,' declares Roderick Random, 'I looked upon all that had happened as the fictions of a dream!' Life in Henry Fielding, is no more than 'an idle, trifling feverish dream'. 'Is all a troubled dream?' asks Richard Carstone at the end of his unhappy life in *Bleak House*. It is the great dream of London.

If there is one aspect of Smollett's art which is of particular significance, however, it lies in his creation and embellishment of eccentric character. A general delight in eccentricity, in all its forms, fact animates the English genius. It is related to the habit of individualism and defensive privacy which the English have adopted. Eccentricity then becomes the natural, if unacknowledged, issue of native virtue. So Smollett introduces certain stock characters, such as the formidable Mrs Trunnion who 'by the force of pride, religion, and Coniac, had erected a most terrible tyranny in the house'. But her unfortunate spouse, Commodore Trunnion, is of quite another order of creation. He is perhaps the first eccentric in English prose fiction. In his companions, Pipe and Hatchway, he lives in a nautical dream. He has been a hard-working man, and served all offices on board from cook's shifter to the command of a vessel. Here, you Tunley, the hand of a seaman, you dog.' He is the immediate ancestor of innumerable Dickensian characters, from Captain Cuttle to Mr Bagstock, and the preposterous if amiable ex-seaman has entered the list of English immortals. He calls his house a 'garrison', he draws a drawbridge over a ditch, and sleeps in a hammock; he 'swears woundily' but 'means no more harm than a suckling babe'. He is located in an English county 'bounded on one side by the sea', and can be seen as a burlesque upon the private and enclosed English character. That is why he has achieved such exemplary status. His constant memories of the sea, and of nautical battles, render him an Anglo-Saxon *revenant*; his fear of women and his whimsical sensibility can also be seen as marked characteristics of the English temper. He is a reluctant and hen-pecked husband who finds comfort with his male companions, generally in the tavern, but he makes a good death. On his death-bed he declares, of his gravestone, that it may not be engraved in the Greek or Latin lingos, and much less in French, which I abominate, but in plain English, that when the angel comes to pipe *all hands* at the great day, he may know that I am

British man, and speak to me in my mother tongue. And now I have no more to say, but God in heaven have mercy upon my soul, and send you all fair weather, wheresoever you are bound.' It has been said that Smollett based the death scene upon that of Shakespeare's Falstaff; in the calm dignity and cool despatch there are resemblances, but it might also be fair to claim that in its reticence and disinclination to lament it is a very English death. The sensibility endures to the very moment of its surcease.

The emphasis upon eccentricity of behaviour or demeanour is also part of a larger English preoccupation, best exemplified by what became known as 'the novel of character'. Its first and best practitioner was another urban writer, a tradesman and pamphleteer who like his contemporaries in eighteenth-century London seemed to adopt the novel form almost by accident. Samuel Richardson once confessed that 'I almost slid into the writing of *Pamela*'. Thus was born the novel whose intense interest centred on the development of character under the pressure of circumstance and extremity, with a highly coloured presentation of the individual formed upon the anvil of adversity. Richardson's novels betray their London origins.

Richardson himself, in characteristic London fashion, was a businessman and pamphleteer before turning to the business of writing novels. He was a printer by trade, with a shop at the top end of Fleet Street, who had already fashioned a successful career out of publishing political literature and periodicals such as the Duke of Wharton's *True Briton*; he had a licence to print parliamentary debates and launched himself into the public domain with a scholarly account of seventeenth-century English diplomacy. His fictional skills emerged out of that practical or pragmatic interest which has served the English imagination so well; he had been asked to compose a manual on the art of letter-writing 'in a common Style' for the use of 'Country Readers', and on the basis of these models he hit upon the plot of *Pamela* which is itself an epistolary novel. The story of the kidnapping and imprisonment of the unfortunate heroine took him two months to complete; in fact it can be said, of all the eighteenth-century London novelists, that they wrote fast and furiously, as if in consort with the life all around them. In a period when a pamphlet could be written in the morning and printed (by Richardson among others) in the afternoon, when a play and its prologue could be ready in published form the day after their first performance, there was a premium upon speed of execution.

Written at this rapid pace, *Pamela* instinctively and effortlessly incorporates such familiar characteristics as melodrama and theatrical caricature. The portrait of Pamela's unofficial gaoler, Mrs Jewkes, has been variously described as resembling Hogarth and Dickens but her family likeness is clear. 'Her face is flat and broad; and as to Cole she looks as it had been pickled a month in Saltpetre: I dare say she drives. She has a hoarse man-like Voice, and is as thick as she's long . . .' She might be the procuress in *A Harlot's Progress* or Mrs Gamp in *Mad Chuzzlewit*. She is, in other words, a London type. She has an 'up-turned horse-lip', calls Pamela 'lambkin' and tells dubious jokes. 'Hey-diddle, why so nimble, and whither so fast?' she calls out. 'What! are you up to a wager?' Yet the principal emphasis is upon the intense and heightened sensations of Pamela herself, all the time fearing that she is about to be raped by her 'master', and the novel is filled with apprehension and passionate reproach. It is written in the form of apparently artless and spontaneous letters, so that everything happens in the foreshortened space of a day or a passing hour; the intensity of the action is proportionately increased. It is not difficult to enter the movement of feeling therefore; the reader keeps pace, as it were, with the consciousness of the principal characters.

In that sense, if in no other, Samuel Richardson changed the course of the English novel. He had a direct influence upon the work of Jane Austen who, in her *Sanditon*, reveals a character very like herself who 'fancy had been early caught by all the impassioned & most excusable parts of Richardson; & such Authors as have since appeared tread in Richardson's steps, so far as Man's determined pursuit of a Woman in defiance of every opposition of feeling and convenience is concerned'. It has also been said that the novels of Richardson, through their steady attention to a sequence of fleeting impressions, materially influenced Virginia Woolf and James Joyce; in addition, he affected European writers as diverse as Rousseau and Goethe. Diderot composed a poem in his honour, 'O Richardson, Richardson, first of my eyes, you shall be my reading at all times!' So did this successful and somewhat prim London tradesman enter the history of European romanticism.

It could be said that Richardson provided a peculiarly English contribution to that history since, according to Paul Langford in *Englishness Identified*, the 'English novel, the single most potent element of English culture on the Continent, was *par excellence* about character and manners'. By the latter half of the eighteenth century, 'it was

sensibility of the English novel rather than the brutality of English history that informed Continental assumptions'.⁸ A French critic said, of innkeepers, that 'the English novel writers who are so fond of painting these characters copy from a given model which, though it admits of but little scope for variety, is nevertheless true to nature'. Fanny Burney's novels were celebrated for forming 'a history of National Manners in themselves'⁹ while an Italian critic believed that the novels of Fielding and Smollett comprised a vast encyclopaedia of 'English manners and peculiarities'. As Mr Langford remarks in another place, 'Continental observers were fascinated by the English preoccupation with originality of character';¹⁰ it is manifest no less in portrait-painting than in satirical caricature, English drama and English fiction.

CHAPTER 42

A character study

There is perhaps no greater English character than Dr Johnson. This shambling, obsessive, melancholy figure has become representative less of London than of literature; he walks through both accompanied by a fluent and sharp-witted Scotsman. In his bad temper and solicitude for others, in his prodigious learning and no less prodigious speech, in his hack work and in his high endeavours, in his gregariousness and in his melancholy, he is characteristic and unmistakable. He attempted every form of writing and excelled in each one of them. In his essays for *The Rambler* and *The Idler*, in his commentaries upon Shakespeare, he evinces a kind of sublime common sense – literally *communis sensus* – the feelings common to mankind – so that his poetry and prose are marvellously freighted with general reserves of taste and judgment. His gravitas lies also within the weight of his language, which contained all of its classical affiliations. When introduced to French scholars and divines he spoke in Latin; like More and Milton before him, he trusted the efficacy of European humanism and what has been called ‘the Anglo-Latin tradition’. His two greatest poems, ‘London Poem’ and ‘The Vanity of Human Wishes’, are imitations of Juvenal’s satire; he translated Horace, and wrote poetry in Latin. In his own words of dignified melancholy he adverted to his position as ‘scholar’ rather than ‘author’:

There mark what Ills the Scholar’s Life assail,
Toil, Envy, Want, the Patron, and the Jail

He was possessed by the idea of translation as a major force within English letters, therefore, and in the second volume of *Lives of the Poets* he wrote that ‘the affluence and comprehension of our language is very illustriously displayed in our poetical translations of the Ancient Writers; a work which the French seem to relinquish in despair’. His concluding note suggests a certain nationalism of response, even if we learned a context, and once again the English genius seems to spring out of a confluence of European or classical influences. It is as if Johnson remarked of Pope, when he declared that the earlier English translation of the *Iliad* was ‘certainly the noblest version of the

which the world has ever seen; and its publication must therefore be considered as one of the great events in the annals of Learning’; it was ‘a performance which no age or nation can pretend to equal’. This is high praise, but praise for an English poem rather than a Greek epic.

That Johnson understood the dimensions of his national culture is not in doubt. Of the proposal to establish a society for the reformation and standardisation of language upon the French model, Johnson wrote that ‘such a society might, perhaps, without much difficulty, be collected; but that it would produce what is expected of it may be doubted’. In England its proposals ‘would probably be read by many, only that they might be sure to disobey them’. He understood the native sensibility too well to imagine its renovation in a Gallic or neo-classical spirit. Of course his own *Dictionary* might be seen as an exercise in authoritarian linguistics but, like his work upon Shakespeare and his *Lives of the Poets*, it is more profitably to be regarded as an attempt to restore a native tradition. In his preface to that great enterprise Johnson insisted that he wished to recall English to its ‘original Teutonic character’ and that he felt obliged to take ‘examples and authority from the writers before the restoration [1660] whose works I regard as the wells of English undefiled, as the pure sources of genuine diction’. In that sense the *Dictionary* might be considered to be a project filled with the spirit of English antiquarianism – what Johnson himself termed ‘my zeal for antiquity’ – and the learned lexicographer did indeed insist upon ‘making our ancient volumes the ground work of stile’. This reverence for ‘the genius of our tongue’ is then entirely consonant with his deep regard for history and the historical process, or what one biographer has called ‘Johnson’s lifelong concern for historicity’.¹ The *Dictionary* itself is devoted ‘to the honour of my country’ whose ‘chief glory . . . arises from its authors’.

His declaration that ‘No man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money’ has been widely regarded as a ‘typically’ English statement of disregard for theoretical or ideal aspirations. It is an aspect of his pragmatism or, at least, of his practicality. The tone is continued in his reply to James Boswell’s enquiry about the meaning of human activity – ‘Sir (said he in an animated tone) it is driving on the system of life’ – upon which he further elaborated in an essay for *The Rambler*. ‘We proceed, because we have begun; we complete our design, that the labour may not be in vain.’ It is possible to glimpse here, also, that peculiarly native combination of fatalism and melancholy inherited from the Anglo-Saxon poets and continued ever since.

Perhaps Johnson's most famous gesture was his kicking of the stone in contempt of Bishop Berkeley's theory concerning the non-existence of matter. 'I refute it thus' is a sufficiently English rejoinder to have entered what might be called the canon of native sensibility. It also touches upon the most perplexing aspect of his Englishness or, rather, his English reputation. Samuel Johnson is better known for his character than for his writing. It is part of a native tradition.

The English were preoccupied with character as the determining force in human relations and the agent of social change. It was conjectured, for example, 'that English educators were obsessed with the development of character rather than the inculcation of knowledge. We may find its traces within the texture of English common law and religious thought, both of which emphasise individual rights and responsibilities, while one historian finds its origins in the English language and its 'individualism of style, which corroborates a passion for individuality'.³ These are profound matters indeed, suggesting a transmission 'of some common substance of thought from a dimly forgotten past'.⁴ The English language will not yield to the blandishments of academic discipline, and English literature is marked by an absorption in character and its development'.⁵ These concerns are to be found in Elizabethan drama no less than in the comedy of 'humours' in the historical characters who populated Clarendon's *History of the Rebellion* or Burnet's *History of My Own Times*, and in the philosophy of Locke which sustained the natural rights of the individual. They are, in short, to be found everywhere.

It is the merest truism to note, in this context, that the art of portrait painting became for all intents and purposes a national pursuit. Hogarth once surmised that 'portrait painting ever has, and ever will succeed better in this country than any other' and an historian of art has confirmed this observation with the remark that 'portraiture served as an agenda for other forms of painting'.⁶ It is a practical art; it is a useful art; it is a commercial art. These may be considered English virtues. The obsession with character may be traced in medieval babooneries and misericords, in Rowlandson's cartoons and in Frith's crowd paintings. No other European nation has a National Portrait Gallery.

It has been said of Holbein's portraiture that 'his sense of character in itself gives an English appearance to his work',⁷ which suggests that there is something in the soil or air or atmosphere of England which impregnates even a foreign genius. Roy Strong has also written

Holbein that 'the longer he stayed, the more his work moved away from being three-dimensional towards being flattened into a two-dimensional pattern'⁸ which is also part of a native aesthetic. There is a continuity, therefore, manifested in thirteenth-century manuscripts which display a 'purely English skill in portraiture'⁹ and in the carved heads of Early English architecture; it has been observed, of these artefacts, that 'in no other country are such heads found in such quantities, a fact that indicates the English interest in physiognomy, an interest which in the future was to lead to the prominence of portrait painting'.¹⁰

The English Renaissance has been called 'an age of portrait-painting'¹¹ so that in the sixteenth century there was a 'near monopoly by portraiture'.¹² The twin ideals of the Renaissance and the Reformation, if such intellectual shorthand be permitted, encouraged the presumption that religion was the domain of the individual and that history was the arena of the hero. It is of some significance, too, that 'in all its varied aspects only the formalised linear portrait is to be found in England'¹³ so that the preoccupation with the hard or simple outline is of a piece with the interest in character. English miniatures of the period are also entranced by the individual sitter, with 'the insistence on the facial likeness, on the vocation or status of the sitter, on the memorial nature of the works';¹⁴ the practicality of the exercise is not in doubt. In these miniature portraits an exquisite individuality is to be found, complementing the rich colour and decoration so that there is an exact equivalence between face and surface.

In the seventeenth century 'family portraits and portraits of friends and political associates predominated',¹⁵ while the most interesting sculpture is to be found in funereal effigies and portrait busts; the head of Sir Christopher Wren by Edward Pierce is justly celebrated. One of the attributes of English painting in this period is that of 'a fresh approach to character', and the sojourn of artists such as Anthony Van Dyck and Daniel Mytens in England is often invoked to explain their deepening sense of individual or at least courtly personality. The work of a native painter like William Dobson, on the other hand, has been exemplified in the remark that his 'feeling for character is entirely English'.¹⁶ In the single heads of the early seventeenth century, as opposed to the full-length portraits, 'the beginnings of what may perhaps be called a native British tradition can first be found'.¹⁷ Cornelius Johnson, for example, was 'the first to seize (as only an Englishman could) upon that shy and retiring streak in the English

temper, whose presence in a portrait is a sure sign of native English art'.¹⁸ This is an interesting perception, and does much to explain the feeling of hesitancy and awkward formality in subsequent portrait painting. In many of Gainsborough's portraits, it might seem that the sitter did not wish to be painted at all. It is a form of English embarrassment, manifest in Gainsborough's delicate and ambiguous lines.

The exception may be made here for seventeenth-century 'familiar pieces', or 'conversation pieces', in which tribal or social imperatives triumph over the individual sensibility. That is why Steele could write in the *Spectator* that 'no nation in the world delights so much in having their own, or Friends or Relations pictures. . . . We have the greatest number of the Works of the best masters in that kind [portraiture] of any people', which compliment he followed with 'Face Painting nowhere so well performed as in England'.

His own likeness by Godfrey Kneller emphasises the sociability of the English portrait: he was painted as one of the forty-eight members of the 'Kit-Cat Club', a club of Whig notables which met in Shire Lane. These portraits are not representations of the isolated or communing individual but of something close to a collective identity. When Jonathan Richardson elaborated upon the theory of portrait painting in the early eighteenth century he chose to emphasise the importance of 'beauty, good sense, breeding and other good qualities of the person', as if he were constructing a racial or national model to which the representation of the sitter must aspire; they are social rather than personal qualities.

One collector of contemporaneous English art was asked by his friend why he had not purchased one of Benjamin West's classical portraits, to which came the reply, 'You surely would not have a picture hang up a modern English picture in my house unless it were a portrait?' He might have included in this category the somewhat formal portraits of actors in role, or actors in costume, which form a significant part of the English canon. They reflect the national appetite for theatrical illusion, and in the work of such artists as Zoffany and Wright the tinctures of stage lighting reveal action as if it were on the proscenium. Hogarth's renditions of *The Beggar's Opera*, and Highmore's representations of the more dramatic moments in *Paradise Lost* are also part of this tradition.

Yet Hogarth was equally capable of composing individual portraits which are suffused with a certain homeliness or intimacy of response. The portrait heads of his servants are sufficiently well known but,

representations of *Captain Thomas Coram* or *The Graham Children*, the expressions and gestures of the subject manifest Hogarth's extraordinary alertness to the springs of human character. It has always been said of him that he specialised in the English face, with *The Shrimp Girl* as one of the more notable examples, but this abiding interest is connected with what has been called Hogarth's 'rugged individualism' of style and manner¹⁹ as well as the 'homely simplicity'²⁰ upon which the English prided themselves. He is preoccupied with the trajectory of the living character, and with the practical expression of life itself beyond the range of authority and theory. England is a biographical nation.



Bust of Sir Christopher Wren by Edward Pierce. Circa 1673

CHAPTER 43

The fine art of biography

The extant portraits of Samuel Johnson, no less than five of which were executed by Sir Joshua Reynolds, have created a familiar composite image of the scholar with intense and serious gaze, deeply preoccupied or deeply troubled by some inner vision. More circumstantial details supplied by contemporaries who have remarked that 'his immense structure of bones was hideously striking to the eye, and the scars of scrofula were deeply visible'. At a later date 'down from his bed-chamber, about noon, came, as newly risen, a huge uncouth figure with a little dark wig which scarcely covered his head, and his clothes hanging loosely about him'. His clothing was often dirty, his shirt collar and sleeves unbuttoned, his stockings around his ankles. James Boswell noted that 'he is very slovenly in his dress, and speaks with most uncouth voice'. Fanny Burney has left the most interesting account, however, with her observations that 'He is tall and stout; stoops terribly; he is almost bent double. His mouth is always constantly opening and shutting as if he was chewing. He has a strange method of frequently twirling his fingers, and twisting his hands. His body is in continual agitation, see-sawing up and down; his feet never a moment quiet; and, in short, his whole person is in perpetual motion.' His curious gait meant that he was a constant object of amusement to children or to the 'mob'. He would 'zigzag' across the London streets, often colliding with people without realising that he had done so, and he had an obsessive habit of knocking every post with a stick; if he missed one, he would retrace his steps and give it a tap. He would suddenly come to a halt in the middle of these thoroughfares, and his arms above his head in a spasmodic movement; before crossing a threshold he would whirl about, twisting his body before making a sudden stride or leap. He enjoyed rolling down hills and climbing

This is not a diversion but, rather, an example of biographical description in the English manner. Here is Samuel Johnson's example, upon the life of Jonathan Swift:

He thought exercise of great necessity, and used to run half a mile up and down a hill every two hours. . . . He was always careful of his money, and was therefore no liberal entertainer, but was less frugal of his wine than

of his meat. When his friends of either sex came to him in expectation of a dinner, his custom was to give everyone a shilling that they might please themselves with their provision. At last his avarice grew too powerful for his kindness; he would refuse a bottle of wine, and in Ireland no man visits where he cannot drink.

Johnson himself believed that biography, the history of character in the world, was a noble and salutary pursuit. 'I have often thought', he once wrote, 'that there has rarely passed a life of which a judicious and faithful narrative would not be useful.' Whether he would have praised Boswell's *Life* of him in these terms is an open question; but his own *Lives of the English Poets* amply fulfils his principles. 'Biography', he wrote, 'is of the various kinds of narrative writing, that which is most eagerly read, and most easily applied to the purposes of life.' He told a gathering of friends in the Mitre public-house 'that he loved the biographical part of literature most',¹ and once explained to Boswell that 'I esteem biography, as giving us what comes near to ourselves, what we can turn to use'. This emphasis upon usefulness partakes of the English spirit, but Johnson's preoccupation with individual life and character is also of English provenance.

In an essay for *The Rambler* he proposed that biography was an extension of imaginative literature since 'all joy or sorrow for the happiness or calamities of others is produced by an act of imagination, that realises the event, however fictitious, or approximates it, however remote, by placing us, for a time, in the condition of him whose fortune we contemplate'. The biographer will 'conceive the pains and pleasures of other minds' but must also 'excite' them in the act of imaginative recreation. This dictum has profoundly affected the course of the English imagination, even as it arises naturally out of it. The novel and the biography are aspects of the same creative process. In fact it might be suggested that the greatest writers are those, like Johnson, who effortlessly transcend the limitations of genre; their writing, whatever temporary form it takes, is of a piece. If his poetry becomes a 'just representation of general nature', then so must his life of Milton or of Dryden.

But there is a further refinement to Johnson's art, in those passages where he fashions his prose in the image of his subjects. When in his life of Milton he exclaims upon 'these bursts of light and involutions of darkness; these transient and involuntary excursions and retrocessions of invention', he is translating within his own style the idiom and cadence of Milton's verse. In a less elevated mode he notes that 'the

death of Pope was imputed by some of his friends to a silver sauce-pan in which it was his delight to eat potted lampreys'; he employs here the delicate and familiar imagery of Pope's satires to make his own point. The collusion of style is also evidence of further intimacy, since Johnson is drawn into autobiography by the pressure of biography. He re-creates himself in passages ostensibly dedicated to others. He identifies himself with Richard Savage, the destitute young dramatist and poet with whom he walked the streets of London at night in endless conversation. When he writes of the wild and penniless Savage that 'His mind was in an uncommon degree vigorous and active. His judgement was accurate, his apprehension quick and his memory tenacious that he was frequently observed to know what he had learned from others in a short time, better than those by whom he was informed' he is also limning a self-portrait. When he wrote of the scientist, Boerhaave, he was also engaged in an act of self-definition: 'There was, in his air and motion, something rough and artless, but majestic and great at the same time, that no man ever looked upon him without veneration.' There were less happy resemblances, however, and in his account of William Collins's mental decline there is a suggestion of his own incipient madness. Collins 'languished some years under that depression of mind which enchains the faculties without destroying them, and leaves reason the knowledge of right without the power of pursuing it'; this is the composition of one who desired to be tied and whipped, and whose own depression of spirit was heavier than many other men could bear.

All the pity and sympathy of his nature, therefore, went out to the bereft Savage. Indeed his entire description of the young outcast, the uncommon writer thrown away destitute into the alleys and doorways of London, is an image of Johnson as he might have been or might one day become. He wrote his friend's life when he was himself an impoverished hack in the employment of the *Gentleman's Magazine*, often forced to wander the streets at night for want of settled lodgings. And so when Johnson writes of Savage that 'when he left his company he was frequently to spend the remaining part of the night in the street or at least was abandoned to gloomy reflections', he writes about himself as eloquently as he writes about Savage. The associations and affiliations are formed. When in the same life-story he declares that Savage was 'disowned by his mother, doomed to poverty and obscurity, and launched upon the ocean of life only that he might be swallowed by its quick-sands or dashed upon its rocks', he is outlining

the entire plot of Smollett's *Peregrine Pickle* with more than a little seasoning of *Tom Jones*. A common language creates a common vision of the world; this is the English imagination at its primary and pre-eminent work.

In his absorbing study of Johnson and Savage, *Dr Johnson and Mr Savage*, Richard Holmes noted that literary biography is a hybrid art and amplified the argument by suggesting that this mixed and mingled form – this essentially English form – helped to create the romantic sensibility. He surmised that Johnson's naïve romanticism² seized upon Savage as an outcast poet, and that he had 'glimpsed in the back streets the first stirrings of the new Romantic age'.³ It is only another step then to claim, as Mr Holmes does, that biography itself 'is essentially a Romantic form'⁴ which, in the eighteenth century, 'became a rival to the novel'. It is perhaps more appropriate to suggest that it incorporated the novel, just as it manifested certain tendencies which come under the rubric of 'romanticism'. Like the language, and the culture, it assimilates anything.

In truth English biography was, from the beginning, a collection of fictional or dramatic episodes united by a commentary of a didactic or homiletic nature. The twin deities of 'Fortune' or 'Fate' were invoked in medieval narratives, while North's preface to his translation of Plutarch's 'Lives' – one of the key influences upon the development of the native tradition – reveals the moral aspect of biography in the typically English injunction that 'it is better to see learning in noble men's lives than to read it in Philosophers writings'. The perception was extended by Fielding in his novel, *Joseph Andrews*, in which he remarked that 'examples work more forcibly on the mind than precepts'. The pragmatic dimension of biographical study is here made explicit, and that practicality helps to explain the love of biography among English rather than French or Italian readers. With its approximation to fact it is considered to be an instructive and useful art, implicitly opposed to the fanciful and useless – if entertaining – allurements of fiction.

There has never been any distinction between 'fiction' and 'fact', however. Just as early biographies followed the tragic pattern of the drama's 'wheel of fortune', so the early novelists insisted upon the basis of their fictions in true sources and authentic reports. It is appropriate that a dramatist, Thomas Heywood, proposed to write 'the Lives of all the Poets, foreign and modern' while Thomas Fuller's *Worthies of England* (1662) promised a narrative 'interlaced with many delightful stories'. Izaak Walton's *Lives* maintain the hagiographical tradition of

medieval biography; his accounts of Donne and Herbert, Hooker and Wotton, resemble threnodies or laments, and he did not scruple to invent lengthy conversations in order to transmit the nobility and sanctity of his subjects. More's *Richard III* reverses the equation by constructing an almost wholly inaccurate report of that monarch as false and malevolent. More's son-in-law, William Roper, in turn fashions a biography of More which proposes him as a secular saint and martyr. Cavendish's biography, *The Life and Death of Cardinal Wolsey*, is filled with imprecations to Fortune – 'O madness! O foolish desire! O fond hope!' – while Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* thoroughly exemplifies the English tradition in its combination of improbable anecdote and broad theatricality.

If the eighteenth century witnessed the first flowering of the novel, it was wholly appropriate that it should also have nurtured the more extensive development of prose biography. They grew up together in an act of symbiosis. There were volumes entitled *The History of the lives of the most noted highway-men, footpads, house-breakers, shop-lifters and cheats* as well as *The lives of the most eminent persons who died in the year 17—*; the *Biographica Britannica* was begun, and the seventeen volumes of John Nichols's *Literary Anecdotes of the Seventeenth Century* were completed. It is also highly appropriate, indeed it is fitting and significant – that Samuel Johnson himself has been made more generally known to posterity through Boswell's biography rather than through any of his own books or essays.

Yet we must pause before we cross the threshold of this great work and examine Boswell's practice of mingling representative fact and selective fiction. In his advertisement to the second edition of the *Life of Johnson* Boswell compares his narrative with that of Homer's *Odyssey*: 'Amidst a thousand entertaining and instructive episodes the HERO never long out of sight; for they are all in some degree connected with him; and HE, in the whole course of the History, is exhibited by the Author for the best advantage of his readers.' Boswell less resembles the writer of the verse epic, however, than the novelist. He is concerned with his subject's important actions but also with 'what he privately wrote, and said, and thought'; he wishes to display 'the progress of his mind and fortunes', like any fictional hero, principally by dwelling upon 'innumerable detached particulars'. Boswell admired Rembrandt and Vermeer in this respect, noting 'with what a small speck does the painter give life to an eye!' He quotes Johnson himself to the effect that the biographer must examine 'domestick privacies and display

minute details of daily life'. The biographer thereby congratulates himself that Samuel Johnson 'will be seen in this work more completely than any man who has ever yet lived'. But when he states that 'I have spared no pains to ascertain with a scrupulous authenticity' the facts of the matter, and that 'I have sometimes been obliged to run half over London, in order to fix a date correctly', we may recall Daniel Defoe's similar protestations in the prefaces to his fictional accounts. There are indeed scholars who have dismissed Boswell's *Life* as a work of the imagination, but of course it is only in the imagination that writing lives. The imagination is the secret of Boswell's art.

He informed one acquaintance that he wished to cast Johnson's biography 'in scenes', as if he were somehow impelled by the theatrical nature of London life to proceed upon a dramatic model; then Johnson might become the chief actor surrounded by secondary players. If it is the business of the biographer to create drama, however, he must introduce pace or tempo into various confrontations. He must rehearse moments of significant action, such as that of Johnson kicking a stone in refutation of Bishop Berkeley's theories. Most importantly he must create, or shall we say fabricate, memorable dialogue. Since Boswell himself was engaged in many of these conversations, he was also obliged to enter his own narrative with all the attendant problems of repression and revision.

There is a very interesting account of Boswell's procedures in Adam Sisman's *Boswell's Presumptuous Task*, in which he suggests that Boswell subjected his narrative 'to every type of revision: summary, paraphrase, expansion, contraction, conflation, interpolation, and so forth'.⁵ Stories were abbreviated, and anecdotes transposed; short notes were amplified and, significantly, 'details that did not fit were altered or discarded'.⁶ That this is also the practice of most other biographers underlines its suggestiveness. The radical reshaping of a life is primarily the imperative of the artist who must fashion the narrative to accord with his or her own personal vision; it is also necessary to alter or discard facts and details in order to create a coherent character out of the raw materials lying all around. When Mr Sisman goes on to suggest that Boswell was to some extent 'forced to rely on his imagination to elaborate stories of Johnson's early years',⁷ all the formal boundaries of discourse are dissolved. The overriding concern is with the creation of character.

Certainly Boswell did not scruple to invent facts, or omit inconvenient ones. He made only a few notes at dinner in May 1776

when Johnson and Wilkes, the radical London politician, introduced; but out of these random jottings a fully prepared, described scene, of some four thousand words, was produced two years later. Boswell also engaged in what he described as 'correction', by which characters and scenes were omitted or refined for the sake of the narrative argument.

One of his more obvious procedures was to render originally Anglo-Saxon words into their Anglo-Latin equivalents, thus adding sonority to Johnson's stated opinions. Yet this was also a device which Johnson himself employed. On hearing himself say, of a drama, 'I do not wit enough to keep it sweet,' he corrected himself and continued 'it has not vitality enough to preserve it from putrefaction.' There may have been an element of irony or self-parody here, but it may also have been a genuine attempt by Samuel Johnson to preserve a respectable mien for the benefit of his biographer; both men were involved in a process of artistic collusion.

Boswell also believed it to be necessary to bowdlerise or bowdlerise Johnson's correspondence, so that no trace of grossness or vulgarity remained. But Boswell's desire to maintain a stable identity for Johnson was designed to reassure himself as well as his readers. As one critic has suggested, 'the impulse to create or construct a Johnson answering private needs is overwhelmingly visible'.⁸ There is often some confluence between the biographer and the subject of the biography; the biographer and the subject were ineluctably drawn towards certain destinies. In the act of inspection or observation, there is also an element of self-examination. It might account for Mrs Gaskell's biographical interest in Charlotte Brontë, for example, or for that of Carlyle in Frederick Douglass.

There is another way of conveying biographical identity in a conventional, factitious manner. Boswell admitted that, while composing his narrative out of notes or stray anecdotes, 'he had rewritten some of these sayings of Johnson's into what he considered the authentic Johnsonian style. It is once more a question of artistry, and has nothing to do with fact or historical concerns. That is why the 'Johnsonian' style, as invented or embellished by Boswell, was powerfully influential. The biography relates how, after publication of the *Life*, an acquaintance spoke of its success 'in the circles of fashion and elegance'. He informed Boswell that 'you have made them all talk Johnson', to which remark Boswell appends: 'I have Johnsonised the land.' The conversations invented by Boswell were anthologised as 'Johnsoniana', and in subsequent years

biography became the only official or extant source of Johnson's life. This was his success as an artist – to have created a character who over the intervening years has become as recognisable and as familiar as Mr Pickwick or Mr Micawber. In 1835 Francis Jeffrey concluded in the *Edinburgh Review* that Boswell 'has raised the standard of his [Johnson's] intellectual character, and actually made discovery of large provinces in his understanding of which scarcely an indication was to be found in his writings'. He did not pause to consider whether those provinces were the rightful territory of Johnson or of Boswell himself. Yet this invented biography created the first 'romantic' hero. Out of artificial material a great truth was born; romance, epic, fiction and drama come together to form biography.

Mrs Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* was one of the most popular and most controversial lives of the nineteenth century. A modern editor of this interesting volume has remarked that 'she seems to have forgotten that it was not a novel that she was writing'.¹⁰ There are indeed some startling resemblances between Mrs Gaskell's biography and her fiction, to the extent that Charlotte Brontë becomes the heroine of a novel rather than of her own life.

When Elizabeth Gaskell first met Charlotte Brontë, she wrote that 'the wonder to me is how she can keep heart and power alive in her life of desolation', a sentiment similar to the themes of female anguish and self-sufficiency in her novels *Ruth* and *Mary Barton*. The opening of her *Life* follows the same trajectory as that of *Ruth* and *Sylvia's Lovers*, as the narrator walks through the landscape and setting of her story. The parsonage at Haworth 'is of grey stone, two storeys high, heavily roofed with flags, in order to resist the winds that might strip off a lighter covering'. In *Sylvia's Lovers* Hope Farm is 'long and low, in order to avoid the rough violence of the winds that swept over that bleak spot'. In *Ruth* are to be found 'grey, silvery rocks, which sloped away into brown moorland', while in *Sylvia's Lovers* stretch 'the moorland hollows' and purple heather; in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* are to be found 'the dense hollows of the moors'. The first chapter of *Ruth* opens with a description of a town 'in one of the eastern counties' where the streets 'were dark and ill-paved with large, round, jolting pebbles, and with no side-path protected by kerbstones'. The first chapter of the *Life* opens with a description of Keighley where 'the flagstones . . . seem to be in constant danger of slipping backwards'. There is a remarkable consonance of tone and theme. In each case the

landscape creates a steadfast heroine, and what Mrs Gaskell called Charlotte Brontë's 'wild, sad, life'. As Virginia Woolf suggested, 'Life gives you the impression that Haworth and the Brontës are somehow inextricably mixed. Haworth expresses the Brontës; the Brontës express Haworth; they fit like a snail to his shell.' This formula is in fact so perfectly adapted to the English imagination that it might serve as an introduction; the mingling of character and landscape expresses a general truth, and out of this essentially fictional intuition by Elizabeth Gaskell have sprung a myriad books and literary pilgrimages.

It is appropriate, therefore, that Haworth Parsonage itself is perhaps the principal object of popular affection. Mrs Gaskell did not start with the identification of writer and place – the Shakespeare Jubilee of 1769 in Stratford has some claim to that honour – but Mrs Gaskell's setting of the Brontë sisters on the edge of the moors has greatly influenced the English literary inheritance. It combines a peculiar reverence for place and a preoccupation with the formation of character. Just as artists have found inspiration on Salisbury Plain or among the Malvern Hills, and so others have found consolation in areas which have become sacred and enchanted through their association with writers. From the 1830s forward there emerged a fashion for topographies or itineraries based upon the life of famous writers – *The Homes of Tennyson*, *In the Steps of Charles Dickens*, *Bozland*, *Dickens' Places and People*, *The Homes and Early Haunts of Robert Louis Stevenson* are among the scores of volumes which appeared upon the subject. It became a national pursuit, and Tennyson was forced to move house in order to avoid the attentions and depredations of these literary tourists. There are many volumes upon the neighbourhood of the Lake District and Thomas Hardy's semi-fictional 'Wessex', and there are books entitled *Writer's Britain* and *The Oxford Literary Guide to the British Isles*. The *genius loci* has many hearths in England.

So Elizabeth Gaskell, inspired by the imaginative vision of her novels, re-created Charlotte Brontë. As a novelist she was preoccupied with details, and in similar fashion requested information on the peculiar customs & character of the population towards Keighley'. One of Mrs Gaskell's biographers has put it, 'Charlotte Brontë's life already fell easily into the patterns of Gaskell's fiction, with its suffering daughters, profligate son and stern father, and its emphasis on upbringing and environment, female endurance and courage'.¹¹ Mrs Gaskell lends strong imaginative shape to her biography, also, with letters and anecdotes reinforcing the pace and emphasis of the narrative. She

commenting upon Charlotte Brontë's husband as an 'exacting, rigid law-giving man' at the same time as she was creating just such a character, John Thornton, in *North and South*. In the *Life*, too, Elizabeth Gaskell comments that standards of behaviour and morality 'in such a manufacturing place as Keighley in the north' are very different from those of any 'stately, sleepy, picturesque cathedral town in the south'; this of course is a principal theme of her novel *North and South*. But the resemblances do not end there. After the publication of the *Life* Charlotte Brontë's father, Patrick Brontë, wrote to its author and informed her that 'the truth of the matter is that I am, in some respects, a kindred likeness to the father of Margaret Hale in "North and South" – peaceable, feeling, sometimes thoughtful'. The circle of 'fact' and 'fiction' becomes complete.

It has also become evident that Mrs Gaskell, like Boswell before her, omitted, edited and distorted details so that they might more accurately reflect her imaginative concerns. It was necessary for her purposes to emphasise the private and domestic life of Charlotte Brontë, for example, rather than to examine her professional career in proper detail. When Charles Kingsley wrote to congratulate her upon fashioning 'the picture of a valiant woman made perfect by suffering' he touched upon an important truth; hers is a 'picture' rather than a defined or definite reality. Gaskell omitted unfortunate facts, such as her heroine's obsession with a Belgian schoolmaster, and frequently cut out significant details from Charlotte Brontë's correspondence; she also chose to emphasise the endurance and courage of the three sisters, at the expense of downgrading their unhappy brother Branwell. Gaskell, in other words, created the myth of the Brontës which may still linger among the readers of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*.

The ambiguity of Mrs Gaskell's achievement was recognised at the time. George Eliot praised her for creating 'an interior so strange, so original in its individual elements and so picturesque in its externals . . . that fiction has nothing more wild, touching and heart strengthening to place above it'. The anonymous writer in the *Edinburgh Review* declared that 'Mrs Gaskell appears to have learnt the art of the novelist so well that she cannot discharge from her palette the colours she has used in the pages of "Mary Barton" and "Ruth"'. This biography opens precisely like a novel.' But of course it is precisely because it is 'like a novel' that it has created an enduring impression upon successive generations of readers. It represents a very English art.

CHAPTER 50

The secret garden

Most houses in England possess a small garden; it is part of their natural state or, even, of their national inheritance from the prehistoric inhabitants of England whose small plots of cultivated land 'may be considered the first gardens of Britain'¹ where henbane and the opium poppy flourished.

The reconstruction of medieval settlements reveals peasant cottages with small back-gardens as well as streets of thatched houses with strips of garden 'all with private space fenced from their neighbours'.² The small Elizabethan garden is of the same lineage, and the study of local court records reveals many cases of trespass upon a neighbouring garden; it becomes the very image of defensive privacy which is so congenial to the English mind. The earliest maps of London reveal a city of gardens, each one carefully delineated. It has been remarked of the 'small seventeenth-century garden', also, that it exhibited 'a sturdily independent glory'.³ 'Capability' Brown, that epitome of native ingenuity and practicality, was employed to create landscapes 'of privacy and seclusion'.⁴ The same pattern of enclosure is repeated on the large, as well as the small, scale. That is why the walled garden became the model of secrecy and enchantment; the English imagination can grow only in a confined space. In the words of one historian of gardening, Jane Brown, 'the little garden becomes the key to a world of wonders and delights, of fabulous riches and wealth'⁵ glimpsed in the pages of children's literature no less than in the myths and legends of the English. Gardens are places of safety as well as of delight, of security and privacy as well as of pleasure. As one early gardener put it, 'A garden is a sort of sanctuary, a chamber roofed by heaven . . . a little pleasaunce of the soil, by whose wicket the world can be shut.' This defines a native mood. The reclusive and unremarked spot of soil guards the *genius loci*. It is an image of self-sufficiency, and it is perhaps significant that 'garden' – otherwise 'garth', 'yerd' or 'yard' – itself springs from a root-word suggesting enclosure and protection.

Another historian of the garden has remarked in this context that the medieval garden, with its alleys and hedges, 'reflected in no small measure the sense of security of a walled town'.⁶ It has always been

considered an aspect of national sensibility that 'an Englishman's home is his castle' but the truism can be applied to the adjacent property. Jane Brown has suggested that 'the British taste for gardening has a great deal to do with a warlike past'⁷ and that 'so many garden terms come from the art of warfare'; thus we have trenches and pallisades, cordons and covered ways. These are the insular gardens of an island race, complete with defensive fortifications, walls and outer ditches. We do not need the example of Uncle Toby in *Tristram Shandy*, with the fortified towns of France laid out on his bowling green, or of Mr Wemmick in *Great Expectations* with the battlements of his Walworth garden. Kensington Gardens itself was designed to resemble 'the lines, angles, bastions, scarps and counter-scarps of regular fortifications'. Many plants have been granted military names, such as 'Blue Ensign' and 'Old Bloody Warrior'; the ubiquitous allotments of England where vegetables are grown, are preserved in 'miniature parade-ground proportions, everything in impeccable rows'.⁹ Several forces are at work here. The love of the small scale, of the miniature, is aligned with the need for seclusion and for privacy; but this may become a fierce protectiveness, with the English love of warfare somehow domesticated or displaced. But is there not also a trace of irony, a suggestion of self-mockery, in this mimicry of battle conditions among the lawns and flowers?

In the late eighteenth century Gilbert White remarked that 'even the most decent labourer also has his garden', and the brick cottages of the early nineteenth century were built with plots 45 feet wide and 225 feet long. In the same period there emerged the 'villa garden' as well as the 'cottage garden', the harbingers of the ubiquitous suburban garden. In *News from Nowhere* William Morris celebrates a future state enjoying a 'delicate superabundance of small well-tended gardens' just as Thomas More, in *Utopia*, reports that the inhabitants of his idealistic community 'attached the greatest importance to their gardens' with 'keen competition between streets as to which has the best kept garden'. It is also worth observing that More's dialogue is set within a well-kept garden. It is a charmed space of the English imagination.

In indirect homage to *Utopia* the 'garden city' movement was essentially English in inspiration and, under the tutelage of Ebenezer Howard, developed an ethos in which 'the small garden, now so exceedingly worthy and desirable as almost to be sacred, reaches its apotheosis'.¹⁰ One commentator of 1913 remarked that 'however various our occupations and tastes, however conflicting our opinions

in the garden we are united'. The popularity of gardening itself was markedly increased by the development of the 'semi-detached' house, within whose relatively secluded bounds emerged the English 'happy medium'¹¹ of a small front-garden and a large back-garden. The suburban phenomenon has been described as evincing 'the native urge to return to the land',¹² further imbued with an atavistic remembrance of the Tudor cottage garden. The resurgence of interest in allotments may owe something to the 'green' movement, but it is also part of a larger awakening. Bede possessed a copy of Pliny's *Historiae Naturalis*.

There are other specific examples from this long tradition. The contemporary revival of herb gardening has its 'roots' in the *Laebook* or 'Leechbook' of Bald, composed in the tenth century, and in the Old English translation of the *Herbarium Apuleii* where 132 different plants are described. One of the earliest gardening legends concerns St Maurilius who in the fourth century worked the garden of an English prince. The knights who came to murder Thomas Becket in the cathedral of Canterbury 'threw off their cloaks and gowns under a large sycamore tree in the garden'. And then there are the flowers. In the first century Pliny was unsure whether England had acquired the name of Albion 'from the white roses with which it abounds'. A fifteenth-century poem celebrates 'the white rose of England that is freshe and wol not fade'. A prose text of the early seventeenth century, entitled *Paradisus*, extols roses white and red as 'the most ancient and knowne Roses to our Countrey'. Ancient, too, are the tools of the trade. They have changed very little from the rakes and spades employed by Celtic settlers to the shovels and latices of the seventeenth-century gardener. In medieval illuminations Cain and Abel are shown with spades, picks and hoes, digging and delving after the Fall; a misericord in Lincoln Cathedral has the carving of a gardener carrying an unmistakable spade.

Gardening, then, is a national pursuit with truly native characteristics. Thus Jane Brown celebrates 'our national preference for homelike rather than princely gardens'¹³ and notes the fact that wherever the English go 'they establish gardens and always gardens of the type they left in the old country'.¹⁴ The world itself is sometimes understood in this context. John Winthrop recorded in his diary, before he set foot upon the soil of Massachusetts, that 'there came a smell off the shore like the smell of a garden'. The Indians of that region named plantain 'Englishman's foot' as if the race had an inalienable link with horticulture. In that sense 'the English garden was a nationalist icon',¹⁵

with its disinclination for magnificence and its almost homely presence. The English have eschewed 'the frigid grandeur of Versailles'¹⁶ and have avoided 'any hint of Mediterranean drama or French extravagance'.¹⁷ The country has produced enthusiastic amateurs rather than botanical theorists. Practical men and women, such as 'Capability' Brown, Joseph Paxton and Gertrude Jekyll, are the epitome of the English gardener. 'Capability' Brown was self-made, and rose from gardening boy to companion of princes and statesmen. Joseph Paxton modelled his celebrated design for the glass hall of the Great Exhibition from the glass-houses that he had constructed for the Duke of Devonshire's tender plants. Gertrude Jekyll trained to be an artist but fading eyesight sent her into the nurture of gardens, where she delighted in broad sweeps and banks of colour – particularly in the wild gardens which she rendered fashionable.

The garden displays all the fruits of the English imagination, including the passion for intricacy and the love of the miniature. So it will not be wonderful to learn that the gardens of England have been described as 'jewelled miniatures'.¹⁸ One history of gardening has concluded that the cottage garden of many centuries 'has much in common with hand needlework, for there is always the individual touch and lack of regularity';¹⁹ here is an interesting confluence of taste. Anglo-Saxon embroidery, renowned for its intricate variety, was also recognised for its pattern of interlace, a native tendency which may help to explain the 'knot gardens' of the sixteenth century so curiously varied and with so many 'enknotted' flowers 'that the place will seem like a piece of tapestry of many various colours to encrease every one's delight'. Various plants 'were interlaced so that they were seen to weave in and out of each other', and these gardens were copied in sweetmeats to produce the 'marzipan knot'.²⁰ It is also worth noting here that the 'knot garden' displayed 'abstract and geometric designs'²¹ and may in that respect also claim Anglo-Saxon ancestry. The English affection for 'medley' and heterogeneity is also evident in the range of gardens which proffer intricacy and variety in an enclosed or intimate space. John Aubrey described an English garden as 'full of variety and unevenness'. *The Theory and Practice of Gardening*, published in 1712, declared that 'the greatest beauty of gardens consists in variety'. In *Humphrey Clinker* a garden is described as 'exhibiting a wonderful assemblage of the most picturesque and striking objects, pavilions, lodges, groves, grottoes, lawns, temples and cascades'; to use a phrase of Pope's, all is 'harmoniously confus'd'. In Stourhead, Wiltshire, w

may admire 'the eclecticism of the English landscape school: the classic style side by side with English cottage "Gothick"'.²² It may also be remarked that many fine English gardens 'grew piecemeal'²³ by that process of organic accretion which has been noticed elsewhere in this study.

The curved or serpentine line has also been a feature of this enquiry, and in Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan' there is a vision of 'gardens bright with sinuous rills'. In *The Pursuit of Paradise* Jane Brown suggests that English landscape gardening was 'obsessed with the serpentine line', in a manner of which Hogarth would have approved; Horace Walpole remarked of William Kent's landscapes that 'the gentle stream was taught to serpentine at its leisure'. Capability Brown's 'curves and serpentines were smooth and suave'.²⁴ The Georgian landscape garden has been described as 'enshrining the spirit of England' with 'the avoidance of straight lines and their invariable replacement by the amorphous serpentine' in lawns and paths and lakes.²⁵ It suggests a distaste for regimentation and a love of 'English liberty – that liberty of which the new [eighteenth-century] gardens themselves were a sort of symbol'.²⁶ Horace Walpole considered the art of the garden to be 'totally new, original and undisputably English', a development which he associated with 'English political liberties'.²⁷ Across the Channel 'the compressing geometry and regularity of the French avenues and bosquets had held down the pressure till France exploded'.²⁸ In 1753 Francis Coventry, writing in *The World*, asks whether 'a modern gardener would consent to enter heaven if any path there is not serpentine';²⁹ thirteen years later, in Garrick and Colman's *The Clandestine Marriage* a character revels in the fact that 'here's none of your straight lines here – but all taste – zigzag – crinkum crankum – in and out – right and left – to and again – twisting and turning like a worm, my lord'.

The pursuit of gardening fosters a native individualism; it is pre-eminently a solitary pleasure. It has been well said that 'in England we have always preferred high hedges, which make for privacy'.³⁰ A French aristocrat of the early nineteenth century observed that 'the English detest being seen and will gladly forgo any prospect beyond their own limited boundaries'. That is why, in coffee-houses of the same period, there were wooden partitions between each 'box'. It has been remarked, too, that 'secret gardens gain much fascination as remnants of old Catholic England and Scotland, lingering in intangible ways',³¹ as if the enclosed and scented air were imbued with time past.

The lawn and the gravel path are also ancient features, and gardening does in a real sense touch the *genius loci*; the gardener makes contact with the soil, which is the ground of our being and becoming.

The garden is also an exercise in utility and practicality; the earliest gardening books were 'essentially practical'³² and gardening itself was 'purposeful'³³ in the cultivation of herbs and vegetables. We may also introduce the English philosophical tradition here, in the words of William Lawson's *A New Orchard and Garden* published in 1618. 'We must count that art the surest, that stands upon experimental rules gathered by the rule of reason', under the guidance of 'mere and sole experience'. The elements of English diffidence or embarrassment may also be deemed to be present, since gardening may encourage the displacement of passion and even of sexuality itself. In her study of gardening Jane Brown has commented upon the fact that gardens are 'constantly demanding sweated exertions and a tender touch' while at the same time 'constantly offering sensual arousal'.³⁴ The innocence of children is therefore often conceived in the setting of an English garden, most notably in the animals and birds of Beatrix Potter. With their tales for children A. A. Milne, James Barrie, Kenneth Grahame and Lewis Carroll also linger in English gardens as if they had escaped into a refuge or a sanctuary.

Travel has also been seen, in this study, as a form of escape. The English gardener may also be a traveller, and has ranged from Japan to Central America, from China to Australia, from Borneo to South Africa, in pursuit of new or rare species. The Michaelmas daisy comes from Virginia, the convolvulus from Barbary, the tulip from Turkey. The fact that they have now been thoroughly acclimatised, and treated as native plants, is further testimony to the assimilative power of the English genius. It may be that the language of flowers takes as its model the English language itself. At Fulham Palace, for example, there are 'more than a thousand tender exotics'³⁵ which like the importations into the language flourish in a mild and accommodating climate. Jane Brown's insight into botanical practice uncannily echoes most other commentaries upon the English imagination itself. 'All plants and ideas which came home,' she writes, 'became instantly English, transmogrified as if they had no native roots at all: conversely *le jargon anglais* was exported and mysteriously became the rage.'³⁶ No better or more significant example could be found for the essential unity of English cultural practice. In the gardens of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries 'we modified the new French style . . .

accordance with our traditional custom we adapted them to our insular taste'.³⁷ The emphasis rests upon a pattern of immigration and adoption, succeeded by ever renewed diversity. The Elizabethan chronicler, William Harrison, remarked that 'strange herbs, plants and annual fruits are daily brought unto us from all parts of the world'. A more recent commentator, Miles Hadfield, has remarked in his *Gardening in Britain* that 'our island was rapidly and readily absorbing theory and practice, as well as material, in the form of plants, from overseas. Thus it came about that our gardens, which we like to think of as singularly British, are in fact the most cosmopolitan in the Old World'.³⁸ The appetite for variety, and diversity, is thus very strong. One history of English gardens has in fact claimed that 'there is no part of the earth's surface as small in area as these islands where such a diversity of plants can be grown'³⁹ – smallness, heterogeneity and temperate accommodation have also been the grace notes of the present study.

It is therefore natural that the literature of gardens, and the gardens of literature, should be harmoniously united. Some of the best English prose has been preserved in gardening books, where communion with the spirit of place releases a note of native lyricism. William Kent in turn declared that 'he caught his taste in gardening from reading the picturesque descriptions of Spenser'; yet Spenser derived his plant names from *The New Herbal or History of Plants* translated by Henry Lyte in 1578. The pre-eminence of translation, as an aspect of the English imagination, has already been outlined; it need only be noted that the first gardening book in English, *A Most Briefe and pleasant treatyse teachyng how to dress, sowe and set a Garden . . . by Thomas Hyll, Londyner* (1563) was a translation and compilation of classical or continental European sources.

The legend of the twelfth-century 'Rosamond's Bower', described by Addison as a sacred spot where 'Amaranths and Eglantines with intermingling sweets have wove the particolour'd gay Alcove', evokes the enchantment which the English garden has cast upon poetry and prose. 'Of Gardens' is one of Francis Bacon's longest essays, with its delighted litany of plants and perfumes in 'gardens for all the months in the year'. He extols the delights of the English lawn, too, since 'nothing is more pleasant to the eye than green grass kept finely shorn'. In this setting Pepys remarked that 'the green of our bowling alleys is better than any they have'. This native pride, asserted here against the French and the Italians, is complemented by an instruction in *The*

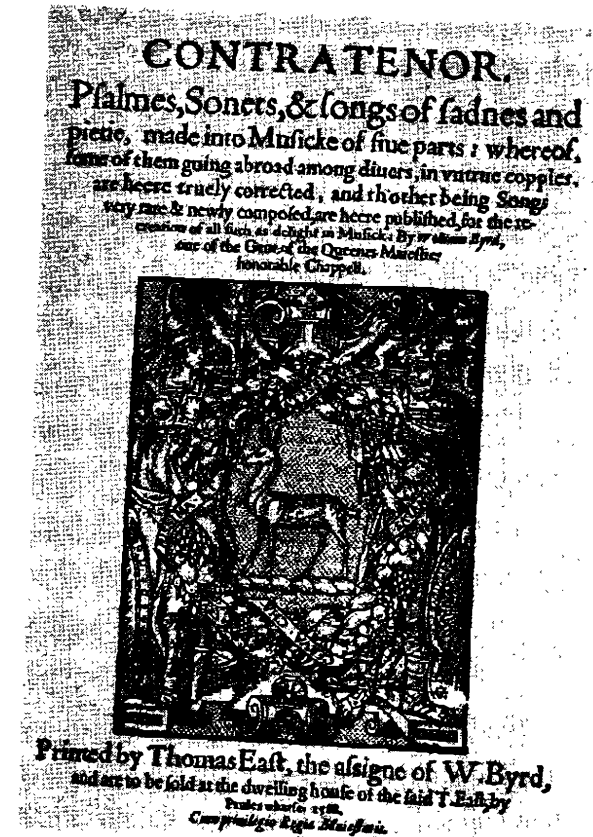
Solitary Gardener that 'A Bowling Green should be encompassed with Great Trees' to ensure privacy and seclusion. The sports and pastimes of the English – among them bowling itself as well as cricket and snooker – take place upon 'greens' where an intricate game is played in a confined space.

It is the *hortus inclusus* of Chaucer's poetry – 'A gardyn saw I ful of blosmy bowes' – and in *The Legend of Good Women* he extols the virtues of the simple daisy 'of alle floures flour'. Violets scent the poetry of Shakespeare, and it has been calculated that the dramatist dilates upon the fairness of roses in some sixty separate passages. It has been asked, of the Elizabethan poets, 'in what foreign literature can one gather such handfuls of flowers?'⁴⁰ – through the cowslips of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to the 'daffadownillies' of Spenser. There were so many garden publications in the seventeenth century that one might conclude that England itself was one large garden. Abraham Cowley's 'The Garden' celebrates the 'blessed shades' and 'gentle cool retreat' of a secluded place, and much of Marvell's poetry is of course set among the prospect of flowers and gardens:

Annihilating all that's made
To a green Thought in a green Shade

Thus the English imagination is forever green.

Looking backwards



Title page of William Byrd's 'Psalms, Sonnets and Songs of Sadness and Piety', 1588

CHAPTER 5 I

Forging a language

The art of forgery did not fully flower and prosper until the eighteenth century. It has been associated, in particular, with the emergence of the relatively new phenomenon of professional authorship as well as with the contextual arrangements of trade publishing and commercial marketing. But the single most important alignment has gone largely unremarked. The most significant connection is to be found between forgery and the burgeoning movement known as 'romanticism'. The forged document and the 'romantic' personality are manifestations of the same change in taste. We might advert here to Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson*, in which the first 'romantic' hero emerges out of faked conversations and dramatically staged encounters.

But there are more suggestive parallels. It is not inappropriate that the two greatest literary forgers of the eighteenth century, James Macpherson or 'Ossian' and Thomas Chatterton or 'Rowley', have been said to herald or inspire the new romantic movement in letters; with their transcription of a respectively Celtic and medieval past, they created that enchanted landscape which became a dominant influence upon the romantic poets.

James Macpherson was a Scottish poet and teacher who in 1758, at the age of twenty-two, published a long poem entitled *The Highlander* in part as a response to the intense interest in Celtic literature and mythology. That burgeoning movement of taste has been denominated 'the Celtic Revival' and can be taken to include Thomas Gray's ode upon the 'Bard', Mason's *Caractacus* and Evans's *Specimens of the Poetry of the Ancient Welsh Bards*. It has been estimated that in the forty years from 1760 one volume was published each year upon Celtic myth. It is also the context in which James Macpherson perpetrated his forgeries. He was a Jacobite with a profound instinct, and love, for his native culture. It took only the enthusiasm of another literary nationalist, John Home, to unleash his powers of historical imagination and creative reinvention. His first faked production was 'The Death of Oscar', which he claimed to be a translation from the manuscript of a Gaelic original in his possession; it was immediately recognised as a

work of primitive genius. A year later Macpherson was able to publish *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*, the preponderance of which were also his own inventions. The appetite for Celtic folklore and verse already existed; it was only natural that it should be fulfilled. Two years later, therefore, Macpherson brought to light six books of *Fingal, An Ancient Epic Poem* composed by a bard named 'Ossian' in the more remote stretches of Scottish history. A specimen of Ossian reads, 'Our youth is like the dream of the hunter on the hill of the heath. . . . Her steps were the music of songs. He was the stolen sigh of her soul. . . . The horn of Fingal was heard; the sons of woody Albion returned.' Such plangent writing exerted an immediate and powerful effect, and Ossian was extensively quoted by Goethe in *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. A cult sprang up closer to home, too, and various eminent literary tourists explored Ossian's territory. Thomas Pennant discovered various Ossianic landmarks in the Scottish landscape, and the guide for Sir Joseph Banks on the island of Staffa pointed out 'the cave of *Fiuhn*' or '*Fiuhn Mac Coul*, whom the translator of Ossian's works has called *Fingal*'. Oyster shells were dated with reference to the Ossianic fragments. So the forged poetry of Macpherson engendered caves and rocks and crustacea. Pennant wrote also of the local songs, which 'vocal traditions state are the foundation of the works of *Ossian*'. A skilful faker had created a living communal tradition. It is testimony to the credulity of scholars and general readers alike, but it is also tribute to the creative power of Macpherson's imagination. His forged words forged – in another sense – a new reality.

In his 'Essay, Supplementary to the Preface' of *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth records that 'Having had the good fortune to be born and reared in a mountainous country, from my very childhood I have felt the falsehood that pervades the volumes imposed upon the world under the name of Ossian. From what I saw with my own eyes, I knew that the imagery was spurious' and from the lips of a 'Phantom . . . begotten by the snug embrace of an impudent Highlander upon a cloud of tradition'. At some point after his childhood, however, Wordsworth seems to have changed his opinion. The first lines of his poem entitled 'Glen-Almain; Or, The Narrow Glen' reflect that:

In this still place, remote from men,
Sleeps Ossian, in the NARROW GLEN;

The poem ends thus:

And, therefore, was it rightly said
That Ossian, last of all his race!
Lies buried in the lonely place

There is some ambiguity within the poem itself whether 'Fancy' creates the presence of death, but Wordsworth's overall ambivalence or confusion about Ossian reflects the general romantic sensibility. James Macpherson created a wild and sublime landscape of vision, from which emerged an ancient bard instilled with all the primitive simplicity of passion; here were romantic archetypes indeed. But if they were all faked or forged, what then? Could the products of the romantic sensibility themselves be fraudulent? Or, to put it in another manner, that which seems most genuine may be the most artificial.

In the same decade as James Macpherson was forging 'fragments of ancient poetry . . . translated from the Gaelic or Erse Language', Thomas Gray was in fact compiling his own authentic translations from Norse and Welsh poetry to add to his *Poems* of 1768; under these circumstances it is hardly surprising that Gray enthusiastically accepted the work of Ossian as that of a true original. Thus he joined William Blake and Johann Wolfgang Goethe in celebration of a notorious hoax which at the time satisfied the taste for the visionary sublime. The other most influential lyric poet of the period, William Collins, composed an 'Ode on the Popular Superstitions of the Highlands' ten years before Ossian himself furnished precisely those superstitions to an admiring public. As Samuel Johnson wrote of Collins, 'the grandeur of wildness, and the novelty of extravagance, were always desired by him'; but of course they were also desired by the two generations of romantic poets who professed their own debt to Gray and to Collins, to 'Ossian' and to Chatterton's Rowley. If forgery or fakery seem endemic to the whole enterprise, we will find it also in Collins whose 'Persian Eclogue' is composed in the 'pretence that he was translating from the Persian'.¹ His 'Song from Cymbelyne' has also been described by his editor as a 'skilful pastiche'.² In the same context Horace Walpole, the quondam friend and admirer of Thomas Gray, published his novel *The Castle of Otranto* as a relic of the sixteenth century some four years before the youthful Chatterton tentatively began his own forgeries.

It ought to be recalled that in the early years of the eighteenth century forgery could be celebrated as a form of masquerade or carnival, part of the endless shifting game of identities. It was nothing against the work of Defoe or Swift that they faked the character of the 'authors' of

Robinson Crusoe or *Gulliver's Travels*; in that ostensibly more stable and assured world, the notion of identity was neither precarious nor ambiguous. Daniel Defoe can plausibly and happily become 'Robinson Crusoe' in 1714 and 'Moll Flanders' in 1722; in the last decades of the century the subterfuge involved in such impersonations would become a matter for camouflage or indignant denial.

The latter half of the eighteenth century, however, the seed-bed from which the romantic movement emerged into the full light of the English imagination, has been well described as 'An Age of Forgery'.³ The crime of forgery itself reached its apogee in the period 1750-80 but of more significance, in a literary context, was the passing of a Copyright Act in 1709 which confirmed the individual ownership of words as 'intellectual property'. Since the notion of individual ownership led in turn to the development of the literary personality and to the affirmation of the romantic selfhood, this act of legislation had aesthetic as well as economic consequences. It is often supposed that part of the 'irritability' of the romantic genius sprang from its immersion in the literary market-place, and its prostitution in commercial trading, but this disquiet can be traced back to the recognition of individual 'property' itself. It has been suggested by Paul Baines, an astute historian of forgery, that the new monetarism of the eighteenth century 'threatened basic ideas of value, and the security of human exchanges and interactions'.⁴ Did not this new legislative sense of the individual, owning certain words and sets of words as private property, in turn threaten the old and more established ideas of selfhood as residing in a commonality of expression and perception? If the romantic self was first deemed to be a legal and financial unit, its origin might provoke deep unease and ambiguity in those who professed it. We will notice this in subsequent pages. If one anonymous discourse of the period can refer to 'that chimerical ill-founded Medium, Paper Money', then perhaps the individuality written upon paper might also possess a 'fluctuating, abstract and possibly evanescent value'.⁵ As one historian has put it, 'Once property was seen to have a symbolic value, expressed in coin or credit, the foundations of personality themselves appeared imaginary or at best consensual: the individual could exist, even in his own sight, only at the fluctuating value imposed upon him by his fellows.'⁶ It is interesting to observe in this light the assertion of personality in Wordsworth's poetry, which emerges only to be assailed by doubt and anxiety as to its true nature. If there did indeed run 'the need for a perfect, unassailable touchstone of human identity against

which all falsifications could be measured',⁷ the romantic 'I' offered only a tentative solution. If words as well as property have only 'a symbolic value' expressed in the 'coin or credit' which they obtain for their owner, then they too possess only a 'fluctuating value' dependent upon the manner in which they are recognised or received as the true coin of feeling or imagination.

Yet of course the rise of the 'individual author' long predates the work of Wordsworth and his contemporaries. Both Langland and Chaucer deliberately introduce themselves into their own narratives. The notion of individual authorship at this later time, however, extended beyond textual matters. It was also implicated in the relatively original notion of originality exemplified by Edward Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759), published two years after Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful* to which it remains a natural and faithful companion. As one study of poetics has put it, the concern for sublimity of expression, that artistry beyond the familiar reach of art, 'played no small part in the drift towards subjectivism . . . and ultimately in the rise of romanticism in poetry'.⁸ The obscure and the dark, the awful and the mysterious, became legitimised by Burke's enquiry in ways which he would have neither anticipated nor approved. They had a particular bearing, for example, upon Young's affirmation of 'original' composition. 'Our spirits rouze at an *Original*; that is a perfect stranger, and all throng to learn what news from a foreign land. . . . All eminence, and distinction, lies out of the beaten road.' In a similar spirit he enjoins the writer, 'Thyself so reverence as to prefer the native growth of thy own mind to the richest import from abroad.' Young's own interest is clearly aligned with the material and financial imperatives of his culture, with the encomium upon the original writer whose words 'will stand distinguished; his the sole Property of them; which Property alone can confer the noble title of an Author'. But his sentiments are no less clearly related to the burgeoning romantic movement in which spontaneity and originality are to be preferred over laboured imitation. The nature and nurture of Thomas Chatterton may be invoked here.

Some three years before Wordsworth composed his encomium upon Ossian he completed a poem, 'Resolution and Independence', which paid tribute to that paradigm of the romantic movement:

I thought of Chatterton, the marvellous Boy,
The sleepless Soul that perish'd in his pride

Thomas Chatterton was the most celebrated faker of the eighteenth century, and he shares with James Macpherson the palm also of being the most successful. Chatterton was born, in Bristol, in the winter of 1752; his father, an antiquarian and a collector of old trifles, died before his son was born. That death had a crucial effect upon Chatterton, since all his life he was searching for his patrimony. It would be easy to say that he had inherited his father's antiquarian passion, or that he identified antiquarianism with the invisible presence of his father. More significantly, however, he considered the past itself to be his true father. He learnt to read from sundry old folios scattered in his little house in Pyle Street, opposite the church of St Mary Redcliffe; his passion for antiquity was such that, even before he left his charity school, he had started to compose 'medieval' poetry. He may have been partly inspired by Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, published when Chatterton had reached the age of thirteen; it is ironic, too, that upon closer examination certain of Percy's own ballads were shown to be less than the genuine article. But the essential truth is that Chatterton was inspired and animated by the past; he devoured texts like a library cormorant and, when not reading or writing, devised genealogies and created heraldic emblems. He invented a fifteenth-century monk, Thomas Rowley, who had resided in St Mary Redcliffe and had written much poetry duly transcribed by the young Chatterton. On being challenged about the provenance of 'Rowley's' poems, Chatterton confessed that he had found them in an old chest within the muniment room of the church; he even managed to produce some stained antique documents to prove his assertions. His case was so plausible that, well into the nineteenth century, there were many who believed that no boy could have fashioned such masterpieces of an early date. But create them he did; the language of the past spoke through him, as it were, and his was a genius of assimilation and adaptation.

At the age of seventeen Chatterton travelled to London in order to find his fortune; he was noticeably successful, composing essays and satirical poetry on contemporary themes. Five months later, however, he was found dead in a Holborn attic with traces of arsenic poisoning in his teeth. It was necessary and inevitable that his death was deemed to be suicide, a last gesture to society from a doomed poet; more recent commentators have suggested that it was a botched effort to cure a bout of syphilis.

His apparent suicide added immeasurably to his stature, however, while his celebrity was maintained by the revelation that the 'Rowley'

poetry was an imposture. There were pamphlets, essays and tracts issued by various interested parties. Almost immediately after his death he had been considered to be akin only to Shakespeare in his prolificity; Horace Walpole had commended him as a 'masterly genius' and Joseph Warton had described him as 'a prodigy of genius'. In 1780, ten years after his death, an epistolary novel on his life was published under the title of *Love and Madness*; in the following year Jacob Bryant's *Observations Upon the Poems of Thomas Rowley: in which the Authenticity of those Poems is Ascertained* were published in two volumes. Six hundred pages of scholarship and testimony led ineluctably to the conclusion that the poems were 'written too much from the heart to be a forgery'. That conclusion may still stand, if we deem the heart to be a capacious organ which includes inspiration, invention and historical memory. Chatterton composed as many fine lines of medieval poetry as came out of the medieval period itself; the language instinctively propelled him to this restoration, whereby ancient words and images float naturally if unexpectedly to the surface of consciousness.

His career as a forger, whose work was eventually compared with a 'forged note' presented to a banker, would certainly not be evident from the tributes lavished upon him by his romantic successors. Coleridge revised his poem, 'Monody on the Death of Chatterton', until his own surcease; he first began writing it at the age of thirteen, and the final text was not published until the year of his death. It began in Pindarics and ended in pentameters, all the while chanting in borrowed metres the fate of 'that heaven-born Genius'. Coleridge compared himself explicitly to the young poet, dead in a garret at the age of eighteen; apparently unwanted and unhonoured, Coleridge laments his 'kindred woes'. In his agonies he is possessed by 'the Ghosts of Otway and Chatterton' (Otway another penurious and unsuccessful writer) as if to confirm his own sense of doomed genius. Yet can 'Genius' subsist in forgery?

In his poem upon the death of Keats, *Adonais*, Shelley paid stately tribute to the 'solemn agony' of Chatterton; he is one of the 'inheritors of unfulfilled renown' who, in the unstated argument of the poem, will reach fruition by means of Shelley's productive genius. At a later date a memorial of Shelley was sculpted by Onslow Ford in the manner of Henry Wallis's *The Death of Chatterton*. Whatever the circumstances of Chatterton's compositions, that picturesque or theatrical pose survives as a token of romantic poetry itself. That is why Keats evinced

the most effusive reaction to Chatterton's unhappy fate. He composed a sonnet in 1815, 'To Chatterton', and lamented the 'Dear child of sorrow – son of misery!' whose 'Genius mildly flash'd'. Three years later he inscribed *Endymion* 'to the memory of Thomas Chatterton' but, more significantly, in a letter of the following year he remarked that 'the purest english I think – or what ought to be the purest – is Chatterton's . . . Chatterton's language is entirely northern' and free from 'Chaucer's gallicisms'. He went on to declare that 'I prefer the native music of it to Milton's cut by feet.' Keats was acquainted with the controversy surrounding Chatterton's 'medieval' poetry, but he considered it to be of little consequence beside the dead poet's adoption and assimilation of a 'native' or 'northern' dialect – by which he means, in the context of Chaucer and Milton, an Anglo-Saxon cadence and vocabulary. In a letter of the same period he remarks that he has given up *Hyperion* because 'there were too many Miltonic inversions in it', but in the same paragraph he avers that Chatterton 'is the purest writer in the English Language . . . 'tis genuine English Idiom in English words'. His abandonment of *Hyperion* suggests that he understood the dangers of imitation or plagiarism, but then how are we to estimate his praise of Chatterton's forged verses as 'genuine English Idiom'? Here lie mysteries which may or may not be resolved. It may be worth noting in this context that the poem in which Wordsworth celebrated the memory of Chatterton, 'Resolution and Independence', is written in the same metre as Chatterton's fake medieval poem 'An Excelente Balade of Charitie'. Wordsworth also owned a portrait of the dead poet, which was itself a forgery.

The posthumous comparison of Chatterton with Shakespeare does suggest what all the evidence implies – the 687 pages of his extant poetry and prose, in the 'Oxford' edition of his works, is astonishing evidence of his precocity but it also bears testimony to the fact that he was a thoroughly English poet. If it were otherwise, his fame and fate would not be so congenial to the English imagination. There is, for example, the salient matter of Chatterton's reverence for the past. The influence of Percy's *Reliques* upon the young poet's burgeoning poetic imagination has already been suggested, but the antiquated diction and metre of Percy's specimens may have been less important than Percy's belief that there existed 'a peculiarly English characteristic of cultural history and national identity that derived from the Ancient Goths . . . the English minstrels were the inheritors of a national poetry'.⁹ In this same spirit Chatterton declared in a letter to Horace Walpole, alac-

unsent, that 'However Barbarous the Saxons may be call'd by our Modern Virtuoso's; it is certain we are indebted to Alfred and other Saxon Kings for the wisest of our Laws and in part for the British Constitution'. He evinces all the antiquarianism of the English imagination, therefore, but out of it he fashioned works of genius; he wanted to re-create, rather than rescue, past time. Like Edmund Spenser he invented a language with which to restore the proximity as well as the mystery of the past. Or can we say that the language invented him?

He dwelled in another life. There were many antiquarians willing to forge material objects and produce medieval coins, rings or chamber-pots; but Chatterton spent the money, wore the ring, and shat into the pot. He restored the past, too, because he believed in its authority and efficacy. By the age of sixteen he had composed a long poem entitled 'Bristowe Tragedie or the Dethe of Syr Charles Bawdin', to which he appended a note claiming 'the following little Poem wrote by Thomas Rowlie Priest, I shall insert the whole as a Specimen of the Poetry of those Days, being greatly superior to what we have been taught to believe'. It is indeed a vigorous ballad:

How oft ynne battaile have I stooode
When thousands dy'd arounde;
Whan smokyng streemes of crimson bloode
Imbrew'd the fatten'd grounde;

How dydd I knowe thatt ev'ry darte
Thatt cutte the airie waie
Myghte notte fynde passage toe my harte
And close myne eyes for aie

Such diction materially affected the work of both Coleridge and Keats, to name only the two most celebrated examples. Only the foolish would dismiss it as pastiche. It is a genuinely new creation and, if genius may be defined as one who changes the nature of expression, then Chatterton has some claim to that honorific.

The question of plagiarism, however, presents itself. Chatterton was, in the native idiom, essentially a bookish writer who borrowed from a score of other English writers, most notably from Spenser, Pope, Dryden, Gay, Churchill and Collins. On occasions he seems to parody his own literary learning by indulging in exaggerated diction and over-elaborated tropes but, as one critic has maintained, 'there was a consistent dynamic of plagiarism working beneath the veneer of

forgery'.¹⁰ In one sense Chatterton was only doing that which all good English poets had previously done; he was stealing or lifting from great originals the material for his own verse. He cultivated a polyphonic personality. But as he was a great originator of the romantic myth, if not of the romantic sensibility, the accusation of plagiarism became a peculiarly sensitive one. We may discover, for example, how Coleridge and Keats themselves became preoccupied with just that charge.

There are other aspects of Chatterton's antiquarianism which are inevitably associated with the course of the English imagination. It has been noted that in 'poetry, prose and letters Chatterton makes use of the legends of Arthur, or the "Matter of Britain"¹¹ so that in the process English history might then become 'both mythical and real'.¹² It is interesting in this context, therefore, that there are 'startling similarities between the respective canonisations of Chatterton and King Arthur'.¹³ Both exist on the interstices of the invented and the authentic, and both embody the essential ebullition or presentness of the past. The assumption may be that, like Arthur who is not dead and will return, Chatterton lives on in the work of successive poets and novelists.

Of course the 'Rowley' poems are themselves set in the medieval rather than the Arthurian period, and provide a curious parallel with the 'Gothic' revival of the nineteenth century. There was a 'Gothick' style of the eighteenth century, but that was the work of connoisseurs and virtuosi. The medieval work of Chatterton was much more vigorous and invigorating, anticipating the strong and powerful Gothic of the Victorians. He believed in the presence of the past in part because it was the means of defining his own genius. This, again, is an abiding English preoccupation. The analogy with the master of early nineteenth-century Gothic, A. W. N. Pugin, is inescapable; it has been said that Pugin's 'knowledge of real medieval work was so profound that he could instinctively produce new designs . . . in a vivid Gothic detail, full of richness and variety'.¹⁴

Pugin is the true child of Chatterton in more than one sense. The young poet had written that 'the Motive that actuates me to do this, is, to convince the world that the Monks (of whom some have so despicable an Opinion) were not such Blockheads, as generally thought, and that good Poetry might be wrote, in the days of Superstition as well as in these more inlightened Ages'. The letter, of 15 February 1769, was written in the same month as he composed a medieval eulogy on the churches of Bristol. It is as if the old religion were still very much in his

head, as it was in that of Pugin. Chatterton's own recourse to 'Superstition' and to the supernatural in his poetry suggests that he had little respect for the 'inlightened' learning of his own time. His principal character is a Catholic monk and bard, and one critic has noted 'the religious atmosphere of Rowley's world'.¹⁵ It allowed Chatterton to re-create in native fashion a world of visions and dreams, drawing material from the past in order to sustain his sense of the sacred; the antiquarians were the visionaries of the eighteenth century. It is appropriate that he should have appeared in vision to the nineteenth-century poet Francis Thompson, and dissuaded him from self-murder. 'I recognised him from the pictures of him,' Thompson said later. 'Besides I knew that it was he before I saw him.' Chatterton attained a kind of psychic or psychological reality, as a token of all that the eighteenth century had lost or abandoned; he was the wraith of faith.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Chatterton had a very powerful sense of place and of the *genius loci*. Certain spots were still holy. A posthumous account reveals how he stared at the church of St Mary Redcliffe, memorial of an earlier age, and said, 'This steeple was once burnt by lightning; this was the place where they formerly acted plays'; theatricality and supernatural visitation are in his imagination twinned. This intuitive sense of territory has been one of the objects of study in this volume, and the sole matter of the 'Rowley' poems is the city of Bristol itself – the medieval city, at least, which rises like a vision all around him. It is part of his patrimony. His father had once been singing-master in St Mary Redcliffe; Chatterton had never seen him, but in entering the old church he was also entering the house of his father. The establishment which Chatterton had attended as a boy, Colston's School, was erected on the site of an old Carmelite convent. So all the forces of his own past, and those of his territory, are aligned. This is the source of his historical mission. To restore a lost past and, at the same time, to restore a lost selfhood – here, once more, we may see how he impinged upon the romantic movement to which he bequeathed so much.

If we now draw the outlines of Chatterton and Macpherson together and see them as a compound figure, we glimpse the sublime and the fantastical mixed; the ancient and medieval landscapes of their imagination haunt their successors. Macpherson created 'Ossian', the inspired bard who sang of his own especial soil in tones of plangency and woe; Chatterton embodied the 'marvellous Boy' whose apparent

suicide provoked contemplations of a solitary genius despised and neglected by contemporaneous society. These two poets, more than any others, created the romantic image. But it was of crucial significance to their literary successors that it should be deeply imbued with forgery and fakery, pastiche and plagiarism.

It might even be said that the recognition or detection of plagiarism and pastiche, in particular, began with the romantic movement itself. In previous centuries, as Walter Ong noted in his *The Art of Logic*, 'no one hesitated to use lines of thought or even quite specific wordings from another person without crediting the other person, for these were all taken to be – and most often were – part of a common tradition'. But when that tradition was broken or discontinued in the rise of the private and personal voice, then apparent originality of expression became of paramount importance. As a result, as if they were intense shadows created by a sudden light, the dangers of plagiarism and pastiche became evident in the first generation of the romantic movement. In one prefatory epistle Milton wrote: 'I have striven to cram my pages even to overflowing, with quotations drawn from all parts of the Bible and to leave as little space as possible for my own words.'¹⁶ Wordsworth or Coleridge could never admit so much even if, in Coleridge's case, a similar confession might have been appropriate. The introduction to an important volume of essays upon English romanticism, *Romanticism and Language*, poses an interesting question: 'Is it pure coincidence, for example, that several of the essays [here] fix on the metaphor of theft?'¹⁷ Romanticism and plagiarism occupy the same area of the English imagination.

The romantic fallacy

English romanticism has no readily identifiable provenance. It has, of course, been traced back to the ancient sources of the native imagination. In particular the melancholy of the anonymous Anglo-Saxon poets may have been transmitted by indirect means to the poets of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Certainly the interest in an ancient national poetry, in England no less than in Germany or Russia, was deemed to be at the expense of the classical tradition derived from Greece and Rome. Hence the division between the classic and the romantic. The romantics, unlike such predecessors as Pope and Dryden, were believed to be returning to some native source of eloquence. There are cultural historians who will then wish to establish their connection with the national Church which emerged after the Reformation. It is argued that the doctrinal emphasis upon individual conscience and private moral duty materially influenced the development of the romantic 'I'; Wordsworth is then the direct heir of those religious enthusiasts who were moved by the 'inner spirit'. The romantic movement in Catholic Europe took on a very different aspect. It became elaborate and symbolic, clothed in allegory and invaded by intimations of strange sins; it became, in other words, intensely Catholic. The image of Wordsworth striding across the rocks and vales of the Lake District is quite another thing. He epitomises that strain of moral earnestness, of right thinking and right feeling, avoid which characterises the Dissenting Protestant tradition.

If we look for earlier and perhaps less orthodox intimations of the romantic sensibility, however, we are sure to find them. The plight of the solitary poet, whose genius is akin to madness, can be witnessed in the unhappy experience of John Clare, Christopher Smart and William Cowper whose respective lunacies offer a disquieting footnote to the literary history of the eighteenth century. The cult of sentiment, the passion for antiquity, the attention to 'Gothick' and supernatural effects, the vogue for the ballad – all have their origins in that century, even if they found their apotheosis in the works of Wordsworth and his successors. The fixed production of generic verse upon classical models was replaced by an organic process of human transference and

sympathy; poetic diction itself became 'less precise, more generally suggestive'.¹

The retreat from statement and sententiousness, and the eighteenth-century movement towards a romantic sensibility, were marked by the fashion for sentimental feeling as exemplified by such novels as Henry Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling*; sensitive sentimentality became known as 'the English malady'. The man of feeling dies because he is too good for this cruel world, and Mackenzie's novel was published just a year after the death of Chatterton. The harsh laughter of Congreve and Wycherley is replaced by the gentler amusement of Sheridan and Goldsmith.

Yet the lineaments of the romantic image were most decisively executed in the nineteenth century. The artist is then one surrounded by invisible powers, which by an act of rapt attention may be transformed into a permanent image or symbol. The poet is one set apart, the conscience and unacknowledged law-maker of human society who as a consequence of his solitariness is doomed to be misinterpreted and mistreated; he does not endure the world but re-creates it in the act of imagination, and must place his own sensibility at the heart of this enterprise because there is no other sure foundation of knowledge. The romantic poet is a lamp rather than a mirror, to use a celebrated antithesis, the source of illumination within his or her own breast. If this entails the re-creation of the self as well as of the world, then the divine afflatus of the bard may also be a mode of private transformation. A human being may be transfigured by god-like powers of the imagination. 'A Man's life of any worth is a continual allegory', Keats wrote. 'Shakespeare led a life of Allegory; his works are the comments on it.'

We may lower the temperature a little by recalling Coleridge's comment upon the acting of Edmund Kean; watching him upon the stage, he remarked, was 'like reading Shakespeare by flashes of lightning'. It is of some interest in this context that the romantic image, or at least the image of the romantic hero, was largely embodied in actors and in paintings of actors. They, rather than the poets themselves, seemed to fulfil the prerequisites of the part. Kemble as Coriolanus and as Hamlet, painted by Thomas Lawrence respectively in 1798 and 1801, set the mood and tone with 'these heroic figures, dark cloaked against murky skies' exhibiting 'Hamlet's introversion' and 'Coriolanus's humiliated pride'.² The connection of the romantic poets with the theatre is not confined to portraiture alone. All of them

wrote verse dramas, and most of them speculated upon the nature of theatrical passion and dramatic performance. They associated their art with the techniques of impersonation. Coleridge may be said to set the scene of the dramatic action with his remark upon Shakespeare that 'he had only to imitate certain parts of his character, or exaggerate such as existed in possibility, and they were at once true to nature, and fragments of the divine mind that drew them'. In this passage the notion of imitation, and of exaggeration, is indistinguishable from that of creation.

The renown of actors such as Kean and Kemble, Macready and Mrs Siddons, was such that the nature of dramatic poetry itself was seen in the context of their art. Charles Lamb wrote even of a relatively minor actor, Robert Bensley, that he 'had most of the swell of soul, was greatest in the delivery of heroic conceptions, the emotions consequent upon the presentment of a great idea to the fancy. He had the true poetical enthusiasm.' Yet the terms of approbation are precisely those which were awarded to the poets themselves, so that there seems to be no difference at all between the poetic and theatrical 'delivery' of feeling. That may perhaps be sufficient cause for the ready identification of Shelley and Coleridge with the character of Hamlet, as if somehow their finest or most fugitive feelings were most nobly expressed by a dramatic persona. Coleridge described Hamlet as 'for ever occupied with the world within him, and abstracted from external things; his words give a substance to shadows: and he is dissatisfied with commonplace realities'. This might be a definition of Coleridge himself. Poetry itself is then fully explicated in the processes of the theatrical imagination. What is real, and what is feigned? As Coleridge puts it in *Table Talk*: 'I have a smack of Hamlet myself, if I may say so.'

If we turn from the part to the actor, then there is evidence of further confusion or conflation. Hazlitt comprehended the performance of Kemble as '*intensity*'; he was able to seize upon one feeling or one idea, 'working it up, with a certain graceful consistency, and conscious grandeur of conception, to a very high degree of pathos or sublimity'. Kemble 'had all the regularity of art' and lent 'the deepest and most permanent interest to the uninterrupted progress of individual feeling'. A casual reader might be forgiven for believing that Hazlitt was describing the imaginative procedures of the poet rather than the stage life of the actor. It is so common an identification in the period that it often passes without comment, but it is suggestive none the less. When Keats celebrates the 'sensual grandeur' which Kean brings to the

'spiritual passion' of Shakespeare's verse, he might have been describing his own practice; the poet then confirms and elaborates upon his point with the suggestion that 'Kean delivers himself up to the instant feeling, without a shadow of thought about anything else. He feels his being as deeply as Wordsworth. . . . We will say no more.' Enough has been said, however, to provoke the student of Wordsworth or of Keats himself into speculations about the theatrical management of passion.

The language of dramatic criticism was similarly of a piece with the language of literary criticism. Kean, as Iago, was praised for 'the ease, familiarity and tone of nature' of his delivery; as Timon of Athens he was criticised for want of 'sufficient variety and flexibility of passion'. The same vocabulary, and the same sentiments, were applied to the latest poetical productions of the period. Romantic acting, and romantic poetry, were considered to be equivalent. It throws curious light, too, upon Keats's conception of 'the poetical character' which 'is not itself - it has no self - it is everything and nothing . . . the camileon poet'; to which definition he adds: 'A poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence, because he has no identity; he is continually . . . filling, some other body.' This might stand as a definition of the actor, too, as if the poet and performer shared the same identity - or, rather, shared the same absence of identity.

The equivalence may help to account for the modern critical assumption that in the romantic poetry of the early nineteenth century, particularly in that of Wordsworth, there exists 'artifice behind the postulate of nature'.³ Just as an entire dramatic system lies behind the apparently unpremeditated art of Kean or Mrs Siddons, so dwell 'tradition, convention and genre behind the appearance of romantic spontaneity'.⁴

The claims of the romantic poets, however, were grand indeed. In his *Defence of Poetry* Shelley celebrated poets as themselves 'the happiest, the best, the wisest, and the most illustrious of men . . . men of the most spotless virtue, of the most consummate prudence'. It is not clear, however, if these remarks were made in the spirit of deepest irony. Wordsworth considered the poet to be a man 'endowed with a more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness . . . a more comprehensive soul', so that 'the Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society'. The natural virtues of the poet are here asserted in the spirit of what Keats called 'the Wordsworthian, or egotistical sublime', but the full ramifications of

that phrase have not been properly understood. What, precisely, is egotism in the sphere of the imagination?

The term itself implies some weakness or insufficiency beneath apparent strength. It implies a trust in a deep and powerful subjectivity, but one which is also obsessive and defensive. Johnson defines an egotist as 'a talker of himself', and in his *Lectures on Shakespeare* Coleridge called egotism 'intense selfishness'. As one critic has remarked of the romantic poet in general, 'he is thrown back on himself, his status and nature'. In the case of Wordsworth, 'his chief preoccupation is with the question of the poet's function, his role, his power, his obligations'.⁵ In turn the pose, or poses, which Byron adopted were 'a logical continuation of the Wordsworthian preoccupation with role'.⁶ We revert inevitably to the vocabulary and manner of the stage.

In the largest sense romantic literature is the literature of personality, in which the writer imposes upon an unchanging landscape or a passing scene the contours of his or her own preoccupations; the world becomes an echo-chamber of the solitary voice. But this also may lead to a form of imposture, as if the romantic poet were indeed an actor trying to project to the 'gods' as well as the 'pit'. We have noticed how fragile the romantic image may become, touched with intimations of forgery and plagiarism as well as theatricality, but there is a subtler frailty. The cult of the 'egotistical sublime' - or, in a philosophical context, individualism - effectively destroyed, in the words of one eighteenth-century cultural historian, 'the organic metaphysics of earlier centuries and the archaic belief in the unity and wholeness of experience'.⁷ It promulgated instead the instincts or doctrines 'of a solitary, increasingly alienated individual'.⁸ Just as the Reformation severed the national Church from the consensus of a thousand years, so its natural child of romanticism abrogated the alliance between the artist and the larger settled community. That is why it has been argued that the 'central truth of romanticism is not joy and fulness of being but what Hegel . . . called "the unhappy consciousness . . . the consciousness of self as a divided nature, a doubled and merely contradictory being" '9 relying upon the artificiality of language and its constructs to exemplify its dubious status. It is not irrelevant that Robert Browning parodied romantic sentiment through the voice of 'Mr Sludge', a fake spiritualist medium. One critic has discovered, in the narratives of British romanticism, a 'problematical self-consciousness' and a 'division in the self':¹⁰ the main thematic and imaginative drift is not

towards the affirmation of a certain and simple selfhood, but the nostalgia incumbent upon its loss of connection with the larger world. The solitary wanderers of Coleridge or Wordsworth or Byron are forms of self-projection and self-alienation.

To read through Wordsworth's collected works is to encounter strange stories of grief and loss, of death and forgetfulness, of isolation and failure, of dissolution and despair. In one edition of his poetry the 'Fragment of a Gothic Tale' is followed by *The Borderers – A Tragedy* succeeded a few pages later by 'The Three Graves', 'Address to Silence' and 'Incipient Madness'.¹¹ In *The Prelude* Wordsworth invokes the burden and the mystery of the 'Imagination'; the vision occurs at a moment when he and his companion are told they had crossed the Alps without realising that they had done so. In this moment of bewilderment and loss, the 'Imagination' wreathed itself around the poet

Like an unfather'd vapour; here that Power,
In all the might of its endowments, came
Athwart me; I was lost as in a cloud,
Halted, without a struggle to break through

The 'Imagination' here isolates and imprisons him; he is trapped in its vaporous obscurities. It is a power which seals off the world, leaving the traveller susceptible only to 'the might of its endowments'. The imaginative power is 'unfather'd'; it is not a natural force, and can be seen to work against the experience of the natural world as somehow irrelevant to its concerns. What Wordsworth is experiencing are the rising currents of his highest self, which lead in turn to anxiety and vertigo. There are times when he tries to flee from the reaches of his most profound mental consciousness but then he is confronted with images of death, loss and silence. The romantic image – the image of the romantic selfhood – was more fragile than its exponents seemed willing to comprehend.

It is perhaps appropriate that the great avatar of the romantic poets was Cain himself. He is invoked by Shelley in *Adonais*, by Byron in *The Giaour* and *Cain: A Mystery*, and by Coleridge in *The Wanderings of Cain*. The biblical murderer was one in whom the 'egotistical sublime' had dared to rear itself against God. When Cain became 'a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth' he set out upon a path of wandering and in his steps followed such great exilic romantic heroes as Manfred and Melmoth the Wanderer. But it was also decreed that 'thou art cursed from the earth'. The romantic personality can indeed seem curiously at

a loss, sensitive of 'cultural discontinuity, of being nowhere in the movement of history, of being useless, ignored, misunderstood'.¹² As Schopenhauer wrote, 'we are lost in a bottomless void; we find ourselves like the hollow glass globe, from out of which a voice speaks whose cause is not to be found in it'. Or, as one historian of the romantic movement has put it, there emerges 'an infinite series of displacements of meaning' attendant upon 'incompleteness, fragmentation and ruin'.¹³ Yet flowing beneath them, supporting them and moving them forward, is the steady current of English music itself.

CHAPTER 53

English music

There can be little doubt that the English music of the twentieth century was inspired and animated by the music of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; the old music awakened the new, and the new reawakened the old. Arthur Bliss composed his *Meditations on a Theme of John Blow*, which may be compared with Vaughan Williams's *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*; Gustav Holst's daughter has written of her father's 'wild excitement over the rediscovery of the English madrigal composers' which he considered to be 'the real musical embodiment of the English composers',¹ while Tippett's polyphony was directly modelled upon the madrigal compositions of John Wilbye. Delius's secretary and amanuensis, Eric Fenby, noted a connection between William Byrd's 'The Woodes So Wilde' and Delius's own *Brigg Fair*.

A critic, reviewing Ralph Vaughan Williams's *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*, observed that 'it seems to lift one into some unknown region' where 'one is never quite sure whether one is listening to something very old or very new';² the embrace of present and past time, in which English antiquarianism becomes a form of alchemy, engenders a strange timelessness. It is a quality which Eliot sensed in the landscape of England itself and to which he gave memorable expression in *Four Quartets*, 'Now and in England'. It is as if the little bird which flew through the Anglo-Saxon banqueting hall, in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, gained the outer air and became the lark ascending in Vaughan Williams's orchestral setting. It is the skylark of Shelley's poem whose 'notes flow in such a crystal stream'. The same bird, in the words of George Meredith which Vaughan Williams used,

rises and begins to round,
He drops the silver chain of sound,
Of many links without a break

The unbroken chain is that of English music itself.

The passion of Vaughan Williams for folk-music itself has now become a commonplace of English musical history. It began in Brentwood in Essex, in the winter of 1903; Brentwood was then a growing

market town, where after giving a lecture he was invited to tea by the daughter of the local vicar. One of the villagers invited to this ancient ceremony, a seventy-year-old labourer named Charles Pottipher, began to sing the songs of the region. The first of them, 'Bushes and Briars', affected the young Vaughan Williams suddenly and profoundly with the force of revelation. On first hearing this song, in fact, Vaughan Williams confessed that he was invaded by a 'sense of familiarity . . . something peculiarly belonging to me as an Englishman'. The editor of his folk-songs has suggested that he 'experienced a deep sense of recognition, as though he had known it all his life'.³ This is perhaps a strange conception. It is as if the land and the landscape had prepared him for this music; it is as if he had already heard it. The song is of ancestral voices. As a fellow enthusiast wrote, 'every country village in England was a nest of singing birds'. But theirs were not necessarily antique airs. 'In one aspect', Vaughan Williams wrote, 'the folk song is as old as time itself; in another aspect it is no older than the singer who sang it.' This is another aspect of the English imagination itself, which is endlessly renewed and is indeed 'new' again in each passing generation. The folk-song abides in Vaughan Williams's own music, where it has found fresh life and inspiration even if it has now fallen silent in fields and meadows. Of the English folk-song itself, Vaughan Williams has also written: 'We felt that this was what we expected our national melody to be.'

We may note the emphasis here upon melody. All authentic folk-music, as Vaughan Williams put it, 'is purely melodic'. It is also a striking intuition on the nature of English music itself. Of thirteenth-century chant, for example, 'the earliest phase of fully legible notation coincides in England with a flowering of melodic beauty so intense as to create the impression of a new and indigenous art'.⁴ We read of the 'well balanced melodic lines' and 'rhythmic straightforwardness'⁵ of fifteenth-century English music, which can profitably be compared with the native emphasis upon the flowing outlines and delicate linear compositions of the manuscript illuminations. Dunstable's music of that period is notable for its 'consonance and for melodic grace',⁶ fully comparable with the description of Vaughan Williams's own music. Of the Eton Choirbook of English church music there has been noted 'the fluid yet vigorous melodic line that is so typical of this music',⁷ and Taverner's sixteenth century compositions are celebrated for 'the flexibility of . . . melodic lines'. The songs of John Dowland, 'realised' at a much later date by Benjamin Britten, are characterised by 'such

delicacy and refinement that their melodic material is invariably enhanced and transmuted into something precious'.⁸ The pure line of melody is best expressed in the solo song, and so it is perhaps not surprising that 'simple songs or ballads' – in theatre productions no less than in street airs – take an 'indigenous' form.⁹ In the context of eighteenth-century music, 'a wholly English turn of melody' has been remarked.¹⁰ Victorian part-songs, resembling the polyphony of an earlier time, were also a native growth.

Vaughan Williams's own compositions in general are resplendent with 'prodigality of melody',¹¹ as if the singing birds had returned, and it has been said of *A London Symphony* that 'melodies in this work proliferate in a manner that makes disciplining them symphonically a constant problem to the composer'.¹² It is clear that the composer himself 'responded in an extremely sensitive and extraordinarily definite way to the expressive quality of melody'.¹³ This is one definition of his Englishness, of course, and his preternatural attention to melody is part of his overwhelming responsiveness to folk-song. Thus his *Pastoral Symphony* is marked by melody or 'a free evolution of one tune from another . . . like streams flowing into each other';¹⁴ the hidden stream itself is that of native song.

The 'melancholy lyricism' implicit in some of Vaughan Williams's finest work has already been described. A commentator in *Musical Times* compared Vaughan Williams's *Pastoral Symphony* to 'a dream of sad happiness', and of the *Oboe Concerto* a musicologist remarked that Vaughan Williams 'seems to be yearning for some lost and precious thing'.¹⁵ What has been lost that excites so much lament? Could it be the idea of England itself? That would be the easy answer but not, perhaps, an altogether convincing one. The folk-songs collected and arranged by Vaughan Williams are also possessed by profoundly melancholy cadences which have been related to the line of the ancient landscape. It is a national mood, comparable to 'the eternal note of sadness' which Matthew Arnold heard on Dover Beach. It is that note of quietly and insistently 'throbbing melancholy'¹⁶ which emerges in almost all of Vaughan Williams's orchestral compositions; it echoes the delicate melancholy of Dowland and the plangent sadness of Purcell. It lies within Elgar, too, in his 'beautifully poetic expression tinged with wistfulness'.¹⁷

Vaughan Williams gave a set of lectures in 1932, entitled 'National Music', in which he constructed a series of variations upon the theme

of English music. In the first of them he asked whether 'it is not reasonable to suppose that those who share our life, our history, our customs, even our food, should have some secret to give us which the foreign composer, though he be perhaps more imaginative, more powerful, more technically equipped, is not able to give us? This is the secret of the national composer, the secret to which he only has the key . . . and which he alone is able to tell to his fellow countrymen.' Vaughan Williams was no narrow nationalist; he studied under Ravel in Paris, and his own thoroughly indigenous music is indebted to Debussy and Sibelius. Like that of Purcell and Elgar, his very 'English' music is in part inspired by continental models. Elgar was championed by Kreisler and Strauss before he found a thoroughly welcoming audience at home. In turn Vaughan Williams adduces the lives and careers of Bach and Beethoven, Palestrina and Verdi, to suggest that only a 'local' or even 'parochial' artist can become a 'universal musician'. He believed that 'if the roots of your art are firmly planted in your own soil and that soil has anything to give you, you may still gain the whole world and not lose your own souls'. It is a specific and significant perception, wholly shaped by his feeling for landscape and traditional English song.

In a lecture entitled 'The Importance of Folk-Song', for example, he stated that 'folk-songs contained the nucleus of all future development in music' and that 'national music was a sure index to national temperament'. It is what Elgar meant when he said, 'I write the folk-songs of this country.' He was testifying to the power and presence of these often ancient songs within the nation's musical life. It was a subject which preoccupied Vaughan Williams, too. 'It is extraordinarily interesting', he wrote, 'to see the national temperament running through every form of a nation's art – the national life and the national art growing together.' In his lectures upon national music he refined this sense of the native imagination with his description of a 'community of people who are spiritually bound together by language, environment, history and common ideals and, above all, a continuity with the past'. This insistence upon 'continuity with the past' is once more thoroughly English in its inspiration, since for Vaughan Williams it is a living past; it is exemplified by the freshness and spontaneity of the ancient folk-song and by the tradition of Byrd and Purcell, Tallis and Wilbye, revived in his own music. Yet it must be emphasised, too, that this belief and trust in a national 'community' did not preclude for him a faith in the larger possibilities of human civilisation; he professed

a commitment, for example, to 'a united Europe and a world federation', but this global polity had to be established upon an attachment to a local ground since 'everything of value in our spiritual and cultural life springs from our own soil'. The medieval composers of England were part of a larger Catholic and European civilisation, but theirs was still a readily identifiable national art. It is the great perplexity, and mystery, of native consciousness.

Vaughan Williams's most recent biographer has suggested that the composer 'instinctively knew there were idioms of atavistic English music, whether of Tudor polyphony or of folk song, that bore a cultural fingerprint peculiar to his homeland'.¹⁸ A musicologist has also remarked, of this 'national spirit in music', that 'the composer expresses some deeply-felt national characteristic with roots far back in social and cultural evolution'.¹⁹ These may not be fashionable notions, but they are suggestive ones. How far does the *Norfolk Rhapsody* go back; to what atavistic longing does *A Sea Symphony* speak, and do the strangeness and serenity of *Sinfonia Antarctica* invoke an Anglo-Saxon fortitude in face of natural bleakness? The sense of place, so central to this study, is also evident. Peter Warlock's 'An Old Song' represented 'very much the Cornish moor where I have been living'.²⁰ A musical historian has in turn recovered this sense of place in the Norfolk landscape of Ernest Moeran's 'The Song of the High Hills' and in Frank Bridge's 'There is a Willow Grows Aslant a Brook'. The *genius loci* still sings. In the preliminary sketches for the *Ninth Symphony* Vaughan Williams drew upon memories of Stonehenge and Salisbury Plain; when he first saw the ancient stones he was suffused with 'a feeling of recognition' and 'the intuition that I had been there already'. His music is instinct with that sense of belonging, so that the act of listening to it becomes a form of home-coming.

It has been remarked of Delius and his contemporaries that, through their works, 'a wave of nature-mysticism swept like a rushing mighty wind'.²¹ This great wave has been related to pagan nature worship and to elements of Celtic mythology, also; the possibilities of English music spring from the distant past, and can be expressive of it. But if the material is innate and instinctive, it must constantly be refashioned or refined. Thus in his Third Symphony, known as *The Pastoral Symphony*, Vaughan Williams wished to touch upon that 'nerve of English mysticism' by which he hoped 'the psyche of the nation might be made whole'.²² His last symphony, completed shortly after he had set ten poems by William Blake for voice and oboe, is filled 'with an

inner light' and a sound both 'unearthly and enigmatic'.²³ It is the inner light of the English tradition and the English imagination.

His understanding of that tradition was informed by his twin passion for folk-song and for Tudor music. He loved madrigals just as much as he loved 'Bushes and Briars' because he found in both of them an authentic, if unanalysable, English note. His deepest instinct was to draw both of them together in a music rich with harmony. He believed that the formal or ecclesiastical music of the Tudors drew its energy and strength 'from the unwritten and unrecorded art of its own countryside', and his purpose was to restore that grand symbiosis. 'There was a time', he once wrote, 'when England was always reckoned a most musical nation' and he wished to replenish his native culture with fresh melodies.

It has often been remarked how, in the music of Delius, the plangent harmonies convey an intense and intricate sense of loss or transience; it is an intrinsic part of the English imagination, first evinced in *Beowulf* and the Arthurian cycle. Warlock's 'Corpus Christi Carol', based upon an old English carol, contains 'a plaintive liquescent chromatic harmony of unutterable desolation'.²⁴ It is associated with lost childhood and the fugitive memory of the child's landscape is related to the concept of innocence, precarious and fragile. The melancholy of Vaughan Williams's music 'set it apart from that of the continental masters',²⁵ and it may be that the island itself manifests the sadness of long-endured human occupation with all the cares and woes that it brings. Thus the music of Delius has a characteristically English tone which sets him apart from, for example, Mahler or Strauss – with its often searing nostalgia . . . 'its ever-frustrated yearning . . . its understated dreamy melancholy'.²⁶ It is aligned with the 'sense of weary desolation' attendant upon certain English songs of the thirteenth century,²⁷ and 'the undertone of intense sadness' glimpsed in Vaughan Williams's setting of the songs of A. E. Housman.²⁸ Pleasure and melancholy, lyrical beauty and desolation, are thus uniquely aligned in true English synthesis.

Another line of national music was continued by Vaughan Williams when he agreed to be the musical editor of *The English Hymnal* as an alternative to *Hymns Ancient and Modern*. He knew well enough that sacred music was one of the great glories of English composition, and that Tallis and Byrd and Dunstable were acknowledged to be the finest masters of their time. So, engaged upon his twin pursuit of reclaiming Tudor polyphony and folk-music as the true native arts, he fashioned a

hymnal directly out of these elements. His concern was once more with the tradition. Church music provided the only consistent and continuous musical inheritance, however bowdlerised and inhibited it had become, and Vaughan Williams wished to revive it by incorporating 'tunes' by Lawes and Tallis as well as carols and traditional folk-melodies. When he took a psalm tune from that hymnal and composed his *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*, he created 'the ultimate expression of the English soul in music'.²⁹

The sacred music of the past can be restored to life in more than one sense. Vaughan Williams received his first inspiration for the masque of *Job*, for example, from Blake's series of illustrations to that sacred book. Throughout his life he evinced a profound regard for Blake and the tradition of visionary writing in English, encompassing Bunyan as well as Herbert, Shelley as well as the King James Bible. His own visionary powers, intimated in the great symphonies, were enlarged by his reading of the English visionaries; he had pondered over Bunyan's pilgrim for fifteen years before completing *The Shepherds of the Delectable Mountains*, and thus associated himself with a tradition of ancient religious dissent and radicalism even while remaining for all intents and purposes an atheist. He could not escape his national inheritance, however, and his religious music is some of the finest ever created.

There are other elements of Vaughan Williams's native artistry which may be adduced here by way of explanation and interpretation. There is the question, for example, of his detachment and reticence. 'I don't know whether I like it,' he remarked of his Fourth Symphony, 'but it's what I meant.' Of another orchestral piece he said, 'Do what you like with it. Play it backwards if you want to.' All this was said in the context of his overwhelming artistry and professionalism. Pevsner has already noted this detachment as an intrinsic element of the English imagination. It is not a question of false modesty but, rather, a genuine aversion towards claiming too much. When a contemporary composer acknowledged that he had written a piece of music 'on his knees', Vaughan Williams replied that 'I wrote *Sancta Civitas* sitting on my bum.' It seems, like much in Vaughan Williams, to be a 'typically' English remark, eschewing any expression of deep emotion and siting the real strength of purpose in his posterior. It has all those elements of practicality and common sense which are considered to be characteristic, as well as a faint sense of earthy or ribald humour which comes (almost literally) with the territory.

Another example of his temperament has been explored by his friend and interpreter Michael Kennedy, who has remarked that 'at rehearsal and in performance his concern was always with technical matters . . . and never with the emotional content of the music'.³⁰ This emphasis upon the practical and pragmatic is wholly comprehensible in the English context, as is Vaughan Williams's taciturnity or diffidence concerning 'the emotional content'. He was not given 'to probing into himself and his thoughts or his own music'.³¹ We may say the same of other English artists who have prided themselves on their technical skills and are decidedly reluctant to discuss the 'meaning' of their productions. Thus Mr Kennedy believes that the Sixth Symphony must have represented 'a deeply-felt, personal and impassioned utterance' precisely because Vaughan Williams's own programme-note 'studiously avoids any hint of emotional commitment'.³² It is, once more, a question of English embarrassment.

There is in Vaughan Williams's work what has been described as 'a preoccupation with sonorities',³³ which may in turn be related to what one musical historian has called 'the English love of fullness of sound'³⁴ first noticed in the twelfth century. That fullness of sound, touched by melodic beauty, is a distinctive passion in Vaughan Williams just as it is in Purcell or in Tallis. We read of certain extant manuscripts where 'the English added their characteristically acute sense of vocal sonority' which could become 'a special concern for euphony (for which they were later to become especially noted)'.³⁵ It became apparent, too, in the employment of several lines of harmony meeting and parting in a musical structure like that of interlace.

That particular reverence for harmony might be variously interpreted at an aesthetic or social level; the English predilection for compromise and moderation, after all, is an aspect of the 'golden mean'. The rich harmonic texture of Vaughan Williams's music may thus be associated with the 'harmonic forces' of Purcell's compositions and the 'slow-moving harmonies' and 'fullness of instrumentation' in Elgar³⁶, or it may be related to a more primitive need for harmonious order arising from various competing elements. In either sphere, it is the true music of England. In 1994 the most acclaimed of contemporary English composers, Thomas Adès, completed a string quartet entitled *Arcadiana*; its most poignant and lyrical movement, the sixth, was entitled 'O Albion'.

EPILOGUE

The territorial imperative

And so the English imagination takes the form of an endless enchanted circle, or shining ring, moving backwards as well as forwards. I return again to Ford Madox Ford – returning being one of the central images of this book – who wrote that ‘my private and particular image of English history in these matters is one of waving lines. I see tendencies rise to the surface of the people. I see them fall again and rise again.’ These ‘lines’ of force or influence connect the present with the past. We draw half our strength and inspiration from the writers of the past. From their example we learn that the history of the English imagination is the history of adaptation and assimilation. Englishness is the principle of diversity itself. In English literature, music and painting, heterogeneity becomes the form and type of art. This condition reflects both a mixed language comprised of many different elements and a mixed culture comprised of many different races. That is why there is also, in the products of the English imagination, a characteristic mixing or blurring of forms; in these pages I have traced the conflation of biography, or history, and the novel.

The English have in that sense always been a practical and pragmatic race; the history of English philosophy, for example, has been the history of empiricism and of scientific experiment. There are no works of speculative theology, but there are many manuals of religious instruction. This native aptitude has in turn led to disaffection from, or dissatisfaction with, all abstract speculation. The true emphasis rests upon the qualities of individual experience, which are manifest in the English art of portraiture and in the English novel of character. The English imagination is also syncretic and additive – one episode leading to another episode – rather than formal or theoretical.

So there are many striking continuities in English culture, ranging from the presence of alliteration in English native poetry for the last two thousand years to the shape and size of the ordinary English house. But the most powerful impulse can be found in what I have called the territorial imperative, by means of which a local area can influence or guide all those who inhabit it. The example of London has often been adduced. But the territorial imperative can also be transposed to

EPILOGUE: THE TERRITORIAL IMPERATIVE

include the nation itself. English writers and artists, English composers and folk-singers, have been haunted by this sense of place, in which the echoic simplicities of past use and past tradition sanctify a certain spot of ground. These forces are no doubt to be found in other regions and countries of the earth; but in England the reverence for the past and the affinity with the natural landscape join together in a mutual embrace. So we owe much to the ground on which we dwell. It is the landscape and the dreamscape. It encourages a sense of longing and belonging. It is Albion.

