THE DISCOURSES OF FOOD IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH FICTION

ANNETTE COZZI
Nineteenth-Century Major Lives and Letters

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Annette Cozzi
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This book is for my loves, John and Sienna Ballarini. John, thank you for being our hero. Sienna, thank you for being.
...From this Amphibious ill-born mob began
That vain ill-natured thing—an English man—

Fate jumbled them together—God knows how!
What’er they were—they’re true born English now.


Then, Britons, from all nice Dainties refrain,
Which effeminate Italy, France, and Spain;
And mighty Roast Beef shall command on the Main.
Oh, the Roast Beef of old England,
And old England’s Roast Beef.


English cooking is old-fashioned, because we like it that way. We do enjoy foreign dishes and admire Continental cooks, but when we cook the foreign dishes, the dishes, like the foreigners, become “naturalized English.”

—Dorothy Hartley, Food in England, 1954

Roast beef and ale. Fish and chips. Bangers and mash. Yorkshire pudding, sherry trifle, spotted dick. Despite being dismissed as a culinary joke, few national cuisines are as immediately identifiable by name alone as British food. English food may be belittled as boiled and bland, more suited for the nursery than the dining room, but one of the most iconic images of the nation is that of the over-stuffed John
Bull, whose straining waistcoat proclaims plentitude and abundance, the self-satisfied personification of a middle-class nation of well-fed shopkeepers and grocers blithely gorging off the fat of the land. And not just any old fat, but beef fat. Beef is so associated with English identity that not only are the Yeomen Warders of Her Majesty’s Royal Palace and Fortress the Tower of London known as Beefeaters, but even a contemporary pamphlet hails “the absolute necessary of life, beef.” This association of beef with English identity finds its visual correlation in William Hogarth’s *The Gate of Calais, or O the Roast Beef of Old England*, in which an immense side of sirloin is a metonym for a robust national identity explicitly defined against the starveling, emaciated French (see figure I.1). This image is, of course, a fantasy of plenty. In reality, as I discuss in the chapters that follow, there was an almost visceral fear of the starving masses, a fear that reached its feverish pitch—quite literally in the rick-burning rampages, in which the discontented disenfranchised set fire to their agrarian landlords’ haystacks—during the aptly named “Hungry Forties.”

![Figure I.1](image-url) William Hogarth, *The Gate of Calais, or O The Roast Beef of Old England*, 1748. Courtesy of the Haggerty Museum, Marquette University.
This national pride in their prosperity, often measured by an abundance of food, is one of the defining characteristics of British national identity. According to Linda Colley in *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837*, “Britishness was superimposed over an array of internal differences in response to contact with the Other, and above all in response to conflict with the Other,” but British national identity is also partly defined by its self-image as “God’s elect,” in which, as “members of the chosen land…almost by definition, they were blessed, and these blessings had a material as well as a spiritual form. An extraordinarily large number of Britons seem to have believed that under God, they were peculiarly free and peculiarly prosperous.”

To this I would add, peculiarly satisfied. Colley’s echoing of Biblical language is not accidental, and it is this righteous rhetoric of providential grace that would be evoked and marshaled in service of the justification and promulgation of imperialism. The most basic material blessing, for which even the most nominally religious gives thanks several times a day, in a continual reenactment of the transubstantiation of gross material into spiritual sustenance, is that of food. Thus, for the Protestant English, convinced that the accumulation of wealth is a holy venture, providential grace is manifested in the abundance of food, just as the highly encoded ritual of dining serves to distinguish further the chosen from the damned.

Yet England is not only a nation of eaters, it is also a nation of readers. In *The Rise of the Novel*, Ian Watt argues that the creation of a “peculiarly” English national identity coincides with the rise of both the novel and the middle class, developments he locates in the mid-eighteenth century. For Watt, “the world of the novel is essentially the world of the modern city; both present a picture of life in which the individual is immersed in private and personal relationships because a larger communion with nature or society is no longer available.”

However, that larger communion *is* available—through patriotic identification with the nation—and though the novel allows for the delineation of individualized, private lives, identification is only possible because the reader shares (or at least intellectually understands) a form of collective *Englishness*. Watt claims that “the novel was essentially concerned with private and domestic life: what could be more natural, therefore, than that a distinctively commercial, bourgeois and urban society which laid so much stress on family life…should have triumphed in a familiar and domestic genre” (300). What Watt takes for granted is that the novelistic genre is essentially English; this presupposes a definition of Englishness that is not only accessible and shared, but also so assumed as to be hegemonic.
The novel did not merely reflect the reading public, it also created it, as Nancy Armstrong points out. Armstrong argues that “the history of the novel and the history of the modern subject are, quite literally, one and the same. The British novel provides the test case.... Once formulated in fiction...this subject proved uniquely capable of reproducing itself not only in authors, but also in readers, in other novels, and across British culture” (Novels, 3). Ultimately, the “familiar and domestic genre” is propagable because the reader has come to accept both the novel’s form and its content as domestic and familiar. This, of course, is the aim of hegemony: an internalization of ideology so complete that it seems self-evident. What makes hegemony possible is this reliance on the familiar and domestic, which not only white-washes ideological apparatuses (who is alarmed by an innocent little red schoolhouse, or even its Dickensian successor, the looming, gloomy, red-brick, factory-like behemoth that serves to inculcate the masses into their inevitable institutionalized lives?), but allows for otherwise distasteful ideologies to be swallowed whole, so that the individual not only internalizes them, but does so willingly.

Nothing is more familiar and domestic than food. Thus, the sheer mundanity of eating conceals deeply embedded power structures. Like ideology, food is neither innocent nor neutral, nor is it merely nourishing fuel; rather, it allows for an assortment of associations and attachments to be swallowed with it, like mold on cheese—from the emotional (grandma’s cookies and mom’s apple pie) to the evocative (pearls in oysters and plump, bursting figs); from the religious (honey cakes and unleavened bread) to the cultural (plum pudding, wassail, and Christmas goose); from the regional (Cornish pasties and Devonshire cream) to the jingoistic (frog legs or fish and chips).

Significantly, literature and food are often conflated, as is revealed by shared metaphors of consumption and morality. Both are sustenance, whether they are deemed too spicy, too sugary, bad-for-you (trashy lit and junk food) or good-for-you (wholesome and nutritious). Both are the essential elements of mental and physical identity—you are what you read, just as you are what you eat. Yet it is also significant that novels do not merely act as metaphors for consumption, they actually contain detailed descriptions of food and eating. These often lush evocations remind us that the nineteenth century was preoccupied with food, and that hunger, even starvation, was the wolf always howling at the door. Though literal descriptions of food are not surprising in a genre that records the minutia of daily life, they remind us that food was a concern of the author and of interest to the reader. Descriptions of food in the nineteenth-century novel are also
significant in that they reveal anxieties of ingestion that resulted from, among other things, imperialism and industrialism. These anxieties directly affected how identity was both constructed and consumed.

Identities are innumerable, but one of the most powerful identifications is that of nationality; and national identity depends on both food and literature to sustain and replicate itself. Although scholars and theorists have analyzed the construction of the nation and national identity (which I will discuss in more detail below), few have examined how national identity is consumed. I argue that food is one of the most fundamental signifiers of national identity, and literary representations of food—particularly in that most English of genres, the novel—reveal how that identity is culturally constructed. In the pages that follow, I examine how food and the novel both simultaneously construct and confirm British national identity, an identity that is defined both inclusively (such as in terms of the assimilation of the countries of Wales, Scotland, and Ireland and the reconciliation of difference, whether of region, gender, or class) and exclusively (most often against a racialized Other, although, as I will show, Otherness is not merely figured as radical or oppositional difference; it is also figured as superfluity, a monstrous excess that threatens to topple the balance of power). I will also discuss the tension between English and British national identity, a tension located, as Lauren M. E. Goodlad suggests, between “heirloom ‘rootedness’ and capitalist ‘cosmopolitanism’.”

Nationalism requires the internalization of ideology, and both food and literature are portable, exportable repositories of nationalist beliefs and sentiments, repositories that provide models—even blueprints and recipes—for the reproduction and consumption of nationalist ideology. Internalization is not merely literal or metaphorical—the chewing, swallowing, and digesting of an edible comestible or a particularly “meaty” text. It also requires complex psychoanalytic mechanisms of introjection and abjection in order for identificatory processes to occur. These processes mystify not only the imaginative work required to construct national identity, but also the strategies necessary to sustain it. Both food and literature reveal how Britain’s identity is dependent on colonization—imperial exploits often serve as a source for storytelling, just as literature can provide a narrative for imperialism, rendering brutal realities innocent by cloaking them as fictional or fantastic stories. Similarly, food provides a literal and metaphorical example of Britain’s dominance, the result, to some extent, of Britain’s ability to absorb other cultures.
and their resources, ultimately recreating and reevaluating them as something uniquely British. For example, as I discuss in the final chapter, Britain imports tropical ingredients made affordable by plantations dependent on slaves—rum, sugar, lemons—and transmutes them into rum punch, a concoction rendered impeccably British not only by incorporation and admixture, but also by the ritual of preparation. Thus a recipe for Britishness is born.¹⁵

Yet the consumption of the Other’s food is not just a demonstration of cultural dominance, it is also an attempt to absorb the Other, for knowledge confers power. As Kim Chernin states, “When we eat, we know.”¹⁶ Eating is about more than physical nourishment or sensual pleasure, it is about power: power over life, and power over death, power over the self and over the Other.¹⁷ As bell hooks explains, to eat the food of the Other “is a way to say ‘death, I am eating you’ thereby conquering fear and acknowledging power. White racism, imperialism, and sexist domination prevail by courageous consumption. It is by eating the Other . . . that one asserts power and privilege.”¹⁸ Conversely, it seems safe to assume that the more xenophobic Brit would not appreciate a “baboo” eating bubble-and-squeak or a “squaw” nibbling scones. Yet such privilege is not without its costs. That Britishness depends upon the Other for its identity, that the boundaries between Self (or Same) and Other are in a constant state of dissolving, one into the other, the within circulating without, is so distasteful to the national imagination that the abject is repressed and denied, although its insistent presence continues to exert a powerful hold on the British psyche, as I will demonstrate throughout these pages.

Food and literature offer concrete evidence of how Britain plunders colonial resources and transforms them into something not only exportable and consumable, but also quite tasty, a delicacy that can be repeated infinitely and that goes down easy. Yet recipes are far from neutral exchanges. Susan J. Leonardi claims that the “root of recipe—the Latin recipere—implies an exchange, a giver and a receiver,”¹⁹ but the OED lists “take” as the primary root. The definitions of the usual English word for recipe—receipt—makes this one-way relationship not only explicit, but also implicitly teleological and imperial: “[A]n account of the means, for effecting some end [or] the means for attaining an end; the action of receiving something . . . into one’s possession or custody; a place where hunters await driven game with fresh hounds” (defs. 1c, 3a, 11).²⁰ Similarly, Leonardi claims that the word “‘rule’ has long been a synonym for recipe, which is, after all, a model rule; it allows, like the rules for . . . rivalry . . . infinite
variations, while still maintaining almost complete reproducibility and literality” (345). I am interested in both this allowance for variations (with ramifications for national identity discussed later in this introduction), and in the more sinister and brutal variation of the word “rule.” Literary food, whether in novels or cookery books, reveals how the violence of colonialism can be palliated—repackaged as harmlessly entertaining or deliciously familiar, even comforting, as mild as milk-bread (cinnamon from Ceylon), as bland as blancmange (nutmeg from the Banda Islands), as insipid as rice pudding (vanilla from Madagascar).

But before national identity can be consumed, it must first be constructed. Perhaps no theory of nationalism is as widely and successfully disseminated as Benedict Anderson’s notion of the nation as an imagined community, a loosely bound aggregate of otherwise dissimilar individuals linked together not by language, borders, or race so much as by a sheer act of will, an act of sustained imagination that creates an embracing national “family” with which to identify and for which to fight.21 Food is so central to the notion of bonding and community—and, ultimately, fighting—that the word companion is derived from panis, the Latin word for bread, and community is rooted in shared munitions. From this imaginary activity, ideological apparatuses that both enable and enforce national identity kick into gear—Althusser’s state apparatuses, institutions that demand or coax compliance from a community’s citizens. But perhaps the most pervasive apparatus, seemingly innocent and “natural” and thus exquisitely effective, is the family.

One of the most prevalent images of nineteenth-century England is the angel of the hearth.22 Though the archetype of the compliant/transgressive angel has been analyzed and undressed, deconstructed and dissected, dismissed or demonized as subjugated victim, or rediscovered and defended as subversive agent, the hearth itself has been rather neglected by academia. For the hearth is not only the literal and metaphorical center, the heart of the home representing bourgeois ideals of comfort and security, and of the separation of gendered spheres, but it is also the literal center of the home—not just its heart, but its stomach, if you will. And all the many details of food—how one eats, whether with fingers or silver forks; what, whether eels and whelks or aspics and sauces; where, seated according to precedence in a formal dining room or standing at a street stall; when, at a laborers’ supper or a revelers’ banquet; and why, whether to soothe genuine, belly-aching hunger or to assuage other appetites—are some of the most accessible yet encoded ways that national identity is at once
constructed and consumed, reproduced and renewed, ingested and internalized.23

Before I discuss the role of food and the novel in the construction and consumption of national identity, it is necessary to examine briefly some of the most widely disseminated theories of nationalism. Theoreticians take different approaches to the Question of Nationalism, to borrow a popular nineteenth-century formulation, and can be roughly divided into Traditional or Modernization theorists. In their debate about nationalism, Paul Brass and Francis Robinson make the useful distinction between “primordial” and “instrumental” elements of nationalism, categories that can be broadened to generalize about the theorists of nationalism themselves and whether they define nations and nationalism more in psychological and sentimental or material and economic terms.24 In The Construction of Nationhood, Adrian Hastings suggests categorizing theorists as “modernists” or “revisionists” according to what period they see nations and nationalisms emerging, an issue I discuss a bit later.25 Yet Hastings’s insistence on age is significant, for a crucial debate among theorists is the question of which came first, nations or nationalism. Primordialists see nationalism as the culmination of the past, Instrumentalists see it as a consequence of modernity. British national identity, as I shall discuss in more detail in the first chapter, reconciles primordial and instrumental elements.

Primordial and Traditional theorists tend to define the nation in terms of blood and birth, believing that, in a sense, the nation arises from within, that it is based not on the exigencies of difference, but on the expression of common bonds. “Primordial” in more ways than one, Ernest Renan was the first to ask, “Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?” For Renan, the answer is that a “nation is a soul, a spiritual principle.”26 For Renan, though a nation is based on more than just shared similarities, it is still defined by the will of the people to live and work together: “To have common glories in the past, a common will in the present; to have accomplished great things together, to wish to do so again, that is the essential condition for being a nation” (17). Above all, a “nation is a grand solidarity” (17), in which like-minded citizens daily engage in an unspoken plebiscite. Although his view of nationalism is civic rather than ethnic, it is still intrinsic rather than constructed, a community bound by shared memories—and shared repressions.

Tellingly, Joseph Stalin agrees with the primordial point of view that sees the nation as an innate solidarity, claiming that a “nation is primarily a community, a definite community of people.”27 Stalin
believes that a “nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture” (his italics, 20). Theories such as Stalin’s give shape and voice to that type of nationalism inherent in what Liah Greenfeld calls ethnic collectivities, which are defined by ressentiment, rather than individualism and civic pride. Ressentiment, according to Greenfeld, “refers to a psychological state resulting from suppressed feelings of envy and hatred (existential envy) and the impossibility of satisfying these feelings.”

The key word here is, of course, “psychological,” which immediately alerts us to the emotional nature of this type of national identification. Though Britain’s nationalism is considered to be civic rather than ethnic, it is Britain’s complex relationship to ressentiment that will give rise to the monsters that haunt the national imagination, as I discuss in the final chapter.

Instrumental and Modernization theorists, on the other hand, see the formation of the nation in material terms. For them, one way or another, nationalism is about power, whether political or economical—and usually both. Max Weber, for example, believes that national affiliation is not based on language, solidarity, or blood; rather, a nation is political, “a nation is a community which normally tends to produce a state of its own.” For Weber, the state is not just composed of the ink and paper trail of bureaucracy, but validates itself through the “legitimate” use of violence and force, which I examine in more detail in the fourth chapter. Most Instrumental and Modernization theorists, including Eric Hobsbawm, agree that nationalism is not about patriotism or blood ties, but about economic structures, following, in this regard, Ernest Gellner. For theorists such as Hobsbawm, who believes that the nation and its traditions are invented by the political elite, nationalism is a consequence of industrialism and develops unevenly. Hobsbawm, however, also reminds us that though nationalism filters from above and the “lower” masses must be invited into history, the contributions of “ordinary people” should not be underestimated: “[Nations are] dual phenomena, constructed essentially from above, but which cannot be understood unless also analysed from below, that is in terms of . . . ordinary people.” Hobsbawm is one of the few theorists who does analyze nationalism “from below” in, for example, his study of sports, but it is these very “ordinary people”—not to mention their ordinary concerns, such as food—who are often overlooked by many theorists, who disregard not only the emotional lure of nationalism, but also the modernizing benefits that nationalism often confers, which I examine in more detail in the first chapter.
Tom Nairn champions the advantages of nationalism and is one of those theorists who seem to ride the fence, or perhaps more appropriately, straddle borders. Nairn attempts to marry economics and sentiment by providing a materialist rationalization for his rather romantic view of nationalism, a view with glimmers of Scottish nationalism. For Nairn and a handful of other scholars, particularly those whose own countries have not yet been invited into history, nationalism is a positive alternative to oppression and imperialism. Whereas Hobsbawm and Gellner see nations as developing unevenly and are concerned with the discrepancy between above and below, Nairn and other post-colonial scholars, such as Homi K. Bhabha, see nations in terms of center and periphery. Nairn believes that “[i]ndustrialism erupted among remote, squabbling, hirsute tribes of the extreme periphery, and spread out from there amid warfare and mayhem to reach the great world imperium last of all.”33 Bhabha, however, is more concerned with the dynamic relationship between center and periphery—in particular with how nationalism denies those “peripheral” people a history. Bhabha believes that nationalism is “haunted” by an “ambivalence that emerges from a growing awareness that, despite the certainty with which historians speak of the ‘origins’ of nation as a sign of the ‘modernity’ of society, the cultural temporality of the nation inscribes a much more transitional social reality.”34 Bhabha’s intention is to excavate the silenced, near-forgotten, liminal Other, but, as I discuss in the final chapter, we also see how that Other returns to disturb the nation-space.35

Whereas the aforementioned theorists struggle with the definition of nations and nationalism, other scholars attempt to date the phenomenon. Most theorists seem to believe, as Hobsbawm so aptly words it, that the “basic characteristic of the modern nation and everything connected with it is its modernity” (Nations, 14). This, of course, begs the question, What—and when—is modernity? Hobsbawm agrees with Gellner and the majority of theorists that the rise of nationalism coincides with the rise of industrialization, ascribing the most galvanizing significance to the French and American Revolutions. Greenfeld, on the other hand, sees the origins of nationalism in an earlier modernity, and the revolution that concerns her is “glorious” and “bloodless.” Greenfeld suggests that nationalism was a reaction to Queen Mary’s inquisitorial persecutions of Protestants and is an outgrowth of the rise of individualism and Parliamentarianism in a population more than suspicious of the monarchy after the bloody excesses of Mary and the financial ones of Charles I.36 I agree with Greenfeld that modern nationalism begins not in France or America,
but in England, where “the birth of the English nation was not the birth of a nation; it was the birth of the nations, the birth of nationalism” (23), but in the pages that follow I narrow my focus to the years that I call “Imperial Nationalism,” roughly between 1773 and 1939. I take as the “birth date” of Imperial Nationalism the Regulating Act of 1773 (which curbed the East India Company’s rule of the “subcontinent” by making it accountable to Parliament, thus initiating government involvement through the creation of the post of Governor-General), and mark the Independence of Ireland and the beginning of World War II as sounding its death knell. The focus of my readings, however, is the Victorian era, in which Imperial Nationalism becomes institutionalized and legislated by the British government.

What theorists of nationalism overlook is the importance of food to the construction of national identity. Whether constructed from above or confirmed from within, nationalism is about belonging and excluding, and food is one of the most fundamental ways that human beings commune with and discriminate from each other. Food is at once primordial and instrumental; the nostalgic national imagination is steeped in the sentimental sense-memory of food, from hot buttered teacakes to steaming plum pudding, just as the growth and health of the body politic is determined by the realities of bureaucratic and economic forces, from food lines to famines. And not only does the literal incorporation of food feed the national body, but also the consumption of metaphoric food—from food in the novel to the novel as food—maintains the national imagination. All living creatures are consumed by the pursuit of food; what most distinguishes humans from animals is, of course, our manner of preparing and cooking it. But in what ways does food serve to distinguish one human being from another, or one nation from its friends and foes? By examining the cultural politics and poetics of food in relation to issues of race, class, gender, regionalism, urbanization, colonialism, and imperialism, we can discover how national identity and Otherness are constructed and internalized. Ultimately, I investigate how food and discourse work to consolidate and sustain an imagined national identity plagued with anxieties of ingestion and increasingly preoccupied with the threat of its own destruction by improper consumption.

In the following chapters, I examine the role of food and the novel in sustaining an imagined national identity that calls itself British, yet insidiously promotes the “superiority” of Englishness. Though other countries are incorporated into the Kingdom for economic, political, cultural, and psychological reasons, “Britishness” is no
Discourses of Food

melting pot. Instead, the countries of Wales, Scotland, and Ireland not only remain distinct entities with their own customs and culture, their own “protonational” imagined identities, they also serve to bolster the illusion of a cohesive and inclusive national identity. In other words, not only do these “minor” countries provide valuable resources (whether in the form of Irish laborers or Scottish intellectuals or Welsh bards, for example), but they also offer a domestic Other against which Englishness can be defined. Consequently, my formulation of Britishness is as a composite identity that integrates or incorporates various nationalities to its own advantage, while conceding (or insisting) that those nations may remain discrete—even at times conferring benefits to the “lesser” or “minor” countries that comprise this loosely, and violently, united kingdom. Yet we should not be fooled by this supranational strategy, for it is really Englishness that exerts ideological hegemony. But what is Englishness? Though this is a question that I attempt to answer in the chapters that follow, a brief summary here will serve as a useful starting point. As Judy Giles and Tim Middleton point out, “The construction of a monolithic national identity is never complete: it is constantly disrupted by supplementary, competing or radically alternative versions of Englishness.” It is these disruptions that interest me in the following pages, as they serve to reinforce, through the persistence of difference, the illusory dream of a cohesive and homogeneous national identity.

For instance, in “Some Constants of the English Character,” Sir Ernest Barker, born and educated in Victorian England and one of the most prominent and patriotic political scientists of the early twentieth century, attempts to catalogue some characteristics of that dream of a “constant” identity. Barker gives as examples “some half dozen . . . single name[s].” Barker’s list is pertinent not only because it was, according to Keith Robbins, “the last substantial volume which essayed to write about The Character of England,” but also because it elucidates those qualities often associated with Englishness (most of which will be borne out in the novels I examine, such as professionalization and the idea of the gentleman in Dickens, or “the voluntary habit” in Mary Barton and Villette). What is significant here is how many of these “single,” avowedly homogenous characteristics allow for breathing room by accommodating heterogeneity. According to Barker, the first constant is “social homogeneity” (55), in which Barker confirms Hobsbawm’s insistence on a “suitable historic past” (Tradition, 1) by tracing the “cohabitation” of Normans and Saxons, nobles and commoners, through “the blood and the profits of business
families flowing into the families of the land” (56). Next comes the “vogue of the *amateur*” (58), in which Barker admits that “[h]ere again a paradox emerges. England is the home of professions . . . [but] England is also anti-professional” (58). Third is the “idea of the *gentleman*” (59), which, as Barker concedes, “is an idea which has had its mutations” (59). Fourth is the “voluntary habit” (60), a necessary characteristic in “a blended country of compromise—compromise and imprecision . . . ” (60). The fifth constant “which foreign observers have generally noted in the character of England is *eccentricity*” (60–61), but as Barker notes, “Among ourselves we should hardly notice this idiosyncrasy, or detect much difference in the weather of our souls; but if all are eccentric, eccentricity will be so normal that it is commonplace” (61). Finally, the last constant is “youthfulness . . . a trait which the English share with the ancient Greeks” (61). In one neat maneuver, Barker not only conflates England with one of the most impressive and influential civilizations in history, but also manages to make youthfulness ancient.45

Just as few of Barker’s “single words” are actually single, his list belies his insistence on constancy. Flowing, paradox, mutations, blended, compromise, imprecision, eccentricity, idiosyncrasy, difference—Barker’s lexicon, his very list, reveals the degree to which English “constants” are in actuality supremely mobile and accommodating, the only constant being a state of flux. As Barker himself confesses, nullifying his own list, “most of us are mixtures, unreconciled mixtures, and that element of freakishness, disconcertingly mixed with the element of form, can make disconcerting appearances” (61). This preoccupation with “mixtures,” with the dichotomy between the privileging of purity and an uneasy awareness of England’s mongrel origins, is one of the most pervasive features of English identity. Despite Barker’s insistence, what underlies his constants and English identity is heterogeneity; yet heterogeneity is a strategy itself, for in Darwinist terms, variety increases the chances of survival. Thus Englishness proclaims homogeneity whilst taking shelter in British heterogeneity, allowing “little” England a greater chance of ensuring its own survival. And, too, by seeking protection under the expansive mantle of “Great” Britain—a consortium of adopted/adapted nations on whom responsibility (or blame) could fall—England could disavow that which contradicts the moral imperatives inherent in the idea of liberal identity—for example, what contemporary critics called the “sigh” of imperialism, which was by no means, despite pervasive propaganda and jingoistic jubilees, universally or unquestioningly celebrated.
Just as definitions of Englishness such as Barker’s allow for the accommodation and the reconciliation of difference, so too does the British novel. As Henry James so wonderfully put it, the novel is a baggy monster, a great, big, formless form, a wordless, wordy eating machine, the ultimate consumer swallowing anything in its wake, deliberately disregarding decorum. This definition could just as easily apply to British identity itself, an identity predicated on voracious consumption. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, the novel is a kind of meta-genre that subsumes all other genres, its loose form, its heteroglossia, its hodge-podge of styles at once seemingly reflecting and reifying Englishness itself. Yet novels are not merely what George Eliot considered a mirror to the world, for, as Armstrong has demonstrated, reading does not just provide models but initiates them. If theorists such as Anderson and Hobsbawm are correct in asserting that what marks nationalism is its novelty, the key word here is “novel”: stories and narratives play a crucial role in creating—and feeding—the national imagination.

Several theorists, including Anderson, Greenfeld, Hastings, and Hobsbawm, have traced the etymology of a whole constellation of words associated with national identity, words such as _country_ (from _terra_, land) or _patriot_ (from _patris_, fatherland). Though most recent theorists dismiss the importance of land, at least in terms of borders, to the construction of national identity, in the first chapter I stress its importance. “Land” is not merely the etymological root of _country_ and _patriot_, it is also the literal root for grain—the staff of life, the stuff of national identity.

In the first chapter, “Corn Kings: Disraeli, Hardy, and the Reconciliation of Nations,” I examine the role of corn, or grain, in the construction and consumption of national identity. Following Anderson’s notion that nationalism creates an imaginary “birthday,” I investigate England’s imaginary origins through the narration of alternative versions of a national _bildungsroman_. For England, at least according to Thomas Hardy, this birthday is in the rural past, in which a mythology of Englishness is born. Hardy, in _The Mayor of Casterbridge_, creates pagan antecedents so naturalized they have become historicized as truth, just as his descriptions of local dishes such as furmity evoke a nostalgia for a rural past—idyllic, idealized, and imaginary—that has been crushed by the relentless machinery of “progress,” the “agricultural pianos,” to borrow Hardy’s phrase, that have transformed the magic and music of regional specialties such as furmity into the industrial noise that produces uniform loaves of measured sliced bread. Hobsbawm warns us that “[w]e should not