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History in Rags: Adam Thorpe's Reworking of England's National Past

But from what can something from the past be saved? Not so much from the contempt and disregard into which it has fallen as from the particular way in which it has been handed down. The way in which it is celebrated . . . as our "heritage" is more ominous than any oblivion.

Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*

In Adam Thorpe's second novel, *Still* (1995), the narrator Ricky Thornby—a failed film director who is obsessively reconstructing a period from his grandparents' lives just before the First World War—imagines his grandfather, Giles, standing on the swampy playing field of "an incredibly unpleasant boarding school . . . and gazing at this scrappy little oak wood under drizzle and thinking how he might just spot Pan cavorting in there on his hairy goat-legs." "My grandfather's view of the world," Ricky says,

> is basically a lot of England divided between the shallow bits and the deep bits. The shallow bits can be anywhere and so can the deep bits, but generally the deep bits need to have trees or at least some kind of shady greenery except that there's a view of the downs near Hamilton Lodge with nothing but a few juniper bushes on it and a lot of sheep plus shepherd . . . of which the bottom has definitely not yet been sounded.
>
> (378–79)

Ricky's reflections on "deep" England are a fitting entry point into the imaginary geography of Thorpe's fiction, and into his interest in reworking the versions of Englishness that this geography sus-

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tains. As well as suggesting that the "deep" bits of England—those parts that are felt to be the most deeply, quintessentially English—are those parts of it where the countryside is seen through the lens of the pastoral tradition, they offer a specific site for that "deep" England: the "South Country" of rolling chalk downland, where both Hamilton Lodge—Giles's family's country house—and the village setting of Thorpe's first and third novels, Ulverton, are located.

His interest in "deep" England places Thorpe in the company of a number of other contemporary writers, including Graham Swift, Pat Barker, Julian Barnes, Margaret Drabble, Kazuo Ishiguro, and V. S. Naipaul, in whose work Englishness and its histories are examined and rewritten. Their work is born out of a sense, growing since the late 1950s, that English identity is in crisis—a crisis connected to the end of empire, the devolution of power within Great Britain to Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, European integration, and the disintegration, from the mid-1970s onward, of the postwar political and social consensus in favor of a managed economy and a comprehensive welfare state. The Thatcher government's attempts in the 1980s to revivify an implicitly English version of (Great) Britishness only served to highlight the extent of social division and conflict. Writers dealing with England in the 1980s and 1990s, therefore, are frequently preoccupied with the violence that lies just beneath the surface—and often not even that—of an Englishness habitually represented, in the twentieth century at least, as tranquil and unchanging.[1]

Thorpe's approach to Englishness is that of one who is simultaneously an insider and an outsider; born in Paris in 1956, he was brought up in India and Cameroon as well as England and moved to France in the early 1990s. Perhaps as a consequence, Thorpe seems to be acutely aware—as Naipaul is in *The Enigma of Arrival*—of England as an idea and Englishness as an identity both desired and rejected, never simply or automatically possessed. Thorpe's novels enact an agonized, ambivalent relationship to the English histories they tell or, in the case of *Still* and to a lesser extent *Pieces of Light* (1998), are unable to tell. What troubles these narratives

1. As Paul Langford has shown, Englishness had quite different connotations in earlier centuries, being associated with both restless dynamism and a propensity to violence (29–82, 137–48).

above all is the violent history hidden at the heart of the South Country ideal of England, and the melancholic paralysis this unacknowledged violence has bequeathed to contemporary Englishness. It is a theme announced in Thorpe's first, and for many still his best, novel, *Ulverton* (1992), whose twelve linked sections represent the conflicts of 350 years of English rural life.[2]

The village of Ulverton is an invention—almost. There is no place of that name in England now, but it would appear that this was, until the late eleventh century, the name of what is now Newbury, in Berkshire, which in the novel is nearby; in the post-Conquest period, the old village was replaced by a "new borough" that was intended to be a focal point for trade in the area.[3] Thorpe's choice of this site of displacement and dislocation for what he has termed in an interview "a crystallization of Englishness" ("'I Don't See'") signals *Ulverton*'s critical distance from the version of twentieth-century Englishness, enshrined in Britain's heritage culture, that looks nostalgically for the true England in an unchanging rural past; the novel, as I shall try to show, undertakes a historical materialist reworking of England's national past that exposes the centuries of violence—war, imperialism, enclosure, and exploitation—in and from which that Englishness was made. Thorpe does not, however, take the seductively easy route of denying the appeal and power of the countryside and the literature in which its beauties have been celebrated. *Ulverton* enacts a melancholic mixture of nostalgia and critique, a complicated, deeply ambivalent work of mourning for an idea of England that it cannot not want.[4]

2. As well as *Ulverton*, *Still*, and *Pieces of Light*, Thorpe has published three collections of poetry (*Mornings in the Baltic* [1988], *Meeting Montaigne* [1990], and *From the Neanderthal* [1999]), another novel, *Nineteen Twenty-One* (2001), and a collection of short stories, *Shifts* (2000). He has also written radio plays for the BBC.

3. "Ulvritone" is recorded in the Domesday Book as the name of the manor (the territory belonging to the local lord) within which Newbury was founded by the Norman Arnulf de Hesdin (see Gelling 257–59).

4. I draw here and elsewhere in this essay on Freud's distinction in "Mourning and Melancholia" between "melancholic" and "normal" mourning: in melancholia, Freud argues, the processes that should lead to the gradual withdrawal of the mourner's attachment to the lost object are blocked, either because of ambivalence toward that object or because of traumatic experiences associated with it (257). As Jean Laplanche has argued in "Time and the Other," however, the distinction between mourning and melancholia that Freud sought to make is very difficult to maintain, and we should instead recognize varying degrees of melancholia in every process of mourning.

While evoking a landscape and its forms of rural life with sensuous concreteness, the novel's twelve sections, and their disparate, irreconcilable voices, resist the reader's attempts to construct from them a whole and harmonious history, offering instead a national narrative in fragments—a history in rags.

For much of the twentieth century, "to be truly English . . . was," as Brian Short puts it, "to be rural," and not only rural but of the "South Country" (2). From one perspective, this South Country construction of Englishness is a continuation of the long-standing habit in English literature, described by Raymond Williams in *The Country and the City*, of setting up an idealized rural life as a standard against which to measure, and criticize, contemporary life. But the South Country is also a product of more specific social, economic, and political conditions. In the late nineteenth century, English rural nostalgia seems to have taken a recognizably modern shape. Alun Howkins argues that the waning of British industrial strength—centered in the north of England—and the increasing emphasis on imperial commerce saw economic and political power shift to a London-based, commercial middle class with close links to the landed aristocracy. It also fueled anxieties about national "degeneration" and about the overextension and diffusion of Englishness in the theater of empire (64–67).[5] In this context, the increasing prominence of the South Country in the English imaginary can be understood as establishing what Pierre Nora calls a *lieu de mémoire*—a site where, as a defence against the corrosive impact of a critical awareness of historical change and contingency, a society's sense of identity, tradition, and continuity "crystallizes and secretes itself" (7).

Edward Thomas's 1909 book *The South Country* did much to develop and promote this site of cultural memory. As Thomas tells his readers on the book's opening page, he took his title from a poem by Hilaire Belloc, which compared the "sodden and unkind" Midlands most unfavorably with "the great hills of the South

5. Ian Baucom argues that, by creating what he calls "a global theater of address" for Englishness, imperialism destabilized the very idea of Englishness: as "English" spaces—cricket fields, public schools, and clubs, for example—proliferated across the globe, the English lost control of their "own" places of identity (38–39).

Country" (1). But whereas Belloc was thinking largely of Sussex and the South Downs, Thomas says that his book will include "all that country which is dominated by the Downs or by the English Channel, or by both. . . . Roughly speaking, it is the country south of the Thames and Severn and east of Exmoor, and it includes, therefore, the counties of Kent, Sussex, Surrey, Hampshire, Berkshire, Wiltshire, Dorset, and part of Somerset" (1–2). Its characteristic landscape is that imagined in *Still* as deep England:

> East and west across it go ranges of chalk hills, their sides smoothly hollowed by Nature and the marl-burner, or sharply scored by old roads. On their lower slopes they carry the chief woods of the south country, their coombes are often fully fledged with trees, and sometimes their high places are crowned with beech or fir; but they are most admirably themselves when they are bare of all but grass and a few bushes of gorse and juniper and some yew, and their ridges make flowing but infinitely variable clear lines against the sky.
>
> (2)

As Howkins has noted, there is embedded in this landscape a particular historical and social vision, of "continuity, of community or harmony, and above all a special kind of classlessness" (75–76), a vision embodied in the archetypal countryman Lob, from Thomas's own poem of that name, who may be "poor Jack of every trade" (line 134) but also "Wedded the king's daughter of Canterbury" (106) and, as the twentieth century opens, is "a squire's son / Who loved wild bird and beast, and dog and gun" (43–44).[6]

Such a vision requires what Williams describes as the dissolution of processes of change and relations of exploitation into a landscape (46), and Roger Scruton's recent *England: An Elegy* both makes clear the social vision at stake in this reading of Englishness and provides evidence of its persistence. The "inimitable patchwork" of the English countryside, with its hedgerows, combes, and villages, is, Scruton asserts, the correlative of the "English settlement" (148): "the outward sign of [the] inner unity [of the English]," of "the negotiations and compromises that healed the

6. David Gervais also notes Lob's classlessness, although he sees more complexities in Thomas's poetic evocation of England than does Howkins (28–66).

wounds of conflict, the overarching law-abidingness and the sense of belonging and ownership which redeemed the accidents of nature" (85). This vision of the countryside does not exclude labor; indeed, David Gervais suggests that, after Wordsworth, hard manual work—as long as it was *rural* work—became an intrinsic part of literary Englishness. Gervais goes on to note, however, that this emphasis on work on the land came at a time when industrial and not farm labor was increasingly the norm in England. The apparently greater realism of post-Wordsworthian pastoral therefore masks its immobilization of a changing countryside—specifically, its presentation of change as recent rather than continuous, and as a fall from a timeless and authentically English way of life (3–4).[7]

Many writers struggled against this nostalgic tendency, of course. Hardy's later novels, for example, are far from an idealized evocation of a timeless old Wessex, and, as Gervais demonstrates, Edward Thomas's poetry, if not his prose, often seems to recognize that the Englishness he is seeking is elusive, perhaps as much literary as "real" (28–66). Such doubts are generally absent from popular elaborations of the South Country ideal of England, however. More typical are the sentiments expressed by Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin in his 1924 speech to the Royal Society of St. George, later published in his collection *On England*. Baldwin wonders "what England may stand for in the minds of generations to come" if its fields continue to be converted into towns and asserts, "To me, England is the country, and the country is England" (6). Baldwin evokes the true nation through a series of sounds, sights, and "imperishable scents" (6):

> The sounds of England, the tinkle of the hammer on the anvil in the country smithy, the corncrake on a dewy morning, the sound of the scythe against the whetstone, and the sight of a plough team coming over the brow of a hill, the sight that has been seen in England since England was a land, and may be seen in England long after the Empire has perished and every works in England has ceased to function, for centuries the one eternal sight of England.
>
> (7)

7. Gervais sees Wordsworth's "Michael" as exemplary: in this poem, the England of the solitary shepherd, "though seemingly immemorial, . . . is in reality dying out" (3).

Baldwin's speech exemplifies the "injunctive politics of return" that Ian Baucom sees as crucial to the English imagination from the second half of the nineteenth century onward (176). Labor is done by a "plough team," as natural and eternal as "the corncrake on a dewy morning." Baldwin's response to the threat posed by industrialization and urbanization, moreover, is to look for the reassertion of Englishness in symbolic returns to the country "home" through that very English pursuit, gardening, or through the making of new "homes" in Britain's overseas Dominions (8). The rural English "home," it seems, might need to be secured by dispossessing others.

Patrick Wright, Robert Hewison, and others saw a similarly questionable "injunctive politics of return" in the growing popularity of "heritage" in 1980s Britain. Wright, whose *On Living in an Old Country* remains one of the most persuasive critiques of Britain's heritage culture, grants that this culture responds to a genuine need for answers to "crucial questions which are experienced in everyday life and *which remain open*—questions of historicity, political and cultural authenticity or freedom" (254). But the answers that heritage provides to these questions, he argues, tend to be reactionary, even "jingoistic and racist" (255), rejecting the realities of Britain's increasingly multiracial and postindustrial present and seeking to consolidate British national identity around a mythic, English, "national past"—an England that he, like Ricky in *Still*, calls a "deep England" (81–87). Britain in the 1980s, in Wright's view, sought to recover this lost, authentic England not only through military adventure in the South Atlantic, but also through the fetishistic "appreciation and protection" of its heritage: predominantly "the edifices and cultural symbols of the powerful, structures of stone rather than wood, the official rather than the makeshift and vernacular," although, as in industrial museums or museums of daily life, the heritage industries were perfectly capable of incorporating these, too, into a unified national narrative (78–79).[8] As I will discuss further, Wright's analysis of the ills of heritage culture is substantially indebted to the work of Walter

8. For a less negative view of heritage culture, see Samuel.

Benjamin. Most notably, his characterization of heritage as presenting a timeless and monumentalized national past, a history "frozen solid, closed down and limited to what can be exhibited as a fully accomplished 'historical past' " (78), rephrases Benjamin's critique of the perception of history as a continuum, leading smoothly to the present, for the way that it robs the present of a sense of its own historical potential ("Theses").

Thorpe's reference in *Still* to the "deep bits" of England, and his avowed desire not to add "another brick" to "the great edifice of English heritage" but rather to "*subvert* the pastoral" ("One"), suggest that he was well aware of the debates about England's national past that were at their peak at the time he was working on *Ulverton*. And it is in the light of these debates, I would suggest, that his representation of South Country Englishness can best be understood.[9] *Ulverton* is neither the "celebration" of changes "reconciled by continuity" that one reviewer saw in the novel, nor the nostalgic lament for "the passing of the old ways" identified by another (Wollaston, Bilston).[10] On the contrary, it is a text that, by introducing a different kind of history, a different mode of memory, into the nostalgic national *lieu de mémoire* of the South Country, seeks to destabilize the inward- and backward-looking version of Englishness that this memory-site sustains—an Englishness based on a fantasy of a settled, classless, and conflict-free rural society. The very fact that even positive reviews were able to read the novel as simply nostalgic or celebratory, however, is testimony to the difficulty of the task Thorpe set for himself.

Ulverton's reworking of pastoral and heritage representations of Englishness stresses the conflicts that have produced the "eternal" countryside. The first section, "Return: 1650," opens in the troubled aftermath of the Civil War and deals with the murder, by his wife

9. Thorpe says that he "conceived of the whole idea . . . about six years before it was eventually published, and then wrote the first story, and started on the second, and then gave up for a couple of years," indicating that the composition of *Ulverton* took place between 1986 and the early 1990s, the period when the heritage debates were at their height (" 'I Don't See' ").

10. Interestingly, Thorpe feels that reviewers in the United States, France, and Germany were quicker than British reviewers to see the novel as an interrogation rather than a nostalgic evocation of Englishness (" 'I Don't See' ").

Anne and her new husband Thomas Walters, of a local man, Gabby Cobbold, who has come back to the village after years as a soldier, and with the guilt of the narrator, the shepherd William, at not having foreseen the murder and done something to prevent it—guilt that is compounded by his subsequently embarking on a sexual relationship with Anne. "Return" owes much to the ballad genre: a beautiful woman with crow-black hair, married to another when her husband is thought to be dead; her descent into madness; and his tragic return and murder. But these ballad elements run up against details that situate the story in a particular political, economic, and social history, such as Gabby Cobbold's involvement in Cromwell's Irish campaign, Anne's refusal to be churched after her third child was born until the magistrates fined her (11), William's encounters with the occasional "passing vagrant without his certificate cadging a day's work" (7), and his master's enthusiasm, beginning about that time, for breeding new types of sheep (10).[11]

In conventional nineteenth- and twentieth-century English pastoral, as Gervais has argued, details of rural life often give an illusion of particularity while presenting rural England as—until recently—ancient and unchanging (3–4). In *Ulverton*, however, details of rural life and labor register the impact of ongoing political, social, and economic change on individuals and on the local community. Thorpe shows how the demand for greater productivity and profitability led to more intensive land use, and to the concentration of land ownership through enclosure and the buying-out of smaller farmers by large landowners: the Chalmers family, owners of Ulverton House, progressively enlarge their estate at the expense of the assiduously "improving" Farmer Plumm of the novel's third section and of the laboring poor, who lose their rights to common land and in at least one instance their homes as well. He also stresses the responses of the poor to the increased social stratification and landlessness that these changes brought about, responses that range from poaching—significant in both "Dissection:

11. "Churching" was the ceremony performed a few weeks after a child's birth that allowed a woman to enter a church once more. Certificates restricted rural laborers' ability to move in search of better-paid work; without a certificate recording their former master's approval, they were not legally allowed to seek employment elsewhere.

1775" and "Stitches: 1887"—to the "Captain Swing" machine-breaking riots of the 1830s which are the subject of "Deposition: 1830."[12]

The trajectory of Ulverton House illustrates both Thorpe's historical interests and the novel's perspective on contemporary heritage representations of rural England. In "Leeward: 1743," the Chalmerses' fortune depends on their overseas business interests as well as on the Ulverton estate; with their finances under pressure because of Lord Chalmers's family's involvement in the South Sea Bubble, they are squeezing their tenants in order to pay for the renovation of the house and the landscaping of its grounds—a project that also requires the buying-up of Plumm Farm and the destruction of several cottages (92–93). This section makes explicit the connections between the rural "heart" of England and the empire with which it was increasingly entwined, in the person of the slave whom Lady Chalmers inherits from her aunt, named "Scipio" and then—because "Scipio" is the name of Lord Chalmers's stallion—"Leeward," after the island he came from (85, 90). One hundred and sixty years later, the house sinks into decline after the last Chalmers-Lavery goes down with the *Titanic*, reaching its nadir when, like Brideshead, it is used for military purposes in World War II (242, 285–86). Its fortunes then begin to improve, however, due to the postwar rise of what Evelyn Waugh famously called the "cult of the English country house" (10). The eleventh section of the novel, "Wing: 1952," sketches the forces that combined to create this cult: Waugh-parody Herbert Bradman's elitist nostalgia for a time before the "vulgus" took control (258), his put-upon secretary Violet Nightingale's earnest, aspirational enthusiasm for the beauties of the English landscape and English architecture, and her desire for imaginative escape from the drab reality of postwar En-

12. Williams's *The Country and the City* may be acting as a frame here. Notably, *Ulverton*'s third section, "Improvements: 1712," seems to be a specific reference to Williams's discussion of the eighteenth-century concern with intensified land use (60–67): Farmer Plumm's desire to increase the productivity of his land, and secure his estate for posterity by getting an heir, parallels the interest—in novels by Henry Fielding and Samuel Richardson, for example—in what Williams calls the "morality of improvement," and the Chalmerses' later purchase of Plumm's farm exemplifies the fate of small farmers who did not have access to sufficient capital to compete with large landholders.

gland. Significantly, Violet does not see the "long and systematic" process of "exploitation and seizure" (Williams 105) that created Ulverton House, nor does she see that, for Bradman, she is one of the "vulgus" by whom its beauties, and those of the system that created it, can never be properly appreciated; instead, she sees a "huge sad temple" to a better past that was destroyed by the war (285). This misrecognition of what Ulverton House represents is subsequently confirmed by its preservation by the National Trust as a symbol of a generic national past (320).[13]

Thorpe attempts to disrupt this national past by allowing, as he himself put it in an interview, "voices that have been suppressed or are suppressed even now, when you look at history, to have their say" (" 'I Don't See' "). Most of *Ulverton*'s eleven narrators (its twelfth section is a film script) are, by virtue of their class or their gender, marginal to dominant histories, and where they are not, their perspective is undercut by the presence within their narrative of a resistant other. Thus, in "Friends: 1689," the skepticism of the Quaker-sympathizing congregation is implicit in the expostulations of the Reverend Crispin Brazier, as he tries to explain his survival of the blizzard in which his two companions died, and, in "Deposition: 1830," the testimony of the Captain Swing rioters breaks into the young lawyer's complacent and self-interested letters to his "dearest Emily." The overall effect of Thorpe's painstaking imitation of period voices goes beyond the introduction into national history of marginal perspectives, however. Although the reader is invited to construct a history from the twelve narratives—by attending, for example, to the family names that reappear throughout the text, and to the events whose outcome is revealed in passing in a later story—it is not possible to make Ulverton's history whole: some questions, such as whether or not the Reverend Mr. Brazier did steal his dying companions' clothes, can never be answered. And in denying us this whole, completed history, *Ulverton* turns the nostalgic site of national recollection and re-

13. The National Trust was founded in 1895 to protect land and buildings of historic interest and beauty. After the Second World War, the Trust instituted a "Country House Scheme" to secure the preservation of houses whose owners could no longer afford to run them (see Hewison 51–79). On the popularization of the countryside between the two world wars, see Potts, and Taylor 120–51, 182–211.

demption into an altogether more troubling memory-space, where formal fragmentation and irreconcilable voices mark the site of what Robert Colls has described as "the forgotten war of English politics"—the battle over ownership and control of the land (224).

In *Ulverton*'s final section, "Here: 1988," Thorpe presents an England trapped in a debilitating combination of nostalgia and amnesia. The moment is the high point of the 1980s property boom, in which demand for housing for executive commuters, and a lack of incentives for developers to build low-cost housing for rural workers, turned many rural communities into the site of what the House Builders' Federation called "a bloody battle" over development (qtd. in Ambrose 179). As Peter Ambrose has observed, this battle was about the nature of rural communities in the future—whether they would become, in effect, wealthy suburbs of nearby cities or would develop as demographically and economically mixed communities able to meet the employment and social needs of all their inhabitants, and in which growth was balanced with environmental objectives.[14] The conflicting voices of the script that forms the text of "Here" dramatize this debate and demonstrate how different visions of Ulverton's future draw on different constructions of its past. As John Fowles suggested in his review of *Ulverton*, however, their "tired and debased" language, frequently collapsing into cliché, also suggests that contemporary England, even where it attempts to resist a purely materialistic attitude to its heritage, is in some way "self-torpedoed" by its reliance on nostalgic versions of Englishness which prevent the establishment of any vital and creative link to the past.

Clive Walters, the developer who is building a new subdivision on the outskirts of Ulverton, has no nostalgia for his farming ancestors' "[b]loody awful life" (324). For him, the past is of interest primarily as a surface, a heritage or country *look* that increases a property's commercial value. He retains the exteriors of converted buildings and builds "traditional cottage-style" houses (338), because this is what sells: to businesses for whom a scenic rural envi-

14. Ambrose comments that Berkshire, where Ulverton can be imaginatively located, was particularly affected by the 1980s boom in speculatively built owner-occupied housing (188).

ronment is "the best marketing tool we could possibly have" (339), to "real-ale types" and those wanting "the office-lunch-type do in the country" (355–56), and to families looking for "luxury homes in an exceptional countryside location," homes with evocative names like "Balmoral," "Windsor," and "Westminster" (367–68, 336). Those opposed to the developments tend to resort to the language or mood of South Country literature: their feelings for the landscape, however genuine, can find expression only in the trite commonplaces of nostalgia for a better, more authentic past. Enid Bradman, for example, mystifies both the village's and her own history in rhapsodies over "[m]y bit of England forever part of me" and the "eternal hills" (327–28), while Sally Caird, a recent arrival from London who was drawn to Ulverton for the lifestyle and doesn't want it contaminated by "more cars, and more gadgets, and the whole urban thing," couches her nostalgia in the language of the New Age: "Barrows, stone circles and . . . really beautiful strange patterns in the corn, made. And the old people. The old skills" (346). Both she and the local historian Ray Duckett feel that the "quiet of village life" and its "history too" are "all going" (317–18). It is not only newcomers who feel this, however: the older villagers sitting in the New Inn also have a sense that the past is finished, and the "real village" with it (340–45).[15]

In "Here," the fragments of recent history are indiscriminately absorbed into an amnesiac "heritage," as in Clive Walters's renovation of the New Inn, which replaces old oak furniture with a conglomerate retro look involving wagon wheels, "repro sewing tables" and "bentwood seating," a photograph of the village men lined up to enlist for the First World War, and "some very nice hunting prints with brass spots all but thrown in" (354, 377). But the material remains of Ulverton's past do nonetheless seem to hold out the possibility of a different remembering, and so, perhaps, of what Wright would call an "active historicity" in the present (70): the question is how this possibility can be released.

15. The idea that the real England is "all going" cannot but refer us to Philip Larkin, especially to the fear in "Going, Going" that there might not "always be fields and farms, / Where the village louts could climb / Such trees as were not cut down; . . . That before I snuff it, the whole / Boiling will be bricked in / Except for the tourist parts— / . . . And that will be England gone" (lines 3–5, 38–40, 44).

This section of the novel turns on the discovery, during the building of Walters's subdivision, of the skeleton of a soldier—probably Cromwellian, in the assessment of the local archaeological society, and clutching a bit of silk ("Ribbon?") (358–59). The skeleton prompts an imaginative act of reworking that undoes nostalgic returns to a safely picturesque, idealized South Country. "Here" reveals that the first section of *Ulverton*, "Return," is a fiction constructed by "Adam Thorpe," a "local author and performer," in response to the discovery of the soldier's skeleton, and that it is at least partly a protest against the subdivision: "Thorpe's" choice to call the villainous second husband "Thomas Walters"—a name he somewhat disingenuously claims simply to have taken from the oldest legible stone in the graveyard—is no accident (330, 379–81).[16] The discovery of the skeleton poses the question of whether, and how, the past might, as William puts it in the opening paragraph of the novel, stand up again to haunt us (3). But because "Return" is presented as a fiction, written from "Here," it poses this question in terms of something other than a literal return of—or to—the actual truth of the past. Rather than "closing the circle of the book with a satisfying rattle of bones," as John Banville suggested in his review of the novel (24), the effect is to open up the novel's present to an enigmatic but insistent history whose effects continue to be felt but whose meaning is uncertain. The relationship between "Here" and "Return" also suggests that we need to understand the novel's constructed pasts in the light of present concerns, shifting all the texts that make up the novel into this uncertain mode of imaginative historical engagement whose aim is to replace a "monumental" or "settled" heritage with a living sense of history in the making.

I have already suggested that Wright's critique of Britain's heritage culture in the 1980s, with which *Ulverton* has clear affinities, is grounded in a Benjaminian desire to open up the present as a site of radical possibility. The "active historicity" called for by Wright

16. Thorpe suggested in an interview that this revelation makes retrospective sense of the fact that, whereas the other sections of the novel are written as careful imitations of the language of their period, "Return" is much closer to a conventional realist style, with only occasional ventures into dialect (" 'I Don't See' ").

recalls Benjamin's desire, as expressed in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," to "blast open the continuum of history" (254)—an objective to be achieved, he wrote, by attending to the fragments of the past, producing an illuminating "constellation" of past and present in order to allow the past's unfulfilled possibilities to infuse, and blast open, the present moment ("Theses" 255). As subsequent commentators have argued, Benjamin aimed not to represent the past "the way it really was" ("Theses" 247), but to exhume its "lost (or murdered) possibilities" (Bauman 76), "to expose the jagged edges by which we may clamber beyond the slippery blocks of a monumentalized past" (Wohlfarth, "Measure" 19). Benjamin had a variety of names for this method—collecting, montage, quoting without quotation marks, rag-picking—but all are ways of expressing his intention not to "tell" a history, thereby recuperating the past back into a continuous narrative and closing off its potential once more, but simply to "show" it, allowing the disjunctions and tensions of particular constellations of past and present, contained in the material fragments of the past, to explode the experience of history as a continuum, as progress (W. Benjamin, "Fuchs"; A. Benjamin; Wohlfarth, "Et Cetera?").[17]

If *Ulverton*'s representation of the England of 1988 owes much to an implicitly Benjaminian critique of England's heritage culture, so too does its response to this particular historical moment bear analysis in Benjaminian terms. Like Benjamin's, Thorpe's is an aesthetic of violence, which aims not only to make visible the processes of exploitation dissolved into the English landscape, but also, in so doing, to break open its present. A wish to expose the violence obscured by the vision of England's "inimitable patchwork" produces an aesthetic of the fragment and of the collage or patchwork—what Thorpe describes as "putting things up against each other," making "a collage of things of the past or contemporary things," so that "the two sort of jangle together" ("'I Don't See'"). *Ulverton*'s twelve sections are fragments or scraps, seem-

17. Max Pensky argues that Benjamin never really resolved the question of whether his work of montage or rag-picking constructed history or revealed it; the relationship between "Return" and "Here" suggests that *Ulverton* tends toward the former understanding of its representation of English history.

ingly torn out of their era and reassembled in a temporary constellation. Each section, moreover, is itself a patchwork, quoting other texts, for the most part without quotation marks, in order to deploy them in a different collage of Englishness.[18]

"Treasure: 1914," for example, is written from the vantage point of the late 1920s and tells the story of the impact of the Great War on the village, through an account of the narrator Fergusson's involvement in an archaeological dig organized by the local squire in the summer of 1914. The story's archetypal countryman Percy Cullurne could be another avatar of Edward Thomas's Lob, and its lush pastoral tones and nostalgia for all that was "withered and changed . . . for ever" by the war (214) recall the work of interwar rural writers and Great War memoirists such as W. H. Hudson, Edmund Blunden, and Siegfried Sassoon. "Treasure" also critiques this nostalgia for a lost England, however. Its central recruitment scene reveals the quasi-feudal bullying involved in signing up "volunteers" in 1914, justifying the cynicism of Sassoon's 1918 poem on the same subject, "Memorial Tablet," and Cullurne's decision to "bide at home" refuses Thomas's celebration of English countrymen at war ("Lob" 138–41). More disturbingly, perhaps, "Treasure" also suggests that the Ulverton that Fergusson mourns was never really there: it was first a dream of "home" that sustained him through his years in the Indian Civil Service, and then a vision of a world destroyed by war.[19] Collectively these different materials, uncomfortably "jangling together," suggests that it was as a defensive response to the traumatic displacements of colonialism and war that the pleasurable melancholy of twentieth-

18. Leaving out the quotation marks, Andrew Benjamin argues, was important for Benjamin because retaining them recuperates the quoted material back into a continuous, linear history, neutralizing its difference and its disruptive potential (242–43). Compare Thorpe's distinction between pastiche or parody, both of which also retain ironizing quotation marks, and imitation ("'I Don't See'").

19. Michael Gorra comments: "[T]he Raj's fantasy of Englishness stressed the compensatory coziness of a country as unlike the empire as possible—an England all chintz and cottages and weathered Cotswold stone that seems to have been there always. It was the dream of 'Home,' the green and pleasant land, that district officers and their wives nourished around the globe and then attempted to create when they retired to Cheltenham or Tunbridge Wells" (165).

century English pastoral, the romance of an England always lost or vanishing, established itself.

Similar disjunctions in the following section, "Wing," work to open up to scrutiny the consolidation of this Englishness during and immediately after the Second World War. As I have already suggested, this section responds to Waugh's assessment in *Brideshead Revisited* of the state of England in the wake of World War II; there is a good deal of Waugh in Violet's employer, Herbert Bradman, a pompous, reactionary cartoonist for *Punch* who, hoping to transcend "the dross of our so-called 'civilisation' " and "the material shards of a lesser world," is writing his memoirs for burial in a time capsule (299).[20] Bradman's overvaluation of his own talent and significance is treated as comic, as are the villagers' arguments over the appropriate way to celebrate "our new Elizabethan era of streamlined speed & efficiency" (294) and, up to a point, Violet's misplaced faith in Bradman's genius, her dogged daily recording of the weather and the food ("Cold, sleety. Spam" [261]), and her fondness for "Don Carlos & his Samba Orchestra" and Cherry Heering (259). But "Wing" takes a darker turn as Violet's diary entries plot her psychological disintegration—a disintegration caused, on one level, by Bradman's affair with Miss Enid Walwyn, but more fundamentally by Violet's half-recognition that she has been misreading her place in the England with which she has identified so strongly.

Violet, a lower-middle-class northerner, grieving for a boyfriend who "[p]ranged on ops" (259), has attempted to displace her grief and make a place for herself in Ulverton not only by identifying herself with Bradman's "Project," but also by adopting the South Country Englishness promoted by interwar countryside writing and the ideology of the "People's War." Her cultural aspirations are both sad and comic: she does not know her T. S. Eliot or her Elgar (279, 297–98) and is given to secondhand, anodyne reflections on eternity ("Makes you think" [280]), interspersed with com-

20. After one encounter with Bradman's bad temper, Violet compares him to Waugh: "At least I'm not working for Mr. Evelyn Waugh, I always tell myself, after what Gladys Unsworth passed on that time. Pure poison, she said" (262).

ments on her bunions, her digestion, and her circulation problems. But looked at from another perspective, Violet is the embodiment of the English virtues as popularly constructed during the People's War: a belief in "comradeship and cooperation, dedication to duty and self-sacrifice, a self-deprecating good humour and unselfconscious modesty" (Richards 106). If we are tempted, therefore, to dismiss her modest cultural and social aspirations as only bathetically to be compared with the poet's flight "on the viewless wings of Poesy" (Keats line 33), then the implication arises that we are siding with Bradman, for whom she represents "that trivial and clogging stuff we call 'daily life' " (299), and with the betrayal of some of the more utopian hopes of the People's War.

If, as I have suggested, we can see *Ulverton*'s patchwork aesthetic as a Benjaminian tactic for breaking open the present bequeathed to us by tradition, one of Benjamin's models for historical work in particular seems to illuminate the novel's approach to England's national past, that of historical work as rag-picking. Attention to the literal appearance of rags in the novel helps to elucidate both the kind of history it wishes to tell and the inseparable question of how that history needs to be told. Their first appearance is as the "ball of old ribbons that had long ago been red" that Gabby Cobbold brings back from the wars for Anne (6); by the time these ribbons reappear in "Here," clutched in the hand of the nameless skeleton, they have become saturated with contradictory associations. They are the "filthy rags of righteousnesses" that Mr. Kistle casts off (perhaps) in "Friends" (40); the discarded clothes of the London poor, stinking with "smoke from the city, as well as . . . general poverty," that Plumm buys by the cartload (62); and the "soil-caked garments" that the photographer imagines being "soaked and scrubbed" in "Shutter: 1859" (177). They are also, however, the "crimson sattin" waistcoat that Anne Chalmers asks her lover to buy (89); the crimson silk wallpaper, "cut . . . to ribbons in one place," that Violet discovers on her visit to Ulverton House (286); and the red ribbon that Clive Walters cuts to open his subdivision (366). The deterioration of cloth into rags is, to be sure, a metaphor for the movement toward oblivion that characterizes the passage of time in general. But the proliferation of associations around the rags/ribbons/cloth motif—and I have cited only a few

examples here—generates tensions that prevent any recourse to consoling notions of the common fate of rich and poor, tensions that instead tear English history apart. The violence of this process is expressed in the way that people themselves are reduced—literally or symbolically—to rags or scraps that "improve" the land. In a subversive appropriation of Eliot's "East Coker," John Pounds, the tailor, is "claved into more bloody pieces nor be athin [a] pegrug" and fattens the corn with his "red juice" (208), while the bloodstained rags of London's poor, "chopped to an inch square then scattered at the second ploughing" (58), sweeten the soil in "Improvements."[21]

While *Ulverton*'s rags figure the violence that is overlooked in heritage constructions of England's countryside, another of its motifs, bedwine, or old-man's beard, seems to symbolize a Benjaminian sense of the unredeemed potential of the past.[22] In "Return," bedwine is associated with thwarted love and with missed opportunities to break with the repetitive tearing of the village's history in the pursuit of "improvement": when William wistfully calls the bedwine plumes falling in Anne's hair each autumn her "crown of silver" (19), she does not respond, perhaps recalling her wish, years before, to adorn her hair with ribbons—a wish that sent Gabby away to war (6). Bedwine also stands for the possibility of resistance to exploitation and the future redemption of what has been lost. The "wood . . . much given over to bramble and bedwine and pernicious shrubs" in which Farmer Plumm finds "[his] maid and a newish labourer . . . tupping as the beasts do" (61), for example, represents the propensity of those through whose bodies he wishes to consolidate his wealth—specifically, the maid he is paying to bear the heir his wife has not been able to provide—to subvert his schemes. Most notably, bedwine figures prominently in "Deposition," where, as the nickname (Captain Bedwine) given to John Oadam, the local leader of the machine-breakers, who wears "a crown of Bedwine . . . wound about his head" (164), it carries a strongly Benjaminian sense of the failed potential, which nonetheless refers

21. See Eliot's celebration of the "Mirth of those long since under earth / Nourishing the corn" (1.38–39).

22. Bedwine and old-man's beard are names for the wild clematis.

to a possible future "redemption," of the rebellion (Benjamin, "Theses" 245–46). Asked "to remove his Crown of bedwine for it was unseemly, and he was no King, not even a Captain," Oadam answers, "No it bee only plumes of seed that must be planted on the wind" (164). It is to all these moments, and to the possibilities they contain, that we are referred by the "bedraggled 'old man's beard' in hedge" in "Here" (372).

In rags and bedwine, therefore, are encoded both what lies beneath the surface of deep England and the possibility of its transformation. To understand the combination of love, loss, and violence that *Ulverton* inscribes in the heart of England, however, we need to consider the novel's ninth section, "Stitches: 1887," which is, I think, the conceptual and emotional heart of the novel. It is written as the interior monologue of Jonas "Hoppetty" Perry, once a ploughman and now, in his old age, the part-time gardener for a Mrs. Holland. It gradually becomes clear that Jonas is addressing Mrs. Holland's son, Daniel, whom Jonas loved and who died of a "dang flammation on the bellowses" in his first term at Eton (197), and that it traces a walk they used to take around the fields of Ulverton. Jonas's path includes places that are familiar from earlier and later stories, such as "Little Hangy," "Gore patch," "Frum Down," and "Bayleaze," and his monologue covers, as if in response to the boy's often-repeated questions, many of the events from the other sections of the novel: "old Shepherd Willum" and the witch (or ewe) (203), the destruction of the laborers' cottages to make the "bloody wilderness" around Ulverton House (201), and the Captain Swing machine-breaking riots and their aftermath (202–3). It also reveals the fates of some of the characters from the earlier stories: the photographer from "Shutter" died of an unnamed illness (198–99), while Mr. Irvine Leslie, B.A. and John Pounds, tailor, were murdered (206–8).

Jonas's tracing of the village's physical space, and the remembering it prompts, are obsessive, melancholic acts. His narrative proceeds in a series of circles, which begin with a reference to the place through which he is passing, get drawn into harrowing remembrance, and then attempt to return to some emotional equilibrium as he registers his surroundings and exhorts himself, or Daniel, to keep moving. These circles are the path of his repeated approach

toward and then evasion of the central cause of his grief: the degree of his responsibility for Daniel's death. His love for Daniel is mixed with hostility toward the privilege he embodies, producing a deeply ambivalent mourning that cannot acknowledge the extent to which he may have wished for the boy's death. Mrs. Holland believes that her son caught pneumonia because Jonas kept him out in the rain on the last walk they took together before he went away to school, and although Jonas says it was "that old Eton shop jus broke [Daniel] a-two nowt to do wi' that laas stroll" (204), there is a sense that he does not quite believe this himself and is now repeating that "laas stroll" as if to get Daniel home unharmed; the story ends with Jonas telling the dead boy, as he did not tell the living one, to get home quickly out of the rain: "don't thee bide in the wet no longer Master Dannul nope nope maunt lope about wi' this here cluttery weather an you lookin all peeky boy hup yea up bloody buggerin hell oh off wi' thee back home dreckly minut boy yea up this here dreckly minut" (209). Daniel's death has, in a sense, fulfilled Jonas's wishes: to keep the boy to himself and to take revenge on "they Lordyshits" (201). Had he gone to Eton, Daniel would have been transformed into a "scholard" and a "toff" (204, 195), after which there would have been no more "rollin no hoops athurt no peonies nor strollin athurt no coomb agin wi' Hoppetty" (193)—unless it is as "a cloud o' bedwine plume" Jonas might "catch in the corner o' [his] optics now an agin" (193). Because Daniel is dead, "them buggers" won't ever "cotch" him: he is "old Hoppetty's own now" (203).

Jonas's grief and guilt cannot be properly articulated or recognized: his wife offers him "Dinneford's Magnesia for the heartburn" (193), while Mrs. Holland won't have him "blubberin," for it "don't look right wi' a rake," and burns the feathers the old man and the boy had collected together "like they was dirt" (195). He is therefore condemned to rehearse his loss and rage over and over, a repetition that calls up and repeats all the other cruelties of this "sturvin stinkin world" (195): "winters wi' out a stick to rub" (198), his cousin Littler Moses killed by a trap for poachers while acorning (200), dinners of "rooks corn fluff" while the Chalmers-Laverys were "eatin their bloody heads off" (202). Jonas is unable to "disremimber" any of this (201): his memories of his own and

the village's history inhabit and torment him, like his "dang rheumatics," a "blasted gate hinge," or the "wind pokin in an out o' my hide like it were wantin to sew my shroud out o' myself," a wind which "en't never blowed no remimberin off" (208–9). And he is unable to translate this obsessive, painful, bodily remembering into anything that would redeem his or the other villagers' sufferings. The bedwine seeds set free by John Oadam in "Deposition" have come to nothing: the rebellion was "all for nowt" (203), and life, for everyone other than "they Lordyshits," is "jus about a sop in sour grease" (201), a repetitive cycle of labor in which one year is "stitched up an med be as the next year do be aready threddlin its bloody needle" (207).

Coming immediately before "Treasure"—the point in the novel when the South Country ideal takes hold—and alluding to much of what has gone before, "Stitches" is *Ulverton*'s clearest expression of the violence and loss that Thorpe believes have not been given voice in heritage constructions of England's national past and in what he has called "straight English pastoral" ("One"). Jonas's "remimberin" both asserts the place of the voice of labor in "high" art and challenges the integrative memory of rural history in Thomas's "Lob" (58–78). Whereas Lob's naming of English places is a benediction calling England into being, Jonas's is the muttered curse of the archetypal silent laborer of English landscape painting and poetry—the ploughman who, as John Barrell observes, endlessly "ploughs a straight furrow towards an ever-receding horizon" (50). His melancholia and the violent, fragmentary history to which it testifies, the text seems to suggest, are what return in Violet's mental disintegration at the end of "Wing," and what underlie the paralysis of "Here." But if this is so, we must ask under what circumstances this melancholia and violence could, or should, be left behind.

As Irving Wohlfarth has argued of Benjamin's metaphors for historical work, there is undoubtedly a risk that embracing an aesthetic of violence to expose and undo oppression and suffering will lead only to the fetishization of violence ("Smashing" 205), or, to put it another way, to melancholic repetition rather than transformation. Martin Jay has argued, however, that Walter Benjamin's rag-picking practice entails a deliberate choice of melancholia, a

systematic refusal to "progress" to mourning, because mourning would bring about a premature symbolic closure of the wounds of modernity. Benjamin, Jay suggests, wanted to keep those wounds open in order to preserve the possibility of real awakening and transformation. And *Ulverton*'s melancholic rag-picking also seems to be a response to a powerful national impulse toward premature closure of the wounds of social conflict and change, manifest, as suggested earlier in this essay, in the burgeoning heritage culture of the 1980s. On this reading, we could attribute the novel's melancholia to a sense that too quick a movement toward mourning and reconcillation—"[healing] the wounds of conflict," as Scruton would have it (85)—would reinstate the "English settlement" naturalized in the landscape of the South Country. But it also derives, I would argue, from the ways in which *Ulverton* itself is caught up in the historical problem it addresses. A large part of what the novel would, but cannot, mourn is its own attachment to the compromised "cultural treasures" of England's heritage and its literary tradition. These treasures are compromised because, as Benjamin argued, they "have an origin which [the historical materialist] cannot contemplate without horror," owing their existence "not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries" ("Theses" 248). Benjamin's horror, it should be noted, is intensified by the fact that these treasures remain treasures despite his attempts to "[view] them with cautious detachment" (248), and *Ulverton*'s efforts to redeem the "anonymous toil" of those who created the "eternal" beauty of the English countryside are similarly compromised by its attachment to that landscape and its literature.

Much of *Ulverton*'s interest, and its power, comes from its fidelity to this ambivalence—its dedication to "working out a love that," as William puts it in "Return," "is caught like a ram in brambles and must be cut free only by the hand of Death. Or it will tear something from you" (10). Eschewing parody in favor of a more ambivalent and compromised imitation, and choosing to include himself among the incoherent, hamstrung villagers of "Here," Thorpe refuses to disavow his love for England's patchwork beauties but equally refuses to allow that love to become a form of settlement, a home. If its melancholic, redemptive violence is to

succeed in reducing "deep" England to rags, however, *Ulverton* also needs to prevent the history it writes from becoming monumental or finished in its turn. This it attempts to do not only through the gap it opens up between "Here" and the reading present—even when the novel was first published, "Here" was four years out of date—but also through the recycling movement it enacts from "Here" to "Return," in which the novel returns its many texts to the space of imagination, consigning its own patchwork to the fertile rag-and-bone yard of history.

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