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CHAPTER ONE

The Literary Form of the British State

What is the jurisdiction of English Literature? Does English Literature have a common history? How is the 'national' use of English Literature different from that of other 'national' literatures? Is English in fact a national literature at all? What parameters, what assumptions might be important to historicizing the body of literary writing going under this name?

For the linked historical sketches which make up this book, there is a strong and mutually informing connection between the boundaries of the literary discipline – English Literature – and the boundaries of the sovereignty it describes – that of the British Union and empire. This book suggests that the disciplining form of English Literature has been founded – it has been *constituted* – in the form of the British state, and the experience which is interpolated as legitimate to it. (And it is crucial that English Literature is not, as we will see, the literature of England: on the contrary, English Literature relies on an ideal image of England which was always displaced into empire, and which is being made difficult by England's post-imperial return.) The modern British constitution and the discipline of English Literature have been mutually supporting: both arose from the need to bolster the informal state between the late seventeenth century and the dangers at the end of the eighteenth, and both came into question with the post-colonial unravelling of welfare consensus at the end of the twentieth.

The suggestion is that this mutual entwining has been an ongoing and accelerating process – but also that if the knit of English Literature and British constitution began to loosen between the 1950s (the end of consensus, the attrition of the imperial mission, the reworking of educational stratification, and the incursion of lived-experience into the literary canon) and the 1990s (devolution, democratic deficit, advanced neoliberalism, and the loss of a shared civility), it came even further undone with the financial panic of 2007–8. This book argues that in the absence of a codified constitution, between these dates English Literature continued to act as an informal or anti-formal constitution, but that the viability of English Literature as *constitutional culture* has fallen drastically, and may now be facing an insuperable challenge.

A cultural body has always been needed to present British authority as solid and unified, an unusual situation which has origins in the state's strong reliance on the integrity of the money form, and its corresponding need for the ultimate vesting of power in the parliamentary executive rather than the people – a constitutional principle which has nevertheless never been formally settled across Britain. The question has however become urgent since constitutional authority has recently been *seen to be* uneven across Britain's constituent nations, as it was for the nations of the British empire. From the inception of the British state at the end of the seventeenth century, culture has been charged with the ideological task of describing a common ground for the 'nation', understood in terms of ethnicity and empire. The apparently plurinational – and yet itself somehow national – state has relied on a displaced ideal of an England that can be continuously extended outwards – but this is not because of what used to be called 'Anglocentrism', as if England-the-place really did form a centre, but rather because of the cultural burden of holding together incommensurate constitutional authorities relying on its apparently most durable model, that is on a constitution 'settled' but open to perpetual informal modification. In this cultural sense, more than in any formal political sense, the United Kingdom can indeed be described as a 'unitary state'.

It is important in this context to see that a binding authority which depended on and was pushed by Britain's need for a dependable world currency (especially at the end of the seventeenth century) goes together with the avoidance of codification. 'British culture', the financial unification, has had this as its primary characteristic – the power to silently weld together the pre-existing sovereignties of Britain's nations – and its changing relationships within empire have had to be strictly anti-formal. And it is this anti-formality that gives the *literary* discipline its importance. Anti-formalism describes the unusual post-1688 establishment of Britain as a vehicle for imperial investment, rather than as a body based on, for example, ethnos or shared civil society.¹ The idea of a shared British constitution as more cultural than formal allows it to change 'invisibly', or ideologically, with tremendous subtlety, and especially in literature, through apparently natural processes.

Or put otherwise, the avoidance of present-tense and active experience which the anti-formal constitution demands has meant that *legal* principles of precedence have had to correspond to *cultural* ideals of precedence – or

heritage, or canonicity. The 'legal positivist' assumption which forms the backbone of the British constitution, insisting that what is right is what has always already been proven to be effective, is upheld primarily by a culture of continuity, and indeed by the 'shadow-codification' that is the literary discipline. Defined by the resistance to a formal written constitution, a unified Britain has been maintained through a cultural contest that I will also describe as *temporal*, as it is centred on the conflict between the present-tense inscription of experience and a form of 'precedent' which only exists outside history.

The argument here then is that, to an unusually high degree, the registration of history as experience is separate from and antagonistic to the state authority described by the British constitution and informally coded in English Literature. It is worth clarifying a point of nomenclature at the outset: here 'national' points to either the civil and affective elements of British life or, more likely, one of the four discrete areas which make up the United Kingdom. Most political scientists have long accepted that although made up of nations, the United Kingdom itself can't seriously be described as national.² The further step taken here is to suggest that the burden of ideologically 'nationing' Britain was undertaken *in the form of* English Literature. This is not to offer an alternative canon of English, or to identify some texts which are 'more' ideological, but rather to place the parameters of English Literature as broadly congruent to those of British government. The lack of the registration of experience is central here – the constitution and discipline under examination, especially in their 'high' forms from the start of the nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth, have been good at absorbing experience into a pre-existing form, and so at seeming ahistorical and universal.

Literary historians have struggled to date the 'origins' of English Literature in a number of ways. These will be addressed variously here, but by way of a beginning they will be seen to lie neither in the syllogistic terms of the first appearances of the phrase to describe university chairs, nor later in the (even more syllogistic) terms of ancient university departments taking on the name as a subject, but rather as somewhere between these two moments, in the constitutional bolstering of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, when a coherent set of cultural values was urgently demanded. It is significant that the counter-Revolutionary moment

of the 1780s–90s points back so strongly to that of the Hanoverian restoration or ‘whig revolution’ of 1688–9, a foundational moment for a unified Britain standing against those European systems which often seemed to be based on a threateningly formalized authority – rather than on the informality of markets.

There were signs of a growing body of study in and of English throughout the eighteenth century during which time the British financial sector also boomed – but for the purposes of this essay the *disciplining* of English with the rejection of a formal constitution rises from around the 1780s, and is concretized in the rejection of French and American codes as well as in the incorporation of Scottish, English, and Irish rogue elements in the 1790s–1810s. It is this period that sees English Literature behaving as a surrogate constitution. Faced with the need to reject the formalization of rights, the surrogate constitution had to be entirely informal and cultural, and based on the avoidance of action understood as the historical registration of experience. So while both constitution and literary discipline have often been presented in terms of a reverence for history construed as ‘the past’, something more like the opposite has been the case – what these institutions stand for has been the *avoidance* of history as experience, and so the avoidance of the past as past. The avoidance of history as experience is, in a quite fundamental sense, what *makes* the United Kingdom.

Recently, severe pressures have been brought to bear on the stability of British constitutional culture. For one thing, the informal (‘organic’) idea of franchise which rose at the turn of the nineteenth century has been devalued along with the devaluation of the idea of an exceptional and universal Anglophone civilization, which fell away gradually between the 1910s and the 2000s. For another, the era since the 1970s has seen a dramatic failure of the cohesive rationale of the British Union itself, which has accelerated in the latter stages of devolution in the late 2000s, bringing up the question of fundamental sovereignty differences. This has coincided with a widespread disaffection in the Westminster political class, who have been increasingly perceived across the parliamentary ‘spectrum’ as the managers of a discredited state-capitalism.

To engage in the long dating is also to go beyond seeing current malaises as a result of a new neoliberalism created sometime in the 1970s, the story with which the British left often consoles itself: while the post-1979 financial reinvention did make explicit the strengthening of some of the values of

the anti-Jacobin (1780s–1810s) era, in terms of sovereignty a ‘modernized’ counter-revolutionary culture goes back much further than the 1970s. A fortifying constitutional settlement can be perceived, in particular, beneath the gains of the welfare state from 1942, which demanded a strongly policed intuitive conception of a shared good giving rise to a more ‘total’ environment. This is an uncomfortable idea for the British left, but one increasingly borne out by the brittle constitutional settlement. The long fall of consensual sovereignty has correspondingly left English – with its basis in an imperial ideal rather than a place, in precedent rather than experience – with what we might call a ‘heritage deficit’, an unpayable cultural debt to an imaginary past. And the post-2008 era is a dangerous time to be carrying debt.

Indeed the turn of the 2010s saw a perfect storm approaching British constitutional culture: a maturing Scottish national self-determination movement with roots in popular sovereignty increasingly threatened to infect the entire UK; a failure of trust in the Westminster political class reached chronic levels; inequality and surveillance were seen to be integral parts of the policy of all major parties; and there was a premonition of debt which might never be fixed under the prevailing governmental structure. If the informal constitution was indeed cultural, could English Literature really retain the civilizing and universalizing shape it had had during imperial and consensual times? The 1980s and ’90s had already seen the political impact of the movement related to popular sovereignty, later known as the Scottish Literary Renaissance (a movement which doesn’t require knowledge as to the ‘nationalist’ politics of individual writers, as the hoary and misleading question has it) – and this would accelerate as devolution unwound towards the 2011–12 mandate for constitutional referendum. However – the registration of a desire for popular sovereignty became quite widespread throughout Britain after 2008, and can be seen in the student actions and Occupy protests of 2010–11, as well as in reactions to the tripling of university fees in 2012 in *one part* of the UK, troubling the apparent naturalness of the informal constitution and English Literature’s role in upholding it.

And yet the question of these impacts on the scope of English Literature is typically still strenuously avoided within the discipline itself. If anything, its foundations seem to have become more entrenched with the attrition of the ‘British national’ mandate: the conditions which have troubled the mission of English have also petrified it with the need to market itself as

a 'hard' subject (high entry requirements, stringent testing, demonstrable cultural capital, class prestige, apparent employability). At the level of canonicity – the ideal of a set of civilizing texts and classification – 'new' authors were already being added to university reading lists in an apparent act of multicultural bounty – with English still largely speaking in terms of heritage and universalized sensibility, even, or especially, when claiming to be 'reaching out'.

This desire to hold onto the 'hard' disciplinary term has left many in the field in a double-bind: to remain a coherent and saleable whole, the discipline has to deny any ruptures in its cultural governance, and yet it also has to claim a public significance, which stands at odds with the demands of heritage. And so a terrible burden has been placed on English Literature's unspoken forms of trust – whether understood in canonical, constitutional, instinctual, or financial terms. We can be sure that we are in problematic territory when the bond between trust and meaningful participation, even for an aspiring middle class, is *seen* to have been broken. And as university fees are almost tripled overnight for 'home' students, the understanding of home universalized to give English Literature its civilizing mission takes on an uncanny presence: to be a 'home' student in debt in England-the-place is now to be quite perceptibly alienated from the very 'experience' promised.

The troubles of 'British national' cultural authority have also been studiously ignored by a whiggish press which only reacts when absolutely forced, and which presents any registration of the national as a local problem.³ The press has also avoided criticism of what is perhaps the last ideological pin to fall in English Literature, that of state multiculturalism, which demands an expression of constitutional loyalty along with a declaration of 'racial' placement relative to an always-prior default which itself could never be defined (most prominently, 'black British' as a term which demands acknowledgement of a typology relative to an interpolated default plus allegiance to the neoliberal state). Nevertheless the cultural ground has shifted as constitutional questions have become re-territorialized, with ground-level criticisms of an ideal and interpolated centre which relates to no place. And the demonization of England-the-place, and indeed of any other sub-universal body, in the British press in the 2000s of course ignored the way the parliamentary left was often dedicating itself to saving the idea of British culture as *national*: Britishness, that is, has remained the ideally transparent and somehow wholesome form of nationalism.⁴

In this context, multiculturalism in particular was used to repeat the race-and-state typologies of the high-imperial era on which English Literature had thrived. It is perhaps unsurprising that in the area of the British Union retaining a serious attachment to popular sovereignty and a discrete civil society – Scotland – national experience has been less open to racination: by the mid-2000s, Asifa Hussain and William Miller were showing that Pakistani-born Scots were more likely to identify nationally than were their English counterparts.⁵ (This is of course not the same as saying that there is no racism in Scotland – of course, there is.) But a Scotland attached to popular sovereignty has become something of a location of desire for constitutional sceptics throughout the UK. Once a key and enthusiastic player in the expansion of empire, Scotland – largely echoing the historical place of Ireland – has come to crystallize the threats to British constitutional culture as continuation or canonicity.

Over the past two centuries, then, English Literature as a discipline has relied on its ability to congeal incommensurable constitutional models across UK nations. Although once confidently patrician and universalist, then reworked as a progressive traditionalism in the twentieth century, constitutional culture has been troubled by the material realities of the post-colonial era,⁶ after which it has only just clung on with the help of a parliament-oriented vested media. But a cultural drift from constitutional consensus has asked increasingly difficult questions about a unified informal franchise now widely perceived to be dysfunctional. As Michael Keating has long argued, if the UK really were a properly functioning plurinational state, each member would be able to conceive of itself as a constitutional entity without recourse to an imaginary whole – but this does not account for the missing ingredient of universalization, English Literature, reworked as a constitutional glue for troubled times.⁷

Today cultural defences against a territorial, present-tense England are rapidly crumbling,⁸ where until recently, the specificity of England was kept taboo via a multiculturalism which was able to present the constitution as universal and informal.⁹ Defences against the ‘territorial’ taboo in British parliament have come not only from the left (the Labour Party, which is in fact well to the right on any serious metric),¹⁰ but also from explicit conservatives, for example in the post-1999 rash of books on ‘Englishness’, every one setting out to *avoid* a recovery of English place while claiming to flag it up.¹¹ Despite these defences, during the final, post-2008, defence of

English Literature as British constitutional culture, the threats will be seen most clearly in England itself. David Goodhart has argued for contiguous political and national borders for England,¹² and recently Ben Wellings has suggested that the potential for the well-worn ascription to cultural Englishness has become politicized and open to self-determination – an initiative which I propose now exists throughout the UK.¹³

The threat of the return of territorial England against the universal meant that by the end of the 2000s ‘nationalism’ had to be strenuously demonized, even as an invisible UK nationalism was vigorously promoted. After 2008, the British National Party and similar organizations were useful for this, although (as these factions have themselves pointed out) many of their messages would until recently have been seen as British common sense.¹⁴ Facing the possibility of a Scottish referendum on independence, attempts to concede Englishness as itself national have been both belated and in fact still often avoided in territorial England itself (as in the recent ‘Blue Labour’ movement, propelled into the centre of the party, which has murmured about England the place despite remaining supportive of British parliamentary centralization, and being driven by a questionable fear of a Tory England).¹⁵

It is not coincidental that readings of a provincialized England have grown with post-colonial sovereignty scepticism: a sub-field of literary criticism separating a territorialized post-colonial England might be traced back to Ian Baucom’s influential 1999 book, describing England’s idealized displacement and the eclipse of the national as an affective entity.¹⁶ In 2003 Jed Esty made a comparable case for England as having been stretched out in imperial export then un-stretching.¹⁷ And yet neither of these important accounts were able to recognize English Literature as the cornerstone of British constitutional culture, implying that the state form responsible for empire could be stripped back to revive a core of England, although this core was precisely what had been eclipsed by empire. There is no formal analogy to ‘feeling more English than British’ (the ‘Linz-Moreno question’), that is, ‘feeling English’ still tends to revert to measurement of British voting patterns which are unable to account for the possibility of formal English agency. Surveys on Englishness should remember that modern England has *never* had national representation, making difficult casual assumptions about its affective culture.

For these reasons, we might return our understanding of the term *national* to a time before its co-opting by anti-Jacobin British constitutional

culture, especially the time when the current informal constitution had to be firmed up, using the cultural body of English Literature. The national might then be understood better in terms of cultural history than of the ‘self-creation’ demanded by Linz-Moreno, which is in the end a form of self-ownership which I will describe as itself fundamentally British. Looking increasingly dated as structural franchise problems are seen to overwhelm any accounts of identity, Moreno has nevertheless recently become popular with Westminster think-tanks, relentlessly returning to an identitarian ideal which places voters – those who mandate the British state – as consumers locked willingly into a network of abstracted relationships ultimately dependent on the commodity form.¹⁸ Moreno certainly tends to draw whiggish answers about an ideal self, shepherding questions towards existing psephological terms and particularly the misleading category of ‘feeling British’ (begging the question of whether a body overwhelmingly dependent on alienated labour can ever really be felt). It is quite possible that a history of literary authority will be more useful than self-reporting in understanding British constitutional culture, and that the history of English Literature is much more politically determinant than we tend to assume.

The long-accepted universalism that ties together British state and English Literature then can and should be historicized. There is nothing axiomatic about placing Derek Walcott next to Geoffrey Chaucer on syllabi or in publishing catalogues. If the absorbent force of English Literature is indeed also the universalized constitutional culture of the British state, this only became solid after the defeat of Jacobite, Irish, American, Anglo-radical, and French Jacobin challenges.¹⁹ And at the latter end of this long disciplining process, the breaking points of English Literature tended to appear both in decolonizing territories and then in a Scotland whose constitutional incorporation seemed less settled.²⁰ It is not surprising that by the late 2000s most people *throughout the UK* saw the Scottish government, with at least an animating myth of popular sovereignty, as more of a carrier of civic values than the British one.²¹ Even the BBC, a key ideological institution arising simultaneously with university English to help save British constitutional culture in its ‘silver era’, has tacitly given up on a unified address (that is, anything beyond England tends to get parenthesized) – while hanging on to the British rubric.²² And after the 2011 Scottish elections, flutters of anxiety about the constitutional status quo were registered even within the

parliamentary mainstream, further attenuating the continuity function of the literary discipline.²³

Moreover, as faith in the parliamentary version of the public has collapsed, ground-level protests have suggested both resistance to prevailing economic wisdoms and a call for a return of cultural understanding to the commons – with the national as a one conduit – where it had belonged to an absorptive state. Also clearer now is how the heritage of English Literature has to be paid for with the experience of its student-interns, or put otherwise, how financial debt corresponds to the debt of influence which has structured the English canon since the growth of English Literature as an informal constitution. The demonstrations of 2010–11 moreover exacerbated the troubles of informal constitutional culture, and, crucially, exposed its alienation of present-tense experience. After this, a defence of literary experience will also be an ‘occupation’ of English – a phrase less frivolous than it appears if the discipline is understood as an imperial defence against popular sovereignty, imposed by the ahistorical time of heritage.