

6-21-1989

## Thinking of England

Shaun O'Connell

*University of Massachusetts Boston*, [shaun.oconnell@umb.edu](mailto:shaun.oconnell@umb.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp>



Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

O'Connell, Shaun (1989) "Thinking of England," *New England Journal of Public Policy*. Vol. 5: Iss. 2, Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol5/iss2/8>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. It has been accepted for inclusion in New England Journal of Public Policy by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@umb.edu](mailto:scholarworks@umb.edu).

# Thinking of England

Shaun O'Connell

---

The works discussed in this article include:

- Latecomers*, by Anita Brookner. 248 pages. Pantheon Books, 1989. \$16.95.  
*A Sinking Island: The Modern English Writers*, by Hugh Kenner. 290 pages.  
The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987. \$12.95 (paper).  
*Collected Poems*, by Philip Larkin. 330 pages. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989. \$22.50.  
*The Russia House*, by John le Carré. 353 pages. Alfred A. Knopf, 1989. \$19.95.  
*The Fifth Child*, by Doris Lessing. 133 pages. Vintage Books, 1989. \$6.95 (paper).  
*Nice Work*, by David Lodge. 277 pages. Viking, 1989. \$18.95.  
*Out of the Shelter*, by David Lodge. 271 pages. Penguin, 1970, 1989. \$7.95 (paper).
- 

In his study of modern English writers, *A Sinking Island*, Hugh Kenner argues that English literature, as we have known and loved it, no longer exists. “There is now a literature written out of English dictionaries that England either can’t claim or doesn’t know if it wants.”<sup>1</sup> “English” literature has become the property of its former colonies, or, beginning with Joyce, those writers without countries, the modernists. It is tempting to blame Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, Britain’s censorious supernanny, for this loss of still another national resource.<sup>2</sup> However, England has long forgone its place as a literary center, even among those whom Winston Churchill, that cultural imperialist, called “the English-speaking peoples.” What, then, is left of purely *English* literature?

England, that Atlantis, rises to the surface of our minds most vividly in the words of its dead writers. The publication of Philip Larkin’s *Collected Poems* is an occasion to mourn the passing of a man who knew how to portray England’s loss of contingency in the world.

And that will be England gone,  
The shadows, the meadows, the lanes  
The guildhalls, the carved choirs.  
There’ll be books; it will linger on  
In galleries; but all that remains  
For us will be the concrete and tyres.<sup>3</sup>

Shaun O'Connell is professor of English at the University of Massachusetts at Boston; he teaches and writes on contemporary Irish and American literature.

Larkin's elegies — lucid, poetically certain, lyrical — are balanced by his bitter satires on England's waning prospects.

Next year we shall be living in a country  
That brought its soldiers home for lack of money.  
The statues will be standing in the same  
Tree-muffled squares, and look nearly the same.  
Our children will not know it's a different country.  
All we can hope to leave them now is money.<sup>4</sup>

English children will also inherit the debt of maintaining soldiers who patrol the nation's last outposts of empire: in Gibraltar, the Falkland Islands, and, for the past twenty years, Ulster.

For all that, England still produces a notable literature. In June 1989 — while Chinese government troops murdered students in Tiananmen Square (the Gate of Heavenly Peace) in Beijing — an English novelist, David Cornwell, who writes under the name John le Carré, was the focus of international attention. His latest novel, *The Russia House*, which he calls a fable, dramatizes the era of perestroika and glasnost in the Soviet Union.<sup>5</sup> Though high-modernist Hugh Kenner would, no doubt, dismiss *The Russia House* as mere popular literature, this novel was widely praised as artful fiction and taken seriously as a political parable. In an era in which a diminishing number of people find pleasure in reading, John le Carré is one living English writer who *is* read, who has contingency for the common reader.<sup>6</sup>

From *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (1963) through the rest of the saga that features George Smiley, his aged and jaded secret service hero — *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (1974) and *Smiley's People* (1985) — to *The Russia House*, le Carré's novels of intrigue and betrayal have been Cold War fables. While the Soviet Union and the United States have wrecked their economies and threatened world's end by rattling sabers and digging missile silos, le Carré's English spies have served as go-betweens, dangling men, conscience-stricken patriots, and brooding betrayers who test the limits of loyalty to God and country. Gail Caldwell sees a search for honor driving le Carré's heroes. "An existential despair lies at the center of all le Carré's fiction, when an agent has to face the peripheries of the moral life — to lay claim to one's inner being before leaving it behind."<sup>7</sup> That is, the backgrounds of John le Carré's novels present his readers with plausible simulations of the complex geopolitical world in which we live, under the threat of annihilation, but the dramas of his fictions turn on tests of character, trials of conscience for his antiromantic heroes. What should a man do, in an age when ignorant armies are poised to clash by night? Le Carré's England is a nether world, a point of introspective intersection between brutish military superpowers.

*The Russia House* is introduced by two epigraphs, often the best clue to an author's thematic intent. The first is from that surprising prophet, Dwight D. Eisenhower: "Indeed I think that people want peace so much that one of these days governments had better get out of their way and let them have it." But which government and what day? That is the question.

I began to read le Carré's novel during the last days of the student demonstrations for democracy in Tiananmen Square, during the "Beijing spring," and finished it as Chinese students were being hunted down by Deng Xiaoping's storm troopers. (Execution is the most effective means of political education, insists China's aged leader.) Thus life and art

forced reflection, in Orwell's phrase, "on the real motives for which despotic governments act."<sup>8</sup> Perhaps, the Chinese parable implies, *any* government, if sufficiently challenged, will turn against its people. On the other hand, other parables offer more hope. During the same days of early June, Solidarity won an election in Poland and Mikhail Gorbachev was openly criticized in Moscow's new Congress of People's Deputies. Communism was losing its grip, it seemed, in one part of the world, but tightening its stranglehold in another. Those endless, rainy weeks of late spring in New England — such English weather — made, then, a proper season to read and reflect upon a political parable.

In 1968 Katya, heroine of *The Russia House*, had been a student and lover of Yakov, her teacher and a scientist, in Leningrad. In those days Katya and Yakov lived in hope for a new flowering of democracy in the Communist world. As love had buoyed them, surely an incredible lightness of being would lift political oppression. However, her father predicted that Russia would surely send tanks into Czechoslovakia and turn the Prague spring into a Russian winter. Katya later recalls her father's warning: "The red Czars would do exactly as they pleased, just as the white Czars had done. The system would win because the system always won and the system was our curse." After Russian tanks rolled into Prague, and over students, Yakov was convinced. "The system will always win. We talk freedom but we are the oppressors."<sup>9</sup>

So, too, it seemed in the late spring of 1989, when Chinese troops — in the name of a corrupt ideology, under orders from fanatical old men — destroyed the students' simulation of the Statue of Liberty (the Goddess of Freedom) in Tiananmen Square, shot them down in the street, and then instituted a Big Lie in a media blitz to persuade China and the rest of the world that innocent soldiers were attacked by student "ruffians." Protest leaders, "counterrevolutionaries," were sentenced to death. Again the system won.

In an arresting image from the final moments of free expression in Tiananmen Square, a young man carrying a white flag stood alone in the middle of the street and halted a convoy of tanks. But the videotape of his rash and romantic gesture promised too much, for soon after this heartening incident the Beijing killings commenced. That young man, that "ruffian," was not seen again.

If large demonstrations for freedom and single acts of heroism cannot long stand against the armed might of the system — all power comes from the barrel of a gun, said Mao — then, it follows, it is foolish, as the streetwise put it, to buck the system. That is what Alec Leamas did, in *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, and he ended up dead at the base of the Berlin Wall, unable to choose between the corrupt political systems of East and West. George Smiley's honorable pursuit of the mole inside the British spy network (the Service) in *Tinker, Tailor* was motivated as much by his own sense of betrayal, by his wife, as by his faith in England's righteousness. Karla defected to the West more for personal than ideological reasons in *Smiley's People*. The Cold War seemed as fixed as Churchill's iron curtain metaphor. Le Carré's previous novels portray, as he puts it, "an ideological face-off that seemed to be interminable and about people groaning under the strain of the Cold War and seeing no way out. And I made that, if you will, human in the form of George Smiley." Now, however, the liberalized policies of Gorbachev have given the novelist "a whole new pack of cards," and dealt him a new voice.<sup>10</sup> John le Carré sings a new song. Now, in *The Russia House*, he implies that a resolute man, with a little help from his friends, *may* beat the system.

*The Russia House* is narrated by a man who calls himself Harry, "though Harry is not my real name."<sup>11</sup> No Hotspur he, his real name is Horatio de Palfrey. (A "palfrey," we learn, is "neither a warhorse nor a hunter, but a saddle horse deemed suitable for



ladies.”<sup>12</sup> However, this Palfrey is unsuitable as a ladies’ man, for he betrays his wife and lacks the passion to carry off his married lover, Hannah.) Palfrey, a lawyer who works for British Intelligence, is a Prufrock; rather than expose himself to love and loss, he hides inside the Service, “calling my cowardice duty and my weakness sacrifice.”<sup>13</sup> Palfrey too never presumes to force the moment to its crisis. He is a fainthearted Cold Warrior who dares not be noticed. (Hannah believes that the Service is more the disease of the Cold War than its cure.) Palfrey serves “as legal errand boy, as fixer, and bit player, and pleaser, and finally as chronicler; now Rosencrantz, now Guildenstern, and just occasionally Palfrey.”<sup>14</sup> More important, he is the perfect center of consciousness, as Henry James would describe him, for this novel in which an authentic hero bucks the system, breaks out of the web of duplicity, claims freedom for himself and his beloved, and lives to tell the tale. Timorous Palfrey serves as the cautious clerk — a living embodiment of a “nation of shopkeepers” — who records this antihero’s confidences.

The novel’s second epigraph is by May Sarton: “One must think like a hero to behave like a merely decent human being.” A British publisher — Barley Blair of Abercrombie & Blair, a firm that offers a line of romantic pulp fiction — once cited Sarton’s injunction in a speech at a Russian trade fair; these words inspired Yakov to a dangerous act of conscience: the writing of a seditious book. By the era of Gorbachev, Yakov has become a Soviet scientist nicknamed Goethe because he, like Faust, has a divided soul; Yakov is also a rebellious patriot. After Blair visits Pasternak’s grave, the publisher attends a gathering at which he meets Yakov. They get drunk and talk, as Blair later describes it to British Intelligence, “peace, progress, and *glasnost* by the bottleful. Instant disarmament without the options.”<sup>15</sup>

Blair — a near-bankrupt, alcoholic cynic whose only passion is for jazz, a man Russian Communists would call a Western decadent — is shocked to discover that Yakov thinks the publisher *means* what he said about individual heroism. Naïve Yakov even believes in England! Though Yakov is employed to improve the Russian missile-delivery system, aimed at the West, he loves the English because he imagines “the English are the moral leaders of Europe, the secret steadiers, the unifiers of the great European ideal.” On the other hand, Yakov holds that “the Russians’ misfortune is that they long to be European but their destiny is to become American, and that the Americans have poisoned the world with materialistic logic.”<sup>16</sup> Yakov has not discovered that England has lost its character and its soul.

Indeed, this Russian missile scientist places his faith in the myth of English decency and trusts his life to the code of the English gentleman. The drunken Yakov asks the stunned Blair to “promise you’ll behave like a gentleman.” That is, Blair should vow he will behave the way “Goethe” *imagines* Englishmen act. Oddly enough, Blair, a most unlikely hero, takes up this challenge! Blair swears to Yakov-Goethe: “If you ever manage to be a hero, I’ll be a decent human being.”<sup>17</sup>

The rest of the novel works out the implications of that exchange between representative men of East and West. Is it possible to find “a decent human being,” a single honest man, who will put his life on the line for what he believes? If he does, will his gesture be quixotic, like that of the young man who briefly halted the tanks of the Chinese army? Or could such a man, an ordinary citizen who chooses to become a hero, redeem his wasted life and renew his nation, perhaps even save the world?

In the background of *The Russia House*, le Carré provides a thickly textured context of systemic rot: the British and American spy networks do their terrifying things, with all their toys and games on display — safe houses, interrogations, surveillance trucks, coded

messages, wired conversations, competition between the British Service and the American Firm, the abiding cynicism and careerism of intelligence officers whose world would come tumbling down if, God forbid, the Cold War actually ceased! In the novel's foreground — in the guise of this boozy, womanizing British publisher — we discover the hero-redeemer: Barley Blair as Price Hal, ready to renounce his Falstaffian foolery and, as Henry V, save his sceptered isle!

Here le Carré's political parable turns into political romance — for Blair not only stops the tanks, he turns them around! — in the service of le Carré's renewed faith in British decency and the moral heroism of an average Englishman. Alec Leamas, were he alive, would not understand. World-weary Cold Warrior George Smiley, sent into retirement by le Carré, would be amazed and suspicious. Horatio de Palfrey, however, audience for Blair's confession of heroism, understands; Palfrey realizes that his whole life was wasted, etherized upon a table, numbed by Cold War ideology and career-advancing patriotism, so old Palf delights in retelling the tale of Blair's passionate act of faith. Narrating Blair's story — transforming himself from cautious clerk to risk-taking truth teller — constitutes Palfrey's repudiation of his Prufrockian self, rejection of a weaselly profession, and betrayal of his corrupt country. Only by betraying what England has become, implies le Carré, can one connect with what it once was.

In "What I Believe," E. M. Forster prays that he will have the courage to betray his country before he betrays a friend. In Forster's "Two Cheers for Democracy," only love, not democracy, deserves three cheers. In his *Howards End* a character insists we should "only connect" the prose and the passion in our lives, privately and publicly, and all will be well. (Lionel Trilling calls *Howards End* "a novel about England's fate."<sup>18</sup> *The Russia House*, though a lesser work of fiction, is also a novel about England's fate; indeed, it is a melodramatically contrived but telling parable of individual courage that implies the possibilities of salvation for all nations.) Le Carré's novels are deeply indebted to Forster's personal and political values, though not imitative of Forster's more subtle and oblique literary techniques. Le Carré's novelistic tensions turn on Forsterish conflicts of convictions, and tests of loyalties.

Kim Philby, the traitor, has long served as le Carré's alter ego. Both Cornwell and Philby worked as spies in Her Majesty's Secret Service, but Philby, a mole, betrayed his country and escaped to Russia, while Cornwell left the Service, came out *into* the cold, and became John le Carré, escaping to Dover to write novels about Philby-like characters: privileged Oxbridge men who betray their country in the cause of a foreign ideology. (The name resemblance between de Palfrey, the clerk, and le Carré, the novelist, suggests another contrast. Inside the Service Palfrey is required to induce Blair to sign the Official Secrets Act, "a weaselly document," while outside the Service le Carré is free to write what he pleases on the Cold War, though Cornwell discreetly protects state secrets. By writing Blair's story, Palfrey breaks out of his bell jar, *becomes* le Carré.)<sup>19</sup> When he visited Russia for the first time, Cornwell was invited to meet Philby, but he refused. "I couldn't possibly be a guest of the queen's ambassador tomorrow night and be the guest of her biggest traitor tonight."<sup>20</sup> Cornwell's elegant retreat behind a Union Jack curtain to hide from Philby may indicate Cornwell's need to distance himself by using le Carré as a mask and to deny any resemblance between the novelist and the spy.

The plot of *The Russia House* follows Barley Blair's conversion experience from tight (or tipsy) little islander to hero of the West. Blair loves jazz, particularly Charlie Parker, and American writers. He acts out of instinct, makes himself up anew, and learns by going where he has to go, as American poet Theodore Roethke advised. Yet Blair also be-

lieves in an ideal England of noble deeds and words. Blair, then, embodies the best characteristics of the English-speaking people.

To Katya, Yakov entrusts his manuscript, which reveals weaknesses in the Soviet missile system and contains convincing evidence that shows the pointlessness of the arms race. “It rejects the gradualism of the *perestroika*. It demands action and rejects all cosmetic changes.”<sup>21</sup> Through a middleman — a wonderful character who does his turn, then gracefully exits the novel — Katya passes the manuscript along to Blair. Instead of publishing it, however, Blair brings it to the attention of the Service. They, and their snoopy American cousins, are suspicious. There is no news worse than good news — what’s in it for them if peace breaks out? — to those careerists in the spy business. So they enlist Blair to serve as a counterspy to get the goods on Katya and Yakov, those Ruskie ruffians who want to give peace a chance! For a while Blair plays their games, but then he falls for the lovely Katya and tumbles into a loyalty crisis.

Katya says Yakov was inspired by Blair’s Forsterish words: “If there is to be hope, we must all betray our countries.”<sup>22</sup> Looped in the loops of Katya’s hair, and enmeshed in the image of himself as a noble Englishman, the persona he had sold to both Katya and Yakov, Blair calls upon resources he never knew he possessed.

As to his loyalty to his country, Barley saw it only as a question of which England he chose to serve. His last ties to the imperial fantasy were dead. The chauvinist drum-beat revolted him. He would rather be trampled by it than march with it. He knew a better England by far, and it was inside himself.<sup>23</sup>

Barley consciously betrays his country — or that mean, narrow version of his country represented by chauvinist Thatcher, the Service, and the Official Secrets Act — to save the woman he loves. Barley, former cynic, becomes a believer in a better England. He and Palfrey meet in Lisbon, where Barley tells his story. The publisher-turned-heroic-traitor/patriot “was believing in all the hopes that I had buried with me when I chose the safe bastion of infinite distrust in preference to the dangerous path of love,” reflects Palfrey.<sup>24</sup> However, in telling Barley Blair’s Russian fable, Palfrey — speaking for le Carré, a persona of Cornwell — deals himself and us a whole new literary deck of cards. Barley Blair is a plausible hero because he does the decent, not the politic, thing. Inside the hollow crown lives a better England.

*The Russia House* has been criticized as simplistic and sentimental. Sergei L. Petrov, a painter and photographer who worked on Soviet ABM research before he left the Soviet Union, finds the novel naive in its trust of the KGB to keep its promises, inaccurate in its details of Russian life, and overly trusting of glasnost.<sup>25</sup> All of which may be true without diminishing readers’ interest in the novel. *The Russia House* is less interesting as a predictive model of international relations or a realistic account of life in the Soviet Union than it is as a vision of renewal for England.

Anita Brookner’s newest novel, *Latecomers*, also holds a surprisingly redemptive myth about England’s fate. Narrated with the wit and assurance of Jane Austen, *Latecomers* deals not with international intrigue and the safety of the world, but with what was called in World War II the “home front,” where ordinary people muddle through the blitz. “Look! We have come through!” is the refrain of one of the novel’s coheroes, Hartmann.<sup>26</sup> Fibich, his alter ego, is less certain. But they do “come through,” though not without pain, escaping as children from Nazi Germany, growing up alienated in postwar England, establishing a successful greeting cards business, marrying, becoming parents,



and seeing their children launched into a transformed world. In coming through so much they, along with their wives and children, show us that men and women of no public contingency, of no obvious heroism, can renew their lives, even in a sinking island. In Hartmann and Fibich, representative men, England rises again. Despite its modest scope — carvings on a six-inch-wide ivory, like Austen — *Latecomers* implies that there will always be an England.

Brookner, an art historian before she became a respected novelist with *Hotel du Lac* (1984), handles her characters with irony and respect. Hartmann and Fibich, two men displaced by war and politics, are her test cases for the working out of ideas. Hartmann, a “voluptuary” who “aspired to the sublime,” tries to free himself from his dark past through a willed euphoria.<sup>27</sup> He urges Fibich, a history-haunted pessimist, not to dwell on the past: forget psychiatrists, have a good lunch instead! Each needs the other: “Hartmann and Fibich [are] metaphorically and almost physically twin souls.”<sup>28</sup> Point-counterpoint, thesis/antithesis, yin-yang, each man requires the other for balance and ballast. “Hartmann had the ideas and Fibich did the worrying: it suited them both perfectly.”<sup>29</sup>

Of course, plausible lives do not arrange themselves with such fearful symmetry. The source of fiction is frustration: impediments yield characters in crises; crises present opportunities for change and perception. The Hartmanns’ daughter, Marianne, a delight to her father, grows up into a listless woman, subservient to her smug husband, lost to her parents. The Fibich boy, Toto, is self-absorbed, aggressive, independent. In Fibich’s eyes, “in comparison with Marianne, Toto represented something cruder, crueller: the life force, perhaps.”<sup>30</sup> Marianne was plain, but Toto was handsome, his detached looks suggesting legendary English heroism. However, this was an “entirely factitious image,” Brookner reminds us.<sup>31</sup> Toto was not the real thing, merely the mock, so he became an actor, “both ruthless and narcissistic,” successful in roles in which he projected idealized representations of the national character.<sup>32</sup> Brookner, like le Carré, searches for the authentic England beneath the cynical, self-serving facade.

In the face of life’s reversals, even the yeasaying Hartmann wonders whether they have come through.

Hartmann knew, in an unrealized way, that his true life lay elsewhere, that it remained undiscovered, that his task was to reclaim it, to repossess it, and that for as long as it remained hidden from him he would be a sleepwalker, doomed to pass through a life designed for him and others, with no place he recognized as home. Increasingly, what he felt was a kind of homesickness, although he could not have explained this.<sup>33</sup>

Fibich, the naysayer, also wants to escape his given life into another world, though he thinks he knows where: Germany, the land that killed his parents and robbed him of his past. Finally, ignoring Hartmann’s advice, Fibich goes to Berlin, “possessed by the idea that the past would be returned to him as an illumination, and that illumination would render him whole.”<sup>34</sup> However, in Berlin Fibich, too, suffers homesickness, which “had nothing to do with any home that he had ever known.”<sup>35</sup> Finally Hartmann and Fibich — displaced persons, mystified husbands, and disappointed fathers — come to accept their lesser lives, the cards they were dealt. There is no true life elsewhere, Brookner implies, no fulfilling revelation, except in imagination. We are all homesick strangers in a strange land, trying to come through. England, that lesser land, that failed vision, is all.

*Latecomers* is narrated in a voice that hovers above its characters, commenting on their deficiencies and their limited perceptions, but not without love, in the imperial manner of Jane Austen. Here Brookner broods upon Mrs. Hartmann: “She was growing old



unevenly, as most people do; as she was not in the habit of comparing herself with anyone else, she had no notion that her dilemma could in any way be universal.”<sup>36</sup> Anita Brookner knows that the universal is configured in the ephemeral, that the world can be discovered in a grain of sand. In describing the long, often trivial but moving, even noble lives of her two central characters, Hartmann and Fibich, she has demonstrated more than their abilities to muddle through. *Latecomers* shows us authentic examples of English heroism and humane survival.

*The Fifth Child*, a recent novel by Doris Lessing, is an artful and disturbing parable of the decline and fall of an English ideal of civility and family happiness. Lessing’s dystopia has been compared with Orwell’s *1984*, for both novels raise the specter of a bleak future for England. Orwell predicted fascist control, and Lessing envisions “wilding” street gangs who inherit the empire. However, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* is the better generic comparison. Both Lessing’s and Conrad’s works are novellas, a mode in which actions and implications are tightened with an extra turn of the screw; in each, a single, unrelenting plot line rivets our attention. Though Lessing’s characters seldom leave home, they, too, travel up a Congo of consciousness and encounter “the horror”: a revelation of human bestiality. Worst luck, Lessing’s heroine, Harriet Lovatt, cannot leave the wilds of her metaphoric Africa and return to the ordered world, however precarious, of London to tell her startling tale to upright citizens, as does Conrad’s Marlow. England is the center of Lessing’s heart of darkness, the diseased heart of all that has ceased to matter in British civilization. Written with rare inventiveness and grace, *The Fifth Child* is the novelistic equivalent of Yeats’s prophetic personification: “And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?”<sup>37</sup> Now we know. That rough beast is a child who makes English men and women hostages to bad fortune.

Harriet and David Lovatt are more like an idyllic couple out of a Dickens novel than products of swinging England in the era of the sexual revolution. Larkin treats this period with wry whimsy in “Annus Mirabilis”:

Sexual intercourse began  
In nineteen sixty-three  
(Which was rather late for me) —  
Between the end of the *Chatterley* ban  
And the Beatles’ first LP.<sup>38</sup>

Like Larkin, Harriet and David missed the sexual revolution. Their conservative sexual values — he sought lasting love and she was a virgin who wanted only to marry and have children — make them “freaks and oddballs” among their peers, but join them in a common purpose.<sup>39</sup> They seek, above all, *happiness*. With the help of his rich father, they buy a large Victorian house. There, in the bedroom, where they make love the first time they are alone, the newlyweds enter a realm more mysterious than they can understand “Now the room was quite dark, it looked vast, like a black cave that had no end. A branch scraped across a wall somewhere close. There was a smell of cold rainy earth and sex.”<sup>40</sup> The pursuit of happiness, even in marriage and the family, can, like any quest, carry you to an undiscovered country from which you may not return.

In vowing to have many children, Harriet and David act on faith that all’s right with the world. They deny the darker side of social, familial, and human reality. However, the “black cave” of their bedroom is their metaphoric passage to a dangerous realm, a plunge into the id, a retreat to another, more primitive era; it is Lessing’s mysterious Congo.

At first all is well. David and Harriet believe they are living the family life that others really wish to live. They gather large groups of family and friends for holiday celebrations. Their love is strong and their children, one after another, are beautiful. “Happiness. A happy family. The Lovatts were a happy family. It was what they had chosen and what they deserved.” This, then, is clearly a parable, on one level, of the British Ascendancy attainments. The Lovatts’ drive for family happiness is their way to insulate themselves from a threatening world. “Outside this fortunate place, their family beat and battered the storms of the world. The easy good times had utterly gone.”<sup>41</sup> England was slipping. Youth gangs roam the lethal streets, while the Lovatts nurture their babies inside their fortress home.

With Harriet’s fifth pregnancy, all is changed. Even in the womb, the baby was different from her early pregnancies, stronger and angrier, causing Harriet pain, but she could not convince anyone that she was going through anything abnormal. (The proper world blinds itself to disturbing visions.) When Ben was born, “he did not look like a baby at all. He had a heavy-shouldered hunched look, as if he were crouching there as he lay.” To his mother, he seemed “like a troll, or a goblin or something.” Perhaps a “neanderthal baby.”<sup>42</sup> As he grew, Ben had to be kept in his room, door locked and windows barred, so he would not kill animals and attack the other Lovatt children.

After a few years Ben grew impossible to live with. The Lovatts then decided to send him to an institution, where he would be drugged into passivity until he died. “‘It’s either him or us,’ said David to Harriet.” David thought Ben “just dropped in from Mars,” dismissing his son from the Lovatt and human families. After Ben was taken away, “the family expanded like paper flowers in water.”<sup>43</sup> But Harriet would not abandon Ben — she gave birth to him, however alien he may be — so she brought him back home from the place where he had been bound and drugged into submission. The rest of the novel works out the frightening implications of Ben’s presence, like a lethal virus. This formerly happy family gradually contracts, like paper flowers set afire.

Finally David and Harriet agree that Ben is a creature from another time. “Ben makes you think [of] all those different people who lived on the earth once — they must be in us somewhere.” Such creatures are not noticed because normal people, muddling through, do not want to see them. Harriet tells David they are being punished for pursuing happiness. “For thinking we could be happy. Happy because we decided we should be.”<sup>44</sup> Lessing’s characters, like Brookner’s, are set in a narrow, domestic world, but they, too, reverberate with implications.

By the time Ben is in his early teens he is the leader of a youth gang, one of the vandals from whom the Lovatts thought family life might protect them.

Harriet watched Ben with his followers and tried to image him among a group of his own kind, squatting in the mouth of a cave around a roaring fire. Or a settlement of huts in a thick forest? No, Ben’s people were at home under the earth, she was sure, deep underground in black caverns lit by torches — that was more like it.<sup>45</sup>

*The Fifth Child* is Lessing’s parable of recognition about the dark and feral life that lives in us and beneath our precarious civilization. Ben is a reminder of a dark past, a portent of an even darker future. England is threatened by the atavistic forces its pretenses to civility have supposedly suppressed. The Lovatts’ utopian vision of a family bound by love turns into Lessing’s dystopia of a doomed, hate-ridden England.

David Lodge’s novel *Nice Work* — as marvelously comic as Brookner’s *Latecomers* is

stylishly poignant, or Lessing's *The Fifth Child* is artfully bleak, or le Carré's *The Russia House* is revealing on the condition of England — displays an England at twilight, the sun setting on the last days of empire, while PM Thatcher presides over the dismantling of the nation's educational institutions and the deterioration of its industrial base. We are in Larkin country, all "concrete and tyres," north of London, where industries rot and the English character cracks, its citizens barely buoyed by the dole and drugs. Lodge's representative English man and woman — a no-nonsense plant manager and a feminist teacher — are the objects of his withering satire; however, they turn out to be more than types. Indeed, like le Carré's brashly heroic publisher or Brookner's quietly heroic greeting card manufacturers or Lessing's brave mother, Lodge's hero and heroine become characters who rise to the occasion: Britain's economic-political blitz. England, too, in Lodge's certain and compassionate hands, turns out better than we expect when we begin reading *Nice Work* and see how low England has fallen. Finally Lodge also seems to say, to convince us, "Look! We [too] have come through!"

The novel is set in 1986, in Rummidge, another Birmingham, a manufacturing city of the English Midlands, an industrial center now fallen on hard times. Lodge has taught literature at the University of Birmingham, so he knows both industry and academe, the two cultures that show England on the skids; he maps the foul-smelling English heartland, where his characters slog through their disappointed lives. Vic Wilcox, a short, middle-aged, practical, politically-Conservative managing director of an engineering firm, represents industry; Robyn Penrose, a young, attractive, clever, impractical, poststructuralist literary critic and feminist instructor at Rummidge University, represents higher education. An improbable but effective plot device brings together these representative figures from different Englands. As part of Industry Year, Robyn is assigned as Vic's "shadow," to follow him about his factory one day a week. Their brief encounter results in a crisis in each of their lives and provides an epiphany for Lodge's reflections on the state of the nation.

Robyn has written a book on England's industrial novels of the eighteen thirties and forties, what has been called, she explains to her class, "'Condition of England Novels,' because they addressed themselves directly to the state of the nation."<sup>46</sup> *Nice Work*, of course, is just that, for the nineteen eighties. However, despite his serious intent, Lodge is playful with Vic and Robyn, even with England, in this reassuringly old-fashioned novel. (Plot shapes character; the omniscient author holds all the cards and plays them, timing his final trump for optimum effect.)

*Nice Work*, Lodge's most effective work, possesses greater looniness and higher seriousness than any of his previous fictions. Lodge's *Changing Places* (1975) was an academic novel that juxtaposed the adventures of two teachers: in 1969, a year of student demonstrations, a Rummidge don, Philip Swallow, went to California to teach at Euphoric State, trading jobs — and eventually wives — with an American hustler academic, Morris Zapp, who came to teach at Rummidge. In *Small World* (1984), Lodge brought professors Swallow and Zapp together again — they are joined by a large cast of eccentrics, self-promoters, seducers, cutpurses, knaves, and tarts, academics all — at various literary conferences held in exotic spots around the world, their expenses and dalliances underwritten by generous universities. In *Nice Work*, Swallow, Robyn's department chair, and Zapp, who visits Rummidge for a lecture, appear again in cameo-comic roles, but Lodge wants to do more in this novel than set still another blaze in the diminishing groves of academe. *Nice Work* combine two modes — the industrial with the academic novel — and goes further, to the heart of England as image and idea.



Both Vic and Robyn are paralyzed in their narrow worlds. Vic is weighed by worries, stifled by work pressures and responsibilities for his family, along with a pretentious house with four baths. One son, a layabout, is on the dole. With their greedy daughter, Vic's bored wife shops until she cannot drop off to sleep without Valium. Vic believes the country is going to the dogs. His only moments of pleasure occur when he drives to work in his company car, a Jaguar V12, insulated and isolated, listening to romantic female singers. Robyn sees him as another Gradgrind, the fierce man of facts from Dickens's *Hard Times*, but there is more to Vic than that. Robyn, equally detached, is a militant poststructuralist and feminist theorist, a "semiotic materialist," as she puts it. There is no "reality," she tells her students; for everything is the creation of language, or "text."<sup>47</sup> Despite her research, she knows nothing about industry — "What exactly is a foundry?" she asks an amazed Vic — or, indeed, much about how the real world works.<sup>48</sup> "Of course she was aware, cognitively, that there was a life outside universities, but she knew nothing about it."<sup>49</sup> Robyn sustains a bland relationship with Charles, another academic poststructuralist. They relate through nonpenetration sex, "for reasons both ideological and practical. Feminist theory approved, and it solved the problem of contraception."<sup>50</sup> Lodge handles her with a saber-slash precision worthy of Evelyn Waugh.

Robyn generally favors loose dark clothes, made of natural fibres, that do not make her body into an object of sexual attention. The way they are cut also disguises her smallish breasts and widish hips while making the most of her height: thus are ideology and vanity equally satisfied.<sup>51</sup>

However, Lodge is neither so bitter nor so sentimental as was Waugh. Though both authors are Catholic satirists, Waugh's representative characters repudiate the world, particularly in *Brideshead Revisited*, while Lodge's most interesting characters seek honorable ways to live in it. Waugh wished to transcend England; Lodge seeks ways to redeem it.

By changing places Robyn and Vic not only reveal their limitations — if Robyn does not know the ways of the world, Vic is unaware, cognitively, of the implications of "texts," which Robyn cheerily explains — they also grow, learn from each other, come through. As Vic's "shadow," Robyn assumes an alternate identity, gains passage into the real world. "She led a double life these days, and felt herself to be a more interesting and complex person because of it."<sup>52</sup> Vic teaches her how the nonacademic world assigns grades on the basis of who pays.

As it turns out, Vic pays in his relationship with Robyn. After their brief affair in Frankfurt, where she helps him close a business deal before they go to bed, he falls, like a stricken schoolboy, in love. "There's no such thing," she coolly explains to Vic. "It's a rhetorical device. It's a bourgeois fallacy."<sup>53</sup> However, Vic does leave his mark on her; after meeting Vic and touring his hellish but dynamic world, Robyn will never again be an ivy-towered Rapunzel, viewing the world as a pattern of mere "texts." By the end of *Nice Work* Vic and Robyn have become conspirators in the effort to renew their lives and to reaffirm their covenant with England.

Before they joined forces, Vic and Robyn defended themselves and their separate Englands. Robyn: "Give me the University, with all its faults, any day." Vic: "It's nice work if you can get it."<sup>54</sup> However, with the contrivance of Lodge's charmingly high-handed plotting, at the end of the day, as they say in the British Isles, both Robyn and Vic get "nice work." Vic, fired from his company after a merger, revives his marriage and opens a small business, partially financed with money invested by Robyn, who has come into an

inheritance. With her found money, Robyn is able to reject a job offer from Maurice Zapp to teach in California; she will stick with England, sink or swim, driven by an egalitarian vision of the fusion of England's two cultures within the red-brick university at Rum-midge. In *Nice Work* David Lodge has composed a worthy work, a deft parable of England's coming through.

Robyn, analyzing England's industrial novels — Dickens's *Hard Times*, Disraeli's *Sybil*, Mrs. Gaskell's *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*, George Eliot's *Felix Holt* — tells her class that "all the Victorian novelist could offer as a solution to the problems of industrial capitalism were: a legacy, a marriage, emigrations or death."<sup>55</sup> In offering similar options to conclude *his* industrial novel, Lodge both places his work in a formal tradition of English realistic industrial fiction and calls attention to the artifice of his "text." Thus, he gives the world views of both — Vic, man of fact, and Robyn, woman of imaginative interpretations — their due. *Nice Work*, then, is both a self-referential artifact — a novel about the making of novels — and a realistic representation of what Trollope called "the way we live now" in England.

Lodge's novel *Out of the Shelter* (1970, revised 1985) focuses upon the year in which England began to change into what it has since become, a second-rate power that exploits American pop culture (the Beatles) or feeds upon the innards of its own rich cultural history (those end-of-empire plays by Harold Pinter, John Osborne, and others; those Masterpiece Theatre series, which mix nostalgia with self-parody). In 1951, as Lodge notes, the British went from austerity to affluence, from Attlee to Churchill, from triumphant independence to groveling dependence on America: during the Korean War, Britain was forced into an economically destructive arms race to satisfy America's Cold War passion to thwart Communism. Burgess and MacLean defected, betraying England for Russia, revealing the lesion at the heart of the Oxbridge establishment.

This, too, is a novel about changing places. Lodge's hero, Timothy Young, age sixteen, leaves England in 1951 to visit his sister, Kate, who works for the American army occupation forces in Heidelberg. Based upon a similar journey Lodge made in that year, at that age, to visit his aunt in Heidelberg, *Out of the Shelter* is part autobiography and part parable on the condition of England, past and present. (Formally it combines, Lodge notes, the *bildungsroman*, or coming-of-age novel, with the Jamesian "international" novel.)<sup>56</sup> War had made Lodge's generation work centered, cautious, and distrustful of the world. However, his "encounter with the American expatriate community in Germany in 1951" granted him "a privileged foretaste of the hedonistic, materialistic good life that the British, and most of the other developed or developing nations of the world, would soon aspire to and in some measure enjoy." All of which raised the crucial question: "Is this a new freedom for man, or a new enslavement?"<sup>57</sup> A bit of both, actually.

Coming of age during the blitz, young Tim held, like a grail in his mind, an idealized vision of England, honorable and heroic, and envisioned the postwar world as heaven on earth, just as the song on the wireless promised.

There'll be bluebirds over  
The white cliffs of Dover,  
Tomorrow, just you wait and see.  
There'll be love and laughter,  
And peace ever after,  
Tomorrow, when the world is free.<sup>58</sup>

He will learn, however, that the war contained more moral ambiguities than he had imagined, particularly the moral implications which surround the British saturation bombings of German cities. He will experience the grinding postwar privation that made many Englishmen wonder just who won the war. He will root in London's dark cracks: his home ground, southeast London, "its soiled, worn textures of brick and stone, its low, irregular skyline, its odours of breweries and vegetables and tanneries. . . . The predominant colours were black, brown and a dirty cream. Guinness tints."<sup>59</sup> He will even discover, crossing the Channel on his journey to Germany, that the cliffs of Dover were dirty, patrolled not by bluebirds but by scavenging sea gulls.

In Heidelberg, a city untouched by bombing, Tim enters the world of imperial America. Food — hamburgers, fried chicken, banana splits — is plentiful for the occupation forces. His PX card was "like a talisman of magical powers that admitted him to a world of privilege and pleasure."<sup>60</sup> A "childish" world, perhaps, "but it was a childhood he had never known, and he coveted it in spite of himself."<sup>61</sup> Kate's circle of friends were, like the characters in *The Sun Also Rises*, seeking distraction in a ravaged, postwar Europe, making it their playground. Only a former GI, a conscientious objector, tells Tim about a darker Europe: saturation bombing, evident on a trip to Frankfurt, and Auschwitz. In Germany Tim realizes that there was more than he had ever dreamed in his tight-little-island, English philosophy. "Everything seemed so strange and new to him here, everyone seemed to live by notions so different from those that obtained at home, that almost anything was imaginable."<sup>62</sup>

This coming-of-age novel climaxes, so to speak, in a touching, seriocomic, nonpenetrating sexual encounter between Tim and Gloria, an American teenager, on a boat party. They exchange more than amazed touch. He tries to tell Gloria, who is "sort of Jewish," about the horrors of World War II. She in turn tries to get Tim to let go, be guided by his feelings, and not worry everything all the time. After tentative sex with Gloria, Tim feels lucky. "But luck seemed too trivial a word for the occasion. He felt it rather as a kind of dark grace that was granted to those who took the plunge into experience."<sup>63</sup> Their brief fling foreshadows Vic and Robyn's single night of passion in *Nice Work*; Lodge's characters come from different worlds, meet on neutral grounds, come to *know* each other through language and touch, come of age, come through. The rest of *Out of the Shelter* is marred by overplotting and thematic underlining, but Tim's rite of passage, his preparation for return to a transformed England, is memorably made. In *Nice Work* and *Out of the Shelter*, David Lodge codifies his generational heritage: luck for one's good fortune, a memory of others' devastated lives, an imagination of disaster, and a commitment to a reduced but resilient England of the mind.

Henry James thought it "a complex fate, being an American."<sup>64</sup> For Larkin, le Carré, Brookner, Lessing, and Lodge, England is an equally ambiguous inheritance. Neither what it once was, nor what it should be, England, nevertheless, is *there*, a diminished but undaunted landscape of the imagination. In "Englands of the Mind" — a lecture on Ted Hughes, Geoffrey Hill, and Philip Larkin — Seamus Heaney sees these British poets expressing "defensive love of their territory" in a new regionalism.<sup>65</sup>

I think that sense of an ending has driven all three of these writers into a kind of piety towards their local origins, has made them look in, rather than up, to England. The loss of imperial power, the failure of economic nerve, the diminished influence of



Britain inside Europe, all this has led to a new sense of the shires, a new valuing of the native English experience.<sup>66</sup>

The novelists here examined are less shire centered; their fictions range within and beyond the borders of England, with particular concern for those nations which shaped England's fate during World War II: Germany, America, and Russia. However, le Carré, Brookner, Lessing, and Lodge imagine richly specific Englands; they revalue the native English experience in inventive fictional designs. So Kenner is wrong; a meritorious and defiantly-English literature — self-conscious about the literature of place and the place of literature — is still written. No one expresses it better — better preserves in words what is eroding in fact — than Philip Larkin, in "Going, Going." He mourns not only the passing of pastoral England, but also the loss of an ancient vision of England. "Agriculture," in the words of G. M. Trevelyan, "is not one industry among many, but is a way of life, unique and irreplaceable in its human and spiritual values."<sup>67</sup> In this poem Larkin seeks a saving remnant, beyond such a devastating loss.

I thought it would last my time —  
The sense that, beyond the town,  
There would always be fields and farms,  
Where the village louts could climb  
Such trees as were not cut down . . .

It seems, just now,  
To be happening so very fast;  
Despite all the land left free  
For the first time I feel somehow  
That it isn't going to last,

That before I snuff it, the whole  
Boiling will be bricked in  
Except for the tourist parts —  
First slum of Europe: a role  
It won't be so hard to win,  
With a cast of crooks and tarts.

And that will be England gone,  
The shadows, the meadows, the lanes,  
The guildhalls, the carved choirs.  
There'll be books; it will linger on  
In galleries; but all that remains  
For us will be concrete and tyres.<sup>68</sup>

At the least, as we here see, there will be worthy books on the critical, if not terminal, condition of England. 🍷

---

## Notes

1. Hugh Kenner, *A Sinking Island: The Modern English Writers* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 3.
2. Novelist David Cornwell (John le Carré) caricatures Thatcher: "First it's 'Have a little more short-bread, dear,' then it's WIPE YOUR FEET!" cited in Tom Mathews, "In from the Cold," *Newsweek*,

- June 5, 1989, 53. Gail Sheehy sees PM Thatcher "out to remake Britain, from the top to bottom, in her own image." Gail Sheehy, "The Blooming of Margaret Thatcher," *Vanity Fair*, June 1989, 107.
3. Philip Larkin, "Going, Going," *Philip Larkin: Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux/Marvel Press, 1989), 190.
  4. Larkin, "Homage to a Government," *Collected Poems*, 171.
  5. John le Carré, *The Russia House* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), Foreword.
  6. Irving Howe had occasion to reflect upon "the loss of faith, perhaps even of interest, in the idea of the common reader" by academic literary critics who are more concerned with critical theory than with literary works, genres that they "deconstruct" to undifferentiated, apparently authorless "texts." Irving Howe, "The Treason of the Critics," *The New Republic*, June 12, 1989, 28–31.
  7. Gail Caldwell, "Le Carré: The Spy Master Has Another Instant Best-Seller," *Boston Globe*, June 8, 1989, 81.
  8. George Orwell, "Shooting an Elephant," in Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, eds., *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, Vol. 1, An Age Like This, 1920–1940* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1970), 266.
  9. Le Carré, *Russia House*, 166–167.
  10. Cited in Jonathan Kaufman, "Le Carré on the Cold War: A Perfect Thaw," *Boston Sunday Globe*, June 4, 1989, Focus, 86.
  11. Le Carré, *Russia House*, 17.
  12. *Ibid.*, 30.
  13. *Ibid.*
  14. *Ibid.*, 45.
  15. *Ibid.*, 76.
  16. *Ibid.*, 86.
  17. *Ibid.*, 87–89.
  18. Lionel Trilling, *E. M. Forster* (New York: New Directions, 1964 [1943]), 118.
  19. Le Carré, *Russia House*, 34.
  20. Cited in Mathews, "In from the Cold," 52.
  21. Le Carré, *Russia House*, 8.
  22. *Ibid.*, 161.
  23. *Ibid.*, 286.
  24. *Ibid.*, 352.
  25. Sergei L. Petrov, "The Little Drummer Boy," *The New Republic*, August 21, 1989, 30–32.
  26. Anita Brookner, *Latecomers* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 117.
  27. *Ibid.*, 1–2.
  28. *Ibid.*, 8–9.
  29. *Ibid.*, 221.
  30. *Ibid.*, 71.
  31. *Ibid.*, 79.
  32. *Ibid.*, 176.
  33. *Ibid.*, 128.

34. Ibid., 199.
35. Ibid., 229.
36. Ibid., 112.
37. William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming," in Richard J. Finneran, ed., *The Poems of W. B. Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1983), 187.
38. Larkin, "Annus Mirabilis," *Collected Poems*, 167.
39. Doris Lessing, *The Fifth Child* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 4.
40. Ibid., 10.
41. Ibid., 21.
42. Ibid., 48–53.
43. Ibid., 74–76.
44. Ibid., 114–117.
45. Ibid., 122.
46. David Lodge, *Nice Work* (New York: Viking, 1989), 45.
47. Ibid., 22.
48. Ibid., 82.
49. Ibid., 29.
50. Ibid., 106.
51. Ibid., 28.
52. Ibid., 151.
53. Ibid., 210.
54. Ibid., 249.
55. Ibid., 52.
56. David Lodge, *Out of the Shelter* (New York: Penguin, 1970, 1989, rev. ed.), vii.
57. Ibid., x.
58. Ibid., 16.
59. Ibid., 69.
60. Ibid., 127.
61. Ibid., 177.
62. Ibid., 144.
63. Ibid., 248.
64. Henry James in a letter to C. F. Norton (1872). Leon Edel, ed., *Henry James Letters, 1843–1875*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1974), 274.
65. Seamus Heaney, "Englands of the Mind," *Preoccupations: Selected Prose, 1968–1978* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980), 150.
66. Ibid., 169.
67. Cited in G. H. Bantcock, "The Social and Historical Background," in Boris Ford, ed., *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature, Vol. 7, From James to Eliot* (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), 15.
68. Larkin, "Going, Going," 189–190.

7301 051