

## Writing the Nation at War: George Orwell, Alan Ross and Sidney Keyes

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In the wartime poem “Sensations of Land,” Alan Ross imagines his nation drowned like Atlantis beneath the sea his destroyer is sailing across. In an act of desperate nostalgia, the nation rises from the depths, surfacing as in the remembering mind:

Sometimes, miles out, you get  
A sensation of land, as if somewhere  
Deep down a valley was surfacing—  
The sea seems to heave contours  
Of green out of itself  
And you watch fields and forests  
Being salvaged like wrecks. (Ross 45)

What also surfaces here is a faint allusion to Marvell’s “The Garden,” where the mind, “that ocean where each kind/Does straight its own resemblance find,” annihilates “all that’s made/To a green thought in a green shade.”<sup>1</sup> The sea in “Sensations of Land” seems to generate its own self-reproducing green thoughts, the resemblances of memory-images surfacing from a mind desensitized by a culture-annihilating war. The sea’s heaving surge visually recalls the rolling English landscape, but the resemblance is, as it were, salvaged from the mind rather than being in any way ontologically available as vision. Marvell’s extraordinary statement of early modern subjectivity is translated into a questioning of the uneasily indeterminate status of the ideal nation in the minds of patriotic belligerents. The land the millions are defending is a metonymic trick (green waves—green forests and fields), a wishful act of rhetoric (“as if”, “seems”), something potentially unreal (like Atlantis), a form of *trompe-l’oeil*, or a myth patched together from the ruins of English culture’s dreams of the past (“salvaged like wrecks”).

Marvell's rich solipsism is summoned up to the poem's surface as the fantastic origin of this myth of English patriotism, the Platonic old England within the mind withdrawing from politics into prelapsarian, feudal lordship over landscape and language. But Ross's allusion measures the distance from Marvell's seventeenth century confidence in, and discovery of, the mind's creative subjectivity. Ross's "you" is stretched uneasily across towards the reader, but also across the line-ending, the gap between writing and representation miming the gap between writer and addressee, gaps at once temporal, geographical, cultural and typographical.

Marvell's poem is nostalgic too, for prelapsarian Eden—"that happy garden-state" (443). Prewar England surfaces as Ross's Eden:

I imagine a man whistling  
To his dog, someone pruning shrubs,  
The sounds of a cricket match.  
A pub door shuts on faint music.

The "man" and the "someone" are both potentially Ross's prewar self, but the impersonality carefully distances the remembered from the rememberer, just as we are not quite sure whether Ross is being shut out from, or shut in with, the faint music. The "I", through such a manoeuvre ("I imagine a man"), is inhuman, a modernist impersonal textual mark, calling back to its embodiment like the man whistling to his dog. The poem raises the ghost images of traditional English village life as the determining features of a grounded patriotic selfhood, yet they seem indistinguishable from superficial cultural clichés, resembling those served up to foreigners. War has seemingly dislocated its defenders not only geographically from home, but also from the ontological grounds of the possibility of subjectivity.

There is real dubiety, then, in Ross's third stanza, which, on its surface, seems as if it were positing a reclaimed notion of the idea of the nation at war:

It is just such fantasies that mean  
England is not after all  
A figment of our deprivation,  
But a landscape with outriders  
Bringing real consolation.

It is unclear whether “fantasies” is working here in its 17th-century sense of Platonic idea, or its more ruefully sceptical post-Freudian sense. Either way, the stanza’s prose sense is ambiguous—how can fantasies possibly mean that a notion is not a figment, since fantasies are, however one interprets them, figments of the imagination? The paradox is potentially ruinously self-cancelling, pleonastically asserting that figments mean that England isn’t a figment.

Other obfuscations clutter the lines. Line-endings have already been shown as potentially cruelly divisive technical features of the patriotic lyric. Here, taking lines singly decreases their optimism. “It is just such fantasies that mean”, taken on its own, might be interpreted as meaning “It is only fantasies that have any significance in this war”. “England is not after all”, read in isolation from its context, unready admits to the non-existence of the nation being fought for. The wit in “A figment of our deprivation” seems to be defending the belligerents from the charge of wish-fulfilment in their patriotic dreams of home, but the line just as dangerously makes a cultural icon out of the war’s waste, making the privation it causes the source of creativity (by virtue of substituting for the Romantic imagination.)

The last lines of the stanza are similarly strung up on their own ambiguities. England’s landscape sends out consolatory patriotic memories of home to its far-flung warriors, the lines superficially say. Yet the term “outriders” is slippery to say the least. Its main sense seems to be the *avant coureurs* of a noble retinue, thereby repeating a Marvellian hinted drama (the aristocrat sends consoling letters to his family abroad, dislocated from the garden.) But more modern senses to “outrider” conjure up the military motorbikes riding in front of an army, or chief of staff—this seems to me to imply propaganda, or coded military orders to the outflung troops.

The collocation of landscape and outriders cannot fail to allude to Hopkins, though. Hopkins defined outriding syllables in sprung metre as syllables added onto to ordinary metrical feet, i.e. superfluous unstressed syllables.<sup>2</sup> His instress and inscape theories linked visionary contacts with nature to the techniques of writing. If we write this allusion into Ross’s poem, the last two lines of the third stanza seem to be saying something like: “England is the source of true inscape and significant stresses, but as a centre it distributes secondary, unstressed messages to its readers, marginalized by the war”. Ross’s

poem is written in loose free verse with each line running across a fluid number of unstressed syllables to centre on three-beat key stresses. For instance:

It is just such fantasies that mean  
England is not after all  
A figment of our deprivation,  
But a landscape with outriders  
Bringing real consolation.

The uncertainty of this free verse format lies precisely in whether there are really three beats in each line. The last two lines may have more outriding feet, reducing the regular three beats to two:

But a landscape with outriders  
Bringing real consolation.<sup>3</sup>

What has all this got to do with culture? The real difficulty lies in how superfluous the images of home sustaining the displaced patriot seem. Are these images of *nostos* fabricated by propaganda, are they true images of memory, or tricks of facile rhetoric and poetasting metaphor? If they are outriders to the home culture, then they seem to be all three at the same time. As *avant coureurs* they mimic true representations of the home culture. As military *avant garde*, they signal coded propaganda. And as Hopkins's supplementary unstressed syllables, they turn back into features of poetic writing, enacting difficulties of utterance as well as representing uncertain supplementarity as such.

The poem's last stanza brings Ross's divided discourse to a head:

Indigo dusk. Stokers, wiping grease  
From their fingers, take the night air,  
Throwing waste to the gannets.  
Indiscriminate in their appetites,  
They dive, as deprived as we are.

The sea-birds are turned into scavengers by the well-meaning war machine, feeding on the machine's waste products. They are also, according to the time-

honoured conventions of sea-poetry, figures for the mariners who serve the war-ship. The cultural appetite for nostalgic consolations is suddenly figured as indiscriminate scavenging for the waste products of war, as though the green visions of home on the waves were fabricated by the destroyer's slick.

But the real turn of the screw is surreptitiously revealed in this last stanza. It suggests that running through the poem, against its self-consolatory purposes, is fear of the enemy. However much Ross wills the poem to be about the belligerents' attachment to the patriotic idea of the nation, what generates its metaphors is an unconscious fashioning by the enemy abroad, under the waves. For what is really under the waters is precisely *not* England as Atlantis, but the German U-boat. The poem's nostalgia represses this fact with its fantasies of the home country, but the fact surfaces nevertheless. We hear drowned allusions to the submarine in "as if somewhere/Deep down a valley was surfacing," "The sea seems to heave contours," and "They dive, as deprived as we." What dives and surfaces in the sea is the submarine, and it is the submarine's contours that haunt the poem, unconsciously shaping (from somewhere deep down beneath the surface senses of the lines) the contradictory movements of the poem, which all keep the mind off the image of the Allied ships sunk by the U-boat and in some unimaginable future being "salvaged like wrecks".<sup>4</sup>

"Sensations of Land", then, writes the nation as impossible Platonic anamnesis. The idea of the nation as fabricated memory image is then further defined as that which effaces the true source of patriotism in war culture: the enemy. It is the German submarine which is fabricating the consolatory fantasies of England that attempt to sustain the war effort in the belligerents' deprived imagination. The outriders of the patriotic lyric of the Second World War are supplementary ornaments that echo, like secret radar, off the contours of the enemy war machine. They enact desperate ontological manoeuvres away from the absent source of all war poetry: abject fear.

The destabilizing of the idea of the nation is clearly not simply a matter of local engagement with enemy forces, of course, but part of a long cultural history that steadily unpicked the strands of Britain's imperial discursive formations. The internationalism of left-wing politics in the Thirties had remorselessly attacked the ideology of the nation state. What made the Second World War particularly unsettling was its ideological vacuum, despite the seeming clarity of the purposes behind the struggle against German fascism.

The Nazi-Soviet pact had effectively deprived poets of an ideological international centre from which to speak out, thereby simultaneously depriving them of the natural habitat of the modernist avant-garde (Ross's "outriders" may also be mischievously read as a trope for the avant-garde.) Further to these political considerations was a generalized uncertainty about ideology as such, an uncertainty which had been generated by horror at the First World War, but which was massively underwritten by disillusionment at the outcome of the Spanish Civil War. Many poets just simply gave up the idea of a public voice altogether. As Ross writes in "A Letter from Sea": "Now we know uncertainty to be strength,/Certainty weakness, except when a show of strength/Is important" (Ross 18), where the weak, muddled and repetitive syntax, along with the feeble autorhyme, simultaneously enact and lame the defence of uncertainty.

The certainty of weakness in an ideological vacuum can best be gauged by looking at that most wily certain of intellectuals, George Orwell. In 1940, George Orwell published a long essay on cultural politics, "The Lion and the Unicorn", in which he essentially argues for a Socialist revolution as the only way of winning the war—the Revolution meaning the introduction of a planned economy, with nationalised industries, democratic education and a phasing out of the British Empire. The argument is based on a complex analysis of the class system in Britain, Orwell notably theorising the working-class as the true representatives of Englishness. English life is anti-aesthetic, anti-intellectual, essentially private and relatively free of fanatical ideology, with the working class as the true patriotic centre of the nation.<sup>5</sup>

He is well aware of the dangers of essentializing national traits: "I have spoken all the while of the 'nation,' 'England,' 'Britain,' as though 45 million souls could somehow be treated as a unit." But this acknowledgement is used only to move the argument on to consideration of class difference ("is not England notoriously two nations, the rich and the poor?"), differences which the sudden emotional unity of Dunkirk had shown to be secondary to a deep-seated patriotism:

England is the most class-ridden country under the sun. It is a land of snobbery and privilege, ruled largely by the old and silly. But in any calculation about it one has got to take into account its emotional unity, the tendency of nearly all

its inhabitants to feel alike and act together in moments of supreme crisis. (Orwell 67)

That Orwell is thinking of Dunkirk here is made clear later in the essay: “The English revolution started several years ago, and it began to gather momentum when the troops came back from Dunkirk” (90).<sup>6</sup> It is the war that for Orwell will bring about the Revolution for basic economic reasons—capitalism is revealed to be at odds with national interests since its stress on private profit cannot be reconciled with a shift to a war economy — “To prevent war material from reaching the enemy is common sense, but to sell to the highest market is a business duty”(82).

But more importantly, war accelerates historical change:

War is the greatest of all agents of change. It speeds up all processes, wipes out minor distinctions, brings realities to the surface. Above all, war brings home to the individual that he is *not* altogether an individual. (94)

War here is a hermeneutic agent, interpreting the nation, revealing its essential nature, constructing its communal identity.<sup>7</sup> The key phrase here is “brings realities to the surface.” The surfacing of the true nation recalls Ross’s surfacing submarine England. What war brings to the surface, for Orwell, is England as its working class.<sup>8</sup>

Orwell is careful to distance working class patriotism from Fascist or right wing ideologies of the nation. To do so, he stresses its unconscious nature: “In the working class patriotism is profound, but it is unconscious” (65). It is this unconscious force which must come to the surface of public life: “It is only by revolution that the native genius of the English people can be set free [...] What is wanted is a conscious open revolt by ordinary people against inefficiency, class privilege and the rule of the old” (86). The patriotism of the working class is the force that Orwell argues will bring the revolution about, for it is the force that not only constructs the nation as essential unity, but which will erase the difference between “private profit and public necessity” (84).

Orwell suggests that it is patriotism which transcends class conflict and therefore constructs the idea of England for natives— “the soundness and

homogeneity of England, the patriotism that runs like a connecting thread through almost all classes" (83-4); "Patriotism is usually stronger than class-hatred, and always stronger than any kind of internationalism" (64). But he expects this same unifying patriotism to bring about a revolution based on class conflict (working-class revolt against class privilege). This contradiction is conceivable because, during wartime, the privileged minority will be willing to surrender their privileges:

Patriotism, against which the Socialists fought so long, has become a tremendous lever in their hands. People who at any other time would cling like glue to their miserable scraps of privilege, will surrender them fast enough when their country is in danger. [...] Just because the English sense of national unity has never disintegrated, because patriotism is finally stronger than class-hatred, the chances are that the will of the majority will prevail. It is no use imagining that one can make fundamental changes without causing a split in the nation; but the treacherous minority will be far smaller in time of war than it would be at any other time. (94-5)

What unites the nation will be used to split the nation, and war, as hermeneutic agent of history, is the medium within which patriotic revolution can realise this violent contradiction. As such, at an abstract level, war *is* patriotism. War generates the idea of the nation, but it can also construct a rival future ideal, by forging a different community necessary for war.

The essential paradox in Orwell's writing on the nation, that it needs war both to crystallize its unity and to construct its future divisive ideal, is itself based on a contradiction centring on the surfacing metaphor discussed above:

England has got to be true to itself [...] The heirs of Nelson and Cromwell are not in the House of Lords. They are in the fields and the streets, in the factories and the armed forces, in the four-ale bar and the suburban back-garden; and at present they are still kept under by a generation of ghosts. Compared with the task of bringing the real En-



gland to the surface, even winning the war, necessary though it is, is secondary. By revolution we become more ourselves, not less. There is no question of stopping short, striking a compromise, salvaging “democracy,” standing still. Nothing ever stands still. We must add to our heritage or lose it, we must grow greater or grow less, we must move forward or backward. I believe in England, and I believe we shall go forward. (109)

The “real England” is the oppressed working class, submerged beneath the ghosts of the bankrupt governing class. This visionary England is historical, diachronic, an eschatological process, yet it is simultaneously a synchronic presence in the country, England as the working class collectivity. The Revolution is a surfacing of this visionary England, necessitating a raising of the consciousness of the working class, but also a replay of the English civil war (Cromwell) and of the war against Europe (Nelson) to create a hermetically closed nation, purified of its ghosts, at once a socialist England, and an English socialism.<sup>9</sup>

The contradiction here is between the nation as solid and homogenous unity (“we shall go forward”), and as submerged mystical ideal that divides the nation into patriots and ghosts. What will surface as the real England is a collective subject position which is future anterior, both in the future after the revolutionary war, and in history as the real submarine story of the nation. The real England is therefore an article of faith (“I believe in England”), as mystical as the idea of patriotism as defined earlier in the essay: “[Patriotism] is a devotion to something that is always changing and yet it is felt to be mystically the same. It is the bridge between the future and the past” (103). This faith in an unconscious real England is equivalent to faith in the real working class. It is equivalent to faith in patriotism, and faith in the war as agent of revolutionary hermeneutics. It is also equivalent to faith in popular culture itself: “The genuinely popular culture of England is something that goes on beneath the surface, unofficially and more or less frowned upon by the authorities” (59). These faiths rely on a construction of a submarine culture, patriotic, socialist, anti-authoritarian, anti-intellectual, secular and anti-European.<sup>10</sup> The nation is defined as endlessly deferred, an immanent ideal beneath the surface of the text of wartime England.

And it is the war which will be doing the interpretation that will bring the profound meaning to the surface of the text. What Orwell neglects to say, though, is that the war is the direct result of Fascist culture. Like Ross's secret submarine, it is Fascist culture which is the necessary agent. Orwell mystifies war as process of change, in order to keep this fact under the waves of his revolutionary rhetoric. Orwell lets it slip out, though, in his glee over the ideological uncertainty caused by the London Blitz:

After the French collapse there came something that could not be laughed away, something that neither cheque-books nor policemen were any use against—the bombing. Zweee—BOOM! What's that? Oh, only a bomb on the Stock Exchange. Zweee—BOOM! Another acre of somebody's valuable slum-property gone west. Hitler will at any rate go down in history as the man who made the City of London laugh on the wrong side of its face. [...] From that time onwards the ghastly job of trying to convince artificially stupefied people that a planned economy might be better than a free-for-all in which the worst man wins—that job will never be quite so ghastly again. (83)

The amazing conclusion is that the submerged Platonic idea of the socialist nation is brought to the surface by German fascism, as planned economy, as war culture. This, of course, is not to say that Orwell's England is Fascist, but to point out that the myth of the real England, in its impossible contradiction of divided-homogenous, future anterior deferral, is written by the war, and that the war is being written by revolutionary Fascism.<sup>11</sup> Real English culture, beneath the surface of the ghosts of official capitalist culture, is not only defined by, but written by, the enemy.

Orwell's dilemma is, I would suggest, not simply a difficulty with the coherence of his metaphors. And it is not only a consequence of his espousal of patriotism and "the emotional friction associated with the idea of war as an instrument of revolutionary change," as Smith argues (Smith 220). His dilemma signals the impossibility of any credible statement of the idea of the nation without an act of self-deceiving censorship regarding the dark influence of fascism on patriotic discourses. For if that self-censorship were to be

acknowledged by patriotic intellectuals such as Orwell and Ross, then something truly unbearable had to be taken on board, which was the unholy fact that expressions of attachment to a nation had been rendered obsolete by the new conditions of twentieth century warfare at the very same moment that they were sorely needed to pull that same nation through the war.

In August 1942, Sidney Keyes wrote "Seascape," a poem ostensibly about the country of the dead, a Symbolist site of yearning and loss. But its seascape now reads like a description of the drowned ideal England invoked by Ross and Orwell. The old Platonic England is Atlantis, and irrecuperably dead and gone:

Our country was a country drowned long since,  
By shark-toothed currents drowned:  
And in that country walk the generations,  
the dancing generations with grey eyes  
Whose touch would be like rain, the generations  
Who never thought to justify their beauty. (Keyes  
94)

The idea of the nation has become mythical origin, but an origin lost to history, cut off from the war generation, an obsolete dream of Kantian aesthetics. It exists in the present ("in that country *walk*") but a present unavailable to the living except as impossible eventuality ("*would be* like rain"). It reads like a poem about nostalgia, yet, with its mythical frame, turns out to be a poem about legends of nostalgia. Nostalgia itself is no longer available to thinking about the nation state, for the nation state in modern times has irrecuperably revoked its ideal status. Plato's *polis* is a text written in a dead language:

But we are now the gowned lamenters  
Who stand among the junipers and ruins.  
We are the lovers who defied the sea  
Until the tide returning threw us up  
A foreign corpse with blue-rimmed eyes, and limbs  
Drawn limp and racked between the jiggling waves. (94)

The lamenters are not the living but the dead, endlessly mourning the passing away of the ideal, weeping over the body of the heroic nation. Their nostalgia, mourning and loss are not ours, however. For nostalgia is a ritual that has itself passed away, drowned, like the *nostos* of the real ideal England, beneath the jiggling waves of the shark-toothed culture of ruthless war. The corpse of nostalgia is neither English, nor identifiably European, but foreign as a text in a dead language no one can read, not even the dead generations who mourn its past meanings. Sidney Keyes sings the elegy of ideal England, drowned beneath the currents of inhuman war, never to be recovered, never to be remembered, an ideology limp and racked beyond memory, beyond language, erased from the surface of our texts.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Marvell, "The Garden," *The Works of Andrew Marvell*, ed. Andrew Crozier (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1995), 74-75. Ross's stanza also visually resembles Marvell's 8-line iambic tetrametre.

<sup>2</sup> "*Hangers* and *outrides*, that is one, two, or three slack syllables added to a foot and not counted in the nominal scanning" *Poems* (1918), as quoted in OED Second Edition entry for "outride" (sense 3).

<sup>3</sup> Hopkins himself took great pains to indicate which syllables were outrides, but as the 1973 entry for "outrides" reads: "Without the help of these signals, there is little chance of the reader being able to distinguish between an 'outriding' and an ordinary foot."

<sup>4</sup> The U-Boat does surface in another of Ross's wartime poems, "U-Boat in the Arctic": "Out of troughs and with slew/And heave of flanks like seal/Or whale the slack liquorice hull/Of a U-boat surfacing" (Ross 13). The "heave of flanks" is recalled in "The sea seems to heave contours/Of green out of itself" in "Sensations of Land."

<sup>5</sup> "The Lion and the Unicorn" registers a sudden change in Orwell's position on patriotism since 1939. For Orwell and patriotism, see Rossi, Katz and Smith. Orwell's friend, George Woodcock, has some personal reminiscences regarding Orwell's conversion to patriotism: Woodcock 196-205.

<sup>6</sup> For discussion of Orwell's views on Dunkirk, see Katz 103-104.

<sup>7</sup> Bernard Crick has shown how shockingly original Orwell was in relating social change to the influence of the two world wars: "Orwell thus first stated what has become another social commonplace of the Welfare State. Social

change owed more to the two World Wars than to the initiatives of Asquith and Attlee—a proposition that up until then would have appeared, and did appear to his old *Adelphi* associates, reactionary, Nietzschean nonsense” (Crick, *Life* 275).

<sup>8</sup> Smith argues that the England that resurfaces in Orwell’s polemical wartime writings is a nostalgic image of pre-1914 England (Smith 224). Though certainly true of Orwell’s sentimentality, Smith’s proposition does not explain the political implications of Orwell’s attachment to a secret England, which must, surely, be predominately concerned with the unrealised potential of the traditional working class.

<sup>9</sup> For Orwell’s definition of English socialism, cf. Orwell’s article “Fascism and Democracy” in the Victor Gollancz edited wartime volume of essays, *The Betrayal of the Left*, where Orwell writes that the English socialist state would be “both revolutionary and democratic. It will aim at the most fundamental changes and be perfectly willing to use violence if necessary. But also it will recognize that not all cultures are the same, that national sentiments and traditions have to be respected if revolutions are not to fail” (Gollancz 41). See also Crick, “English Socialism”.

<sup>10</sup> Left-wing critics were quick to remark on this dubious mix. Dwight Macdonald, reviewing ‘The Lion and the Unicorn’ in the *Partisan Review* in March 1942, called Orwell’s hostility to enterationalism and intellectualism in his new advocacy of patriotism “common-sense Philistinism” (Meyers 194).

<sup>11</sup> Malcolm Smith does believe that “The Lion and the Unicorn” is dangerously fascist: “the rather mystical view of the possibility of a specifically English revolution that he put forward in ‘The Lion and the Unicorn’ and so much of his other wartime work, came dangerously close to a political doctrine that one could call quite literally ‘National Socialism’ or, perhaps, ‘Socialism in One Country’ (Smith 219).

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