

Four: “Real People, Real Joys, Real Pains”

NICOLA: *Write something new, Philip. You should write something else.*

MARLOW: *Oh? like what?*

NICOLA: *Like this — what has happened to you. Like real things.*

MARLOW: *Pooh.*

NICOLA: *Use your talent, Philip.*

MARLOW: *Bugger that!*

NICOLA: *Write about real things in a realistic way — real people, real joys, real pains — not these silly detective stories. Something more relevant.*

MARLOW: *(with contempt) Solutions.*

NICOLA: *What — ?*

MARLOW: *All solutions and no clues. That's what the dumb-heads want. That's the bloody Novel — He said, She said, and descriptions of the sky — I'd rather it was the other way around. All clues. No solutions. That's the way things are. Plenty of clues. No solutions.*

It's difficult to write accurately about real people in fiction — however much you might want to — because the demands of the idea are usually such that you have to transform the original person to fit the constraints of the story.

*Hanif Kureishi, Some Time With Stephen: A Diary*⁷⁸

In an earlier chapter, I argued that the kind of “knowledge” offered by avowedly fictional works is not *essentially* different from the kind of “knowledge” to be gleaned from the various kinds of “non-fiction” — newspaper, documentary, sociological analysis — by which we are continually bombarded. All these *genres*, whether we call them “fiction” or “non-fiction,” are imaginative constructs, and so is what we call our “experience.” Although *genres* differ from each other with respect to the truth-claims they make, the crucial differences concern not the different kinds of knowledge they ultimately offer but the conventions within which they are both constructed and comprehended.

Conventions — including our shared agreements about what kinds of evidence are required to support different kinds of truth-claim — are accompanied by their own ideological baggage. To identify something as “fiction” is not only to read it differently from the way we read a “hard news” item in the newspaper but also — given our age’s privileging of “hard” data, of scientifically-validated “fact” purportedly grounded in sense-experience — to accord it a different status. And so it is hardly surprising that novelists, in an attempt to make themselves heard at moments of social crisis, should themselves temporarily abandon the novel in order to claim the conventional privilege of non-fiction. I am thinking particularly of a whole slew of “non-fiction” books whose

authors attempt to answer the question of “the state of the nation” by undertaking a journey around the country and publishing their findings. Jonathan Raban, whose agonized “*Where are we at?*” was uttered in the course of a review comparing Beryl Bainbridge’s 1984 *English Journey*⁷⁹ with its illustrious predecessor of a half-century before, J.B. Priestley’s epoch-making *English Journey*,⁸⁰ commented: “It is a fair measure of our present disquiet that the last couple of years or so have seen English journeys cropping up in publishers’ lists as if they were a genre, like gothics or romances” (264). What of these English journeys? Why not interrogate this “genre” rather than the novel?

I Suffered, I Was There

I shall begin by examining two of these documentaries of exploration, but not because so-called “non-fiction” is inherently more “truthful” than novels. There can be no question here of using non-fiction as a “reality-check” against which to measure the relative accuracy of a novel’s vision because, as I have been arguing, non-fiction is not essentially different from fiction. Travel-writing, which has experienced a remarkable resurgence in the last two decades (as numerous issues of the magazine *Granta* attest), certainly employs different narrative conventions from those that inform novels, and the genre so constituted invites reading and judgment according to different criteria of truth and plausibility. Yet these differences are largely rhetorical: although a travel book, like a black-and-white photograph, insists by its very form that “This really happened; I was there, and I witnessed it,” it is just as firmly in the realm of interpretation as a painting or a novel. To give a fuller specification of what I mean by this (and to offer some support

for what may seem at first a perverse claim hitherto argued in purely theoretical terms), it will be useful to look more closely at the two examples of the form — Priestley’s and Bainbridge’s — that Raban was considering, and to ponder some of his judgments upon them.

Raban quite rightly considered Priestley’s journey into the Depression of the 1930’s to be the more impressive document:

In 1933, when Priestley made his English journey, the number of people registered as being out of work was 2,498,100. That is the dominant fact of Priestley’s book. It sets him travelling and it colours almost every perception that he has of England. One sentence echoes through the book like a ground bass: “Never were more men doing nothing and there never was before so much to be done.” This forthright apprehension of what was wrong with the country gives the journey point and clarity, turns it into a serious quest for a solution, and leads Priestley to the passionate flights of description of the decaying industrial landscape that make the book at least as vivid as anything else that Priestley ever wrote. (266)

Bainbridge’s book was built upon the notes she made after each day’s filming of a television documentary series in which she was one of an eight-person production team following in Priestley’s fifty-year-old footsteps, and Raban suggested that its comparative failure was in part the result of these conditions of production. For he did judge the book a failure, although his admiration for Bainbridge as a novelist led him to be both generous and gracious in saying so. Still, the best he could say of it is that it is symptomatic of the state-of-affairs it would describe: “. . . her book manages to catch

(often in an oblique and inadvertent way) a lot of the atmosphere of contemporary England. . . . She catches the spirit of 1983 best in the uncertainty of her own tone” (270). Raban excused her failure and explained Priestley’s success by assuming that the scenes of human desolation Priestley described could be recognized as such by any casual passer-by, whereas the desolation of the 1980’s was hidden from view as a result of the privatization of life that had occurred in the interval. His argument is so forcefully put as to demand serious quotation:

Whatever else was wrong with Priestley’s England, it was recognizable. People had been taught to see it through the eyes of Dickens and Gustave Doré. The slums looked like authentic slums. The poor were dressed in what were obviously rags. The unemployed stood in the street, their pathos visible and affecting. The period photographs in the new edition of Priestley’s journey bear this out brilliantly: for photographers like Bill Brandt, Humphrey Spender, and Edwin Smith, the Depression was eminently picturesque. The camera dwells on each familiar scene as if it were a famous beauty: the lines of washing, hung up to dry in a blackened street; the queues of men patiently waiting for work at dawn on a dockside; the back-to-back tenements, overhung with smoke; the slag heaps, outdoor privies, grubby children, dank canals. In the north of England at least, the Depression produced scene after scene that looked as if it had come out of a painting or a book. . . .

It is not surprising that Priestley was able to write so well about it. Nor is it surprising that Beryl Bainbridge finds herself at a loss when she follows Priestley’s route. For although the statistics [of people registered as unemployed] have increased

[to 3,104,700 in 1983], the images have disappeared. She goes hopefully to Newcastle in search of the unemployed, and finds only a shopping precinct full of people spending money. . . .

For in 1933, most of English life took place out of doors. You even left your house to go to the lavatory. Out of a job, you stood in full view on the street. Because the slums were usually two storeys high at the most, their streets and backyards became communal living spaces, open to the gaze of visiting writers and photographers. It would have been possible for Priestley to see unemployment at first hand without stepping from his Daimler.

It is not so now. Since the 1950s we have moved, or been moved, indoors and upstairs. Unemployment, like so many other features of our social life, has gone private. It happens on the 20th floor, in a room full of plastic furniture, where a man in an ill-fitting but not ragged polyester shirt and jeans watches an old episode from *Dallas* on the video and listens simultaneously to a cassette on his Sony Walkman. As an image, it's not a patch on the lines of washing (now dried in a machine, probably in a public launderette) or the men in scarves and flat caps loitering under the rusty girders of a railway bridge filmed *contre jour*. It is an image that would make any television cameraman yawn. Considered not as an image but as a plight, it is surely just as shocking, pitiable, and arousing as anything described by Priestley. To convey it requires the right of access not just to the outside of the man's house, to his squalid and depressing plot of civic green space, but to the inside of his head.

This, one might have thought, was a classic job for a writer, to go into regions prohibited to the television camera and make the condition of unemployment legible — as it was legible in 1933. But Bainbridge is not that writer. She is the eighth member of her T.V. crew, looking for recognizable pictures that turn out to be in bafflingly short supply. (270-2).

Raban's argument about the privatization of life and hence of misery is a very persuasive one, but he is doing something less than justice to Priestley by assuming that "it would have been possible for [him] to see unemployment at first hand without stepping from his Daimler." Raban's claim that "it is not surprising that Priestley was able to write so well about [the Depression]" proceeds directly from his assumption that in 1933 images of industrial squalor and urban poverty were "ready-mades" because people had already been provided with the images and their meanings by nineteenth-century writers and artists (Dickens and Doré). But this is to scant Priestley's achievement in *English Journey*: as the "publisher's note" prefacing the University of Chicago Press' Jubilee Edition makes clear, it was not Priestley who went north in search of familiar images, but the image-makers and the sociologists who went north in search of what Priestley had taught them both to look for and to *see*:

This book . . . had a vast influence on public opinion, paving the way, amongst other developments, for the Mass Observation movement of the later 'thirties, and ultimately for Mr. Priestley's memorable radio 'Postscripts' during the Second World War. One immediate consequence of its publication was to send several brilliant

young photographers to Lancashire and the North of England to make sociological records of scenes that the fashionable photographers had hitherto ignored.

Indeed, the illustrations in the Jubilee Edition bear this claim out; although the archives have supplied some photographs (usually by “photographer unknown”) of Depression squalor predating the publication of *English Journey*, the classic photographs of Bill Brandt, Humphrey Spender, Edwin Smith and Reece Winstone were all taken in its wake.*

* Of the photographs in the edition that predate Priestley, only one (“Phoenix Passage, Dudley, c. 1930) presents a vision of Depression squalor; of those which are of urban scenes, most are more-or-less-neutral records, while at least one — S. Charles Dietterle’s “Salthouse Dock by Night,” c. 1933 — bathes its subject in a romantic glow that makes it more akin to an eighteenth-century “picturesque” scene (e.g. Richard Wilson’s “Snowdon by Moonlight”) than to Priestley’s Stygian Liverpool dockside:

We reached the docks, put out our pipes and entered their precincts, where a vast amount of gloom and emptiness and decay was being carefully guarded. It was deep dusk. There were some last feeble gleams of sunset in the shadowy sky before us. Everything was shadowy now. The warehouses we passed seemed empty of everything but shadows. A few men — far too few — came struggling along, their day’s work over. . . . We walked slowly along the waterfront, from nothing, it seemed, into nothing; and darkness rose rather than fell; and with it came a twinkle of lights from Birkenhead that reached us not across the river but across a gulf that

Inventing The Depression

It is tempting to adapt Oscar Wilde's epigram about the effect of Impressionist paintings on people's perception of London fogs, and to say that although there may have been a Depression in England before Priestley wrote about it, no one had ever noticed it.** This is clearly an exaggeration, but a useful one in that it focuses our attention on the ways in which Priestley's prose — his rhetoric, his art — created a national sense of crisis and of shame. For the 1930s Depression was no more simply *there* to be seen than the 1980s Depression, and an examination of the two books reveals that the difference between them can hardly be explained by the claim that Priestley was more amply provided with material. It is true that in 1982 Beryl Bainbridge could find no trace of what is now called a "recession" in a shopping centre in Newcastle-upon-Tyne — "an area

could not be measured. I have rarely seen anything more spectral and melancholy.

(185-6)

** "Where, if not from the Impressionists, do we get those wonderful brown fogs that come creeping down our streets, blurring the gas-lamps and changing the houses into monstrous shadows? . . . At present, people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects. There may have been fogs for centuries in London. I dare say there were. But no one saw them, and so we do not know anything about them." From "The Decay of Lying," in *The Soul Of Man Under Socialism and Other Essays*. New York: Harper, 1970. 61.

traditionally depressed, the place in England most vulnerable to recession, an area of high unemployment and lack of opportunity”:

. . . we visited the Eldon Square shopping precinct. It's the largest covered shopping area in Europe. I have never seen so many people in my life, more than at a football match or a pop music festival, thousands and thousands of them milling under the neon-lighting and being born [*sic*] upwards into the miracle parlours of Top Shop. They were young people mostly, dressed in the latest modern fashions, and I swear that in their hands they carried wads of five-pound notes, credit cards and cheque books. They weren't buying one jumper or one pair of jeans, but half a dozen woolly tops and several pairs of trousers, and jackets and floppy hats and boots and shiny belts and handbags. They queued at the clothing rails and they queued at the cash-desks. They carried fat babies in fur-coats, and they studied the racks of dresses and shirts and trousers, heads nodding to the beat of the music blaring from the amplifiers, as though their lives depended on their choice. (121)

Bainbridge and her crew “went back to the hotel and we couldn't stop talking about it. We button-holed waiters and residents and the porter and asked if Newcastle was doing well and they all said it wasn't, that there weren't any jobs. Isn't that a mystery?”

It is a mystery only if one is content to look no further. For in 1933, Priestley had gone to Newcastle, and had had an experience similar to Bainbridge's: he had found that “the sad trade depression into which most of the district has fallen is not immediately noticeable here in its capital. The city looked busy and quite prosperous” (220). But Priestley, unlike Bainbridge, was unwilling to declare the whole affair a “mystery” and

leave it at that. He believed that there was indeed a “sad trade depression,” and he sought it out, contacting a bookseller with whom he had once corresponded and who undertook to “show me what there was to be seen” (222). And Priestley did see quite enough of desolation and despair, despite an elusiveness which meant that he was never able to plumb their depths or measure their extent:

My companion was anxious that I should have a talk with one or two men of his acquaintance in Jarrow and Hebburn, and I might as well confess here that we never succeeded in finding any of those men, though we spent most of the afternoon asking our way in a labyrinth of little streets trying to find them. But if we did not see the men, we certainly saw the towns, though we did not find our way into them without difficulty. They are plainly there, along the river bank, and I was with a Tyneside man who knew them, but nevertheless we had to ask our way several times and twist about and turn back before we contrived to reach Jarrow from South Shields. I suspect that devilish agencies were at work trying to prevent us from ever seeing Jarrow and Hebburn. They did not succeed. We managed at last to thread our way through a maze of monotonous streets, complicated by a spider’s thread of railway lines, and then went round and round Jarrow chasing two elusive officials. I will not add that these two officials had vanished into thin air because there is no thin air in Jarrow. It is thick air, heavy with enforced idleness, poverty and misery. (235-7).

The images and metaphors Priestley deploys in this passage are important: the truth of the Depression, Priestley declared, was “enforced idleness, poverty and misery,” but this truth — far from being something that Priestley could behold “without stepping from his

Daimler” — lay at the heart of a “labyrinth,” a “maze,” a “spider’s web,” guarded by “devilish forces”. As these figures of speech suggest, *English Journey* is structured according to the conventions of a thoroughly fictional *genre*: it is a *Romance* in which knight-errant Priestley set forth to do battle with the Beast, an heroic journey in which the intrepid traveller had to penetrate the veil of appearances in order to come face-to-face with his quarry. This meant turning aside from the main roads into the byways and alleys that the middle-class traveller never glimpsed, for the quarry — the Depression — dwelt at the heart of a labyrinth built and guarded by the forces of darkness.

So when Priestley went to a mining community in East Durham, it was a deliberate expedition into a territory that lay beyond the *given*, beyond the landscapes the tourist knew:

Most of us have often crossed this county of Durham, to and from Scotland. We are well acquainted with the fine grim aspect of the city of Durham, with that baleful dark bulk of castle, which at a distance makes the city look like some place in a Gothic tale of blood and terror. The romantic traveller, impressed by the Macbeth-like look of the city, will be well advised not to get out of his train at Durham station. Some of us, wise or lucky, know West Durham, especially Weardale and Teesdale, which are very beautiful: rocks and heather, glens and streams flashing through the golden woods. . . . But who knows East Durham? The answer is — nobody but the people who have to live and work there, and a few others who go there on business.

(244)

Priestley himself did not want to go to East Durham — “for I knew that it would be ugly and I had had enough of ugliness” — but he forced himself to confront it because “I felt that I should be a fraud . . . if I went sneaking past” (245). And Priestley did find the ugliness he anticipated in Seaham Harbour, a colliery town on the coast — “a town on these wages [about two pounds a week — with luck] is not a pretty sight” (246) — but made it clear that the traveller who did not expressly seek out the industrial hinterlands would form a very different and very mistaken impression of the area’s well-being: “though there is, I believe, considerable unemployment and distress in the town [Sunderland], it looked fairly prosperous, clean and bright that morning” (245).

Priestley’s perseverance was often “rewarded” with just such a spectacle of poverty and degradation as Raban assumes was ubiquitous in the north. Yet he did not stumble onto his scenes; he *achieved* them, and he was able to do so because he was convinced by the unemployment figures that they had to exist somewhere, however carefully concealed.

Such scenes, however, were comparatively few and were comparatively isolated;

Priestley’s real importance lay in his persuasive insistence that even where no wounds were visible, serious injuries had been sustained:

These Lancashire towns — and this excludes industrial villages, one or two of which, I believe, are completely ruined — have not the derelict look of some places elsewhere, to be described later in this book. The streets are not filled with men dimly loafing about. You do not see abandoned shops, which look as if they are closed forever, down every street. Everything that was there before the slump, except the businesses themselves, is struggling on. In nearly every instance, the whole town

is there, just as it was, but not in the condition it was. Its life is suffering from a deep internal injury. (211-2)

Passages such as this — and there are many of them — should have indicated to Raban that Priestley’s work was not a matter of simple transcription, but the diagnosis of economic trauma despite the absence of “men dismally loafing about” in streets of “abandoned shops.”

When Raban wrote his review of the Bainbridge and Priestley *Journeys*, he was in the midst of his own attempt to ascertain the state of the nation; and in the non-fiction book that reports his findings, *Coasting*, he repeats his argument about the lack of readily-available images of the 1980s depression:

Unemployment had been a public event; it was now a private misery, to be borne alone, behind the curtains. It was identifiable, not by things you could photograph and write heartstring-tugging reports about, but by gaps and absences. It was in the sound of a single car backfiring in a street where there should have been a continuous surflike wash of traffic. It was in the shops that weren’t there, in the eerie feeling that the population had shrunk inside its walls, leaving a surfeit of unoccupied air.⁸¹

This is exactly right; but Raban seems not to have noticed that “gaps and absences” are exactly what Priestley was most sensitive to. Priestley’s journey began in the south of England, where indeed there were few signs of extreme poverty and want. When he went to Bradford to attend a reunion dinner of his old World War One battalion, however, the most eloquent witnesses to Depression were absences: those old soldiers who were missing from the reunion, not because they perished in the war but because they were

perishing in the peace. Even though Priestley and others had ensured that free tickets would be available to those who needed them, several old comrades had excused themselves: “They were so poor, these fellows, that they said they could not attend the dinner even if provided with free tickets because they felt that their clothes were not good enough. They ought to have known that they would have been welcome in the sorriest rags; but their pride would not allow them to come. (It was not a question of evening clothes; this dinner was largely for ordinary working men). I did not like to think then how bad their clothes, their whole circumstances, were: it is not, indeed, a pleasant subject.” (132). After recalling what those men had been through in the trenches and how they had been celebrated (in theory, at least) while the War was still being fought, Priestley reflected bitterly that “now, in 1933, they could not even join us in a tavern because they had not decent coats to their backs. We could drink to the tragedy of the dead; but we could only stare at one another, in pitiful embarrassment, over this tragicomedy of the living, who had fought for a world that did not want them, who had come back to exchange their uniforms for rags. And who shall restore to them the years that the locust hath eaten? (132-3). Here Priestley was describing nothing that could be positively seen, but was conjuring up a vision of the invisible, the absent, the forgotten, the unwanted, and making them appear in all their pathos while yet evoking their dignity, their pride.

One might almost say that the rest of his book is a quest for the absent ones, a journey into the dismal underworld to which they had been consigned so that — like Odysseus in Hades — he could give blood to their shades and restore their voices. His language indicates that he was well aware of the nature of his quest:

When I called, one evening, the house seemed very quiet and there was a dim light in the bedroom. My heart sank: I had a vision of death, long dreadful illness, misery and evil. Dubiously, tentatively, I tried the bell. Mr. W. himself opened the door and peered at me through his steel-rimmed spectacles. We had not seen one another for at least ten years. Recognition, joy; no death, no dreadful illness! (151)

Priestley's art was to raise the dead and to make the dumb speak, and this meant not only lending his voice to those effectively silenced by poverty and powerlessness, but teasing the latent significance out of inanimate objects. So when he confronted a heap of industrial refuse which "looked like an active volcano . . . the notorious Shotton 'tip', literally a man-made smoking hill," his task was to render visible what was *not* there, "all the fine things that had been conjured out of it in its time, the country houses and town houses, the drawing-rooms and dining-rooms, the carriages and pairs, the trips to Paris, the silks and the jewels, the peaches and iced puddings, the cigars and old brandies. . . (259)."

Similarly, Priestley's self-appointed mission was not to describe slums — anyone could recognize a slum for what it was — but to convey the poverty of spirit inherent in the surroundings in which the bulk of England's population lived: "during the half-hour or

* Shotton tip may have been "notorious," but like much a great many things that Priestley ferreted out, it was well hidden: ". . . it seems incredible. I cannot help feeling that I shall be told that there is no such place, that I have invented my Shotton; and already I have examined no less than three good maps and failed to find it." (259)

so I sat staring through the top windows of that tram, I saw nothing, not one single tiny thing, that could possibly raise a man's spirits. Possibly what I was seeing was not Birmingham but our urban and industrial civilization. . . . It was not, you understand, a slum. That would not have been so bad; nobody likes slums; and the slum hits you in the eye and you have only to make an effort to get it pulled down. This was, I suppose, the common stuff out of which most of our big industrial towns are made. . . there was nothing, I repeat, to light up a man's mind for one single instant" (69-70). As this passage makes clear, Priestley's main concern was with that poverty of spirit which can be found everywhere but is nowhere to be seen as such because it manifests itself in absences — "nothing, not one single tiny thing, that could possibly raise a man's spirits." His task, in other words, was no easier than Beryl Bainbridge's as Raban represented it: if hers was to make visible the spiritual plight of the polyester-shirted man watching an old episode of *Dallas* on the video, or the lemming-like crowds in the shopping malls, Priestley's was to ventriloquise on behalf of those whose spirit was malnourished by "the whole long array of shops, with their nasty bits of meat, their cough mixtures, their *Racing Specials*, their sticky cheap furniture, their shoddy clothes, their fly-blown pastry, their coupons and sales and lies and dreariness and ugliness. I asked myself if this really represented the level reached by all those people down there on the pavements" (70). He would have asked the same question about *Dallas*, and about the shopping mall with its admittedly more colorful "coupons and sales and lies," and he would have given the same answer.*

* This sort of critique of mass consumerism is hardly original with Priestley, and by the

Who Speaks For England?

So what does account for the vast difference between Priestley and Bainbridge? Quite simply, it is that Priestley felt with perfect confidence that he could speak for England, could truly represent the people he met and the scenes he witnessed, while Bainbridge did not. Priestley confidently spoke for others because he assumed that they were, in all

1980's it has crystallized into a very *topos* of middle-class jeremiads lamenting the aesthetic and cultural pauperization of working-class and lower-middle-class life. The "flyblown pastry," "cheap furniture," and "shoddy clothes" that Priestley beheld in this Birmingham neighbourhood are eerily echoed by a middle-class academic's perception of a district of Rummidge — "an imaginary city . . . which occupies, for the purposes of fiction, the space where Birmingham is to be found on maps of the so-called real world" — in David Lodge's novel *Nice Work*: "The shops are either flashy or dingy. The windows of the former are piled with cheap mass-produced goods, banks of conjunctival TVs twitching and blinking in unison, blinding white fridges and washing-machines, ugly shoes, ugly clothes, and unbelievably ugly furniture, all plastic veneers and synthetic fabrics. The windows of the dingy shops are like cemeteries for unloved and unwanted goods — limp floral print dresses, yellowing underwear, flyblown chocolate boxes and dusty plastic toys. The people slipping and sliding on the pavements, spattered with slush by the passing traffic, look stoically wretched, as if they expect no better from life." Lodge's character is appropriately reminded of a line from D. H. Lawrence — "She felt in a wave of terror the grey, gritty hopelessness of it all." *Nice Work* (1988; rpt. New York: Viking Penguin, 1990), "author's note" and 64.

essentials, like him. For example, he felt able to pronounce that industrial England's dreariness was a betrayal of the people who were forced to live in its midst because "I am too near them myself, not being one of the sensitive plants of contemporary authorship, to believe that it does represent their level" (70). What makes Beryl Bainbridge's book so different — and so unsatisfactory to Raban — is her utter inability to speak for — or even, in some cases, to speak *to* — the people she encountered in her travels. Far from assuming that other people were fundamentally like her in their values, interests and needs, Bainbridge assumed that they were impenetrable, unknowable, and she treated them with the wariness one might adopt if one thought oneself to be dealing with escapees from a lunatic asylum.

The first encounter that Bainbridge chose to represent in any detail was with "a sunburnt tramp" who claims that his parents had been hanged for sheep-stealing:

He looked fifty and was possibly thirty-eight. Spotting the television camera he left off rifling the litter bins and came over to tell me he was eighty-three. Hard to understand a word he said. . . . We had a confused conversation about Liverpool, Tulsa and Southampton. He had often dossed down at Dr. Kelly's in Liverpool. Did I know it? In Tulsa he had joined the Seventh Day Adventists. Last night he had slept in the old West Gate and pissed eight times before dawn. . . . It was strange how memory and language had become jumbled up in his mind. . . . He told me his mother and father had died on the gallows for sheep-stealing. It was all an unfortunate mistake. He said, 'My mother and father, or should I say the Parents,

were innocent of the deed, or should I say the crime.’ He had stood one step below and watched them swing. I murmured inadequately that it must have been awful.

‘It were,’ he said.

‘How old were you? I asked.

‘Five hours,’ he said. ‘I have never gotten over it, or should I say through.’ (16-17)

What, if anything, Bainbridge inferred from the existence of this unfortunate in Southampton in 1983 is left obscure. As the book continues, however, the reader comes to see that this is merely one of the brightest fragments in a mosaic of the grotesque and the bizarre that expressed, for Bainbridge, the state of the nation. On meeting a saintly parson, she was immediately reminded by his “sweet grey eyes” of Dickens’ description of Calcraft the hangman. When the parson told her a story about the apparently saintly Bishop Joe, Bainbridge eagerly anticipated a *dénouement* that would reveal the bishop’s true deviousness, swallowing her eventual disappointment philosophically: “obviously I was wrong and Joe wasn’t devious at all” (29). It is hardly surprising that Bainbridge had so little sense of community when she suspected deviousness and treachery to be lurking behind the sweetest of smiles and the mildest of glances; indeed, she frankly confessed that both Bishop Joe and the parson, men of genuine goodness and humility, “were outside my experience” (29).

Bainbridge’s experience seems to have been replete with the unusual, the uncanny. Examples crop up at regular intervals, e.g. “The obligatory madman was standing outside McDonald’s, using a cider bottle as a telescope and shouting, ‘The niggers are coming’.” (59); “She took me outside and showed me the grave of a Portuguese widow-woman

whose coffin had been no bigger than thirty-three inches in length” (60); “An eighteen-year-old girl arrived who lived down the road in a hostel. Her arms were scarred from self-mutilation and only last week she had slashed her face repeatedly with scissors” (72). Bainbridge’s England in 1982 was a freak show in which the freaks signified nothing beyond themselves, beyond a world gone inexplicably mad. Bainbridge made little effort to distinguish between those whose grotesqueness might have been the result of socio-political causes and hence *remediable*, in theory at least, and those whose bizarre behavior or condition sprang from some hidden and irreducible source.

Unlike Priestley, Bainbridge thought it rude to inquire too deeply into these, or any other, matters: “‘You must remember so much about the past,’ I said. ‘That’s my business,’ she said tartly, and turned her cake over and over with a little nickel-plated fork. I realised I was spoiling her morning, so I thanked her and left. It’s quite ridiculous the way television tries to butt into people’s private lives. Nobody behaves naturally in front of a camera, not unless you’re the inmate of a loony-bin” (96). Bainbridge’s unwillingness to intrude, however commendable personally, was disabling professionally,* and her conviction that people must be seriously deranged in order

* See in particular her account of an excruciating interview with the Honourable Robin Walpole: “His shyness was so extreme that I became at first tongue-tied and then light-headed. I laughed a lot. He must have wondered what on earth he was doing wandering round the Rosa Mundi beds with an hysterical stranger, another stranger stalking him with a camera. . . . It was so difficult extracting any information that I was reduced to prowling

willingly to provide good television “chat” (as she calls it) helps to explain the outlandishness of so many of the characters who cross her pages.

Priestley, on the other hand, was in search of the typical, of the fragment illustrative of a larger whole, and the only place in his book in which he troubled to describe unfortunates whose misfortunes proceeded from what appeared to be irreducibly private and peculiar circumstances was when he went to Nottingham’s fabled Goose Fair and visited a real freak show: “As I stared, and was ashamed of myself for staring, at this sad wild caricature of a woman, I reflected grimly that this was what can happen to you, not when you have sold your soul to the devil and God is angry, but when some tiny ductless gland, the pineal or the pituitary, has decided that it has worked properly for you long enough and then turns rebellious. . . . I still wonder what was going on inside that monstrously carved head of hers, what she thought of her travels (for she had been shown all over the world), of her place in the social scheme, of her gaping audiences. And I shall never know” (113-4).

Although the freak-show was instructive in that it told Priestley something about the “catch-penny process” that the famous Goose Fair had become, this sport of nature, just because it was a sport of *Nature*, could have no moral or social significance. Human beings had not made it, and human beings could neither comprehend nor remedy it, whereas human beings had made and could both understand and remedy the Depression

around Mr. Walpole in a circle, oohing and aaahing at the pictures and the curtains and generally behaving like an idiot” (151).

and its consequences. One function of the freak-show in Priestley's text is to exhibit, once and for all, the shape of natural disaster, so that we may recognize it and not confuse its lineaments with those typical of the man-made disaster that occupies the rest of the book, which must excite our indignation and not just our pity.

For Bainbridge, on the other hand, the typical could hardly be said to exist, and the grotesque became, paradoxically, the norm for a nation that had no other thread of unity.

I have suggested that this depiction of England as a gallery of grotesque portraits is at least partly the effect of Bainbridge's reluctance to intrude, and one might be tempted to applaud Bainbridge's reticence. After all, Priestley's readiness to assume that others are essentially like himself and that he can adequately represent them is an attitude that we have rightly come to distrust in its imperial/colonial and paternalistic/patriarchal manifestations, to see as marked by a presumption and (literally) an arrogance: Priestley arrogates to himself the right of others to represent themselves, easily deciding, for instance, that his own tastes and preferences are the right ones and that those who beg to differ "are doing not what they like but what they have been told they would like" by "astute financial gentlemen, backed by the Press and their publicity services" (302).

Bainbridge's unwillingness to assume that she can speak for "others" may seem admirable in contrast, because the problems and dangers of representing the "Other" are indeed very real ones, but the problems can never be entirely avoided and the dangers must be risked. For to function in the world necessarily involves us all willy-nilly in a kind of authorship, in an imaginative creation of that world. We necessarily imagine inner lives for others, attributing to them motives, passions and interests in order to explain and predict their behaviour in the routine intercourse of daily life. Insofar as the

continuous construction of the social, of a sense of community, depends on our sympathy with our fellow-citizens, we must imaginatively construct them as being in important ways like ourselves, desiring what we perceive as goods and avoiding what we believe to be evils. We can avoid neither this responsibility nor the attendant risks that feminist and post-colonial criticism have alerted us to, because to refuse, as Bainbridge tries to refuse, to interpret the other, is not to leave the other *un-interpreted* but simply to produce a different kind of interpretation — the other as irreducibly unknowable and therefore as irreducibly *different*. This interpretation is not necessarily one we should feel particularly comfortable with: Bainbridge's England of grotesques is not something we are inspired to do very much about, since it is not clear what can be done.

Bainbridge's England is just as much an interpretation, a fiction, as Priestley's, however much she might decry that fact. Indeed, Bainbridge was so accustomed to experiencing the world in terms of the grotesque that she saw it where another observer would not. On the way from Lincoln to Norwich, for example, she met a man who was "a fund of strange information. Pointing at some sea-gulls in a potato field he said they'd come from Skegness, which is surely in Scotland. As we left he observed mysteriously, 'Some people don't like the skies round here'" (149-50). But the information the man imparts is strange and mysterious only to someone who expects the strange and mysterious. Another person (and certainly a Priestley), even if he or she were so ignorant as to confuse Skegness (a Lincolnshire seaside resort, presumably only a few miles from where Bainbridge encountered her informant) with Scotland's Loch Ness, might engage the man in further conversation, expressing surprise and asking for clarification, which would surely ensue. And as for the comment that "some people don't like the skies

round here,” which Bainbridge thought so mysterious, Priestley not only *would not* but demonstrably *did not* find anything puzzling about an impatience with the vastness and monotony of the sky that sits on top of the flat Lincolnshire landscape:

The train curved round and then I saw, for the first time, that astonishing church tower known as the ‘Boston Stump’. This tower is not quite three hundred feet high; but nevertheless, situated as it is, it looked to me more impressive . . . than the Empire State Building It is all a matter of contrast. Here the country is flat; you have seen nothing raised more than twenty or thirty feet from the ground, for miles and miles; and then suddenly this tower shoots up to nearly three hundred feet. The result is that at first it looks as high as a mountain. Your heart goes out to those old Bostonians who, weary of the Lincolnshire levels and the flat ocean, made up their minds to build and build into the blue. (278)

What was doomed to remain a mystery to Bainbridge was crystal clear to Priestley, who felt himself as well able to empathize with Bostonians long dead as with his contemporaries throughout England.

What Bainbridge found on her tour of England was — perhaps not surprisingly — the world of her novels; what Priestley discovered was — equally unsurprisingly — the world of *his*. Bainbridge offered her readers an England that could be understood only as mad, irrational: “. . .this time I actually caught them in the act of digging up a graveyard. . . . I asked the workmen what they were doing. What I said was, ‘What the hell is going on?’ ‘It’s improvements,’ they said. ‘Why?’ I said. ‘Why bloody not,’ they replied” (59). Bainbridge saw only the inexplicable depredations of an alien and

unfathomable “Them” where Priestley assumed and hence created in his book a knowable community of “Us.”

It is by now a truism that a “nation” is always an “imagined community”, something made in ideology rather than given in nature. Priestley and Bainbridge, in their English Journeys as in their novels, each gave their readers an “England,” and these Englands were fictions, things they created in and through language, despite the trappings of non-fiction designed to persuade us that we are reading nothing but a documentary record. The significance of such fictions lies not in whether they are “true” in the sense of being an accurate reflection of an external reality but whether they are persuasive — whether they can persuade us to make them true by behaving as if they were.

Priestley’s “England” seems so distant from Thatcher’s “England” in its invocation of nation-as-community that it might be thought irrelevant to any consideration of contemporary fiction’s attempt to imagine “the way we live now.” Yet Priestley’s concept of the nation was revived in the ‘Nineties: his play *An Inspector Calls*, which was first produced in 1946, was taken out of mothballs and given a stunning production by Stephen Daldry at the National Theatre, where it garnered a number of awards and moved into the West End for an extended run. Anyone who saw the production could have no doubt that Daldry’s revival was intended as a clarion call to Britons to unite in opposition to Thatcherite values of aggressive individualism. Although the play is constructed as a thriller, it makes little effort to mute the didacticism of its claim that the lives of all the other members of our society, “their hopes and fears, their suffering and chance of happiness, [are] all intertwined with our lives, with what we think and say and

do. We don't live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other. And I tell you that the time will soon come when, if men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish."⁸² That there might indeed be no doubt about the contemporary relevance of this homily, which is the play's climax, Daldry had the Inspector deliver it directly to the audience instead of to the characters to whom it is ostensibly addressed. Written at the end of World War II, *An Inspector Calls* is a dramatic argument for the values that inform *English Journey* — values that the post-war electorate found persuasive enough to install as the foundation of the consensus politics that prevailed for the next thirty years. It is therefore hardly surprising that Priestley's work should be revived in an age when the consensus appeared to have been at least temporarily set aside.

Before unreservedly championing Priestley's "England" in opposition to Thatcher's, however, it is worth taking a closer look at *English Journey* in order to understand the parameters within which Priestley constructed his "Us" as a unified and knowable community so much more appealing than Beryl Bainbridge's England-as-Bedlam. For Priestley's "England" was fundamentally unified by an "Englishness" rather vaguely defined in terms of "race" and "culture," and his confidence that the ravages of the Depression could and would be repaired by a concerted national effort depended on his belief that *race* and *culture* were bonds strong enough, in the final analysis, to resist the divisive pull of *class*. In Thatcher's England, however, "Englishness" was much more clearly a site of contestation. After thirty years of sustained Commonwealth immigration, the population of England itself was manifestly less culturally-homogeneous that Priestley had taken it to be, and any attempt to invoke "Englishness"

in Priestley's terms, far from healing social divisions, merely exacerbated them. For Priestley's concept of "Englishness," like any concept whatsoever, is necessarily structured by *difference*, by *exclusion*, and the following chapter attempts to take the measure of what Priestley felt he had to exclude in order for it to do the job he had in mind.