Chaucer and Englishness

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THIS LECTURE HAS ITS ORIGINS in a number of occupations I have been engaged in and preoccupations I have had over the past few years. One is a talk I gave at a conference in Minnesota some years ago on 'Strangers in Late Fourteenth-Century London'.[1] The conference topic was 'Strangers in the Middle Ages', and I found the idea of 'the stranger' a very fruitful one for thinking about concepts of community identity and national consciousness. Another influence has been my own life as an Englishman working in the United States for the last thirteen years, and living there for part of the year as a stranger (a 'resident alien'), with the thoughts about Englishness that such an existence has been bound to provoke, whether out of a desire to exercise them or to exorcise them. And of course, since I am always 'doing' Chaucer, there was inevitably the desire to associate any thoughts about Englishness that came my way with the poet who occupied a large portion of my time, and to find out whether Englishness was in any way important in his writing.

I spent the whole of the academic year 1996–7 in England, and 'Englishness' was a subject that it was impossible, during that year, *not* to go on thinking about, in day-to-day life, in attending to the news, in voting in the general election—the whole question of what constitutes a sense of national identity, a sense of nationhood, the idea of a

national community—with maybe the added excitement that comes from examining something that seemed to be in a state of morbid decay, or at least changing rapidly in the aftermath of the cold war. I even did a little sociological research—of a not too strenuous kind—asking my friends in England what they thought 'Englishness' consisted in. I received an enormous variety of answers, including the categorical answer that there was no such thing, and I could find no consensus among those who thought there was. Tolerance, a sense of humour, a taste for understatement and irony, a love of gardens, standoffishness, excessive consciousness of class, prudishness, prurience, hypocrisy—these are only some of the traits that were mentioned, not all of them, as will readily be seen, forms of complacent self-congratulation.

However, the fact that the concept of 'Englishness' proved amorphous, that there were a number of shifting mythologies of Englishness competing for attention and promoted by a variety of more or less interested parties, did not make the idea of Englishness, and the desire to think about it and investigate it, any less pressingly important. And I was aware that there was at least one consistent strain in the answers to my question, even when people seemed to be putting forward completely different viewpoints, and that was the universal tendency to define 'Englishness' in terms of what it was or what it was not in relation to a presumption of national identity in other countries. So the English have a sense of humour where the Germans have only Teutonic belly-laughter, the English are sexually stunted where the French are open and frank, the English are standoffish and snobbish where the Americans are friendly and neighbourly. Or, as it might be, vice versa, since the truth-content of all these generalisations is about equal with their opposites, which is to say, nil. Nevertheless, these opinions are passionately held to, and, what is more, necessarily held to, since it seems to be a law that communities, including national communities, are chiefly constituted not through their sharing in the possession of certain unique and intrinsic qualities but through the exclusion from those communities, on one pretext or another, and sometimes quite arbitrarily, of those who are perceived not to belong to them.

This, in its implications, is not an entirely happy conclusion, but the strength of its claim on us may be demonstrated by placing side by side two quotations which together, I think, constitute a paradigm of social cohesion and exclusion, of national consciousness and xenophobia. The first quotation is from *Survival in Auschwitz*, by Primo Levi:

Many people—many nations—can find themselves holding, more or less wittingly, that 'every stranger is an enemy'. For the most part this conviction lies deep down like some latent infection; it betrays itself only in random, disconnected acts, and does not lie at the base of a system of reason.[2]

Despite his experiences at the hands of some of them, it is clear that Levi has a quite optimistic view of the many people, the many nations, that he speaks of. He describes the origin of the enmity towards strangers, the exclusion and often vilification of outsiders which informs the more rabid forms of nationalistic consciousness, as a form of deviance from a normally healthy state, as a potential flaw or weakness, like vulnerability to infection. What he does not take account of, or wish to take account of, is the possibility that what he calls the 'infection' is not some rottenness in the system, but part of what makes the system work, indeed part of a 'system of reason'.

The second quotation is from George Simmel, in a 1908 essay on 'Der Fremde' which is very familiar to students of sociology as a classic early statement of the structuralist view of the 'construction' of strangers,[3] a view that provides an important working hypothesis in analyses of group-identity by scholars as widely different in their approaches as the Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth, the French linguist Emil Benveniste, and the American social historian John A. Armstrong.[4] The stranger, says Simmel, is 'an organic member of the group, both outside it and necessary to its efficient working. . . . Mutually repulsive and opposing elements here compose a form of joint and interacting unity.'[5] A stranger is one who is identified as 'other' in relation to a group that

[2] Primo Levi, *Se questo e un uomo* (1958), trans. S. Woolf as *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity* (1960; New York, 1993). The quotation is from the 'Author's Preface', added in the later editions, p. 9 in the 1993 edn.

[3] G. Simmel, 'Der Fremde' ('The Stranger'), translated in *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*, ed. R. E. Park and E. W. Burgess, 3rd edn (Chicago, 1969), pp. 322–7.

[4] F. Barth, Introduction, in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organisation of Culture Difference*, ed. F. Barth (Boston, 1969), pp. 9–38 (see p. 15); E. Benveniste, *Indo-European Language and Society*, translated from the French, *La vocabulaire des institutions Indo-Européennes* (Paris, 1969), by E. Palmer (Coral Gables, Florida, 1973), pp. 289–304; J. A. Armstrong, *Nations before Nationalism* (Chapel Hill, 1982), pp. 4–6.

[5] Simmel, 'Der Fremde', p. 322. Cf. Armstrong, *Nations before Nationalism*: 'Groups tend to define themselves not by reference to their own characteristics but by exclusion, that is, by comparison to "strangers"' (p. 5). Benveniste explains how the ethnic group is defined by exclusion (*Indo-European Language and Society*, p. 299, though I prefer here the translation provided by Armstrong, p. 5): 'Every name of an ethnic character, in ancient times, was differentiating and oppositional. There was present in the name which a people assumed the intention, manifest or not, of distinguishing itself from neighbouring peoples . . . . Hence the ethnic group often constituted an antithetical duality with the opposed ethnic group.'

perceives itself or desires to define itself as the opposite of that 'other', that is, as 'one'. The concept of the stranger is thus vital to the creation and preservation of communities. Where a community feels itself to be under threat, the otherness of strangers will be thought of as potentially menacing, and hostility towards them will grow or be fomented. The threat may be perceived to be economic (as for instance in a shortage of jobs because of immigrants) or political (as for instance in a threat to national security because of the presence of non-nationals). Even where there is no clearly identifiable threat to a community, one may have to be invented, and continually reinvented, often in the form of demonised racial or religious 'others', in order to preserve the integrity of that community.

Turning now to Chaucer, with this paradigm in mind, one can first use the Chaucer text as a linguistic data-base from which to derive a taxonomy of 'stranger-hood', an understanding of the system through which words mark the boundaries that strengthen a given community's consciousness of its identity. Take the word 'strange'. Chaucer uses the adjective 'strange' or 'straunge' quite frequently, with a range of meanings that are illustrated also in the Middle English word 'straunger'. 'Straunge', first, means 'foreign, from a country not one's own, from abroad', without connotation of odd or weird, and is applied thus to the warriors who come from all over the near east and the far east to fight in the lists for Palamon or Arcite in the *Knight's Tale*. Theseus and his court entertained them, we are told,

> And made revel al the longe nyght
> Unto the straunge lordes, as was ryght.[6]

Such strangers are not necessarily hostile, but they are not unlikely to be so disposed, like the 'strange nacion' that Constance fears in the *Man of Law's Tale* (II. 268). Second, 'straunge' means 'not a member of one's social group', as more narrowly but still quite broadly defined. The 'straunge folk' that Prudence warns Melibeus against in *Melibee* (*Canterbury Tales*, VII. 1245) are people from outside their circle of friends: all such people one is to be wary of. Thirdly, and in a somewhat narrower sense, 'straunge' is used to refer to people who are not members of one's family or household or who are not friends of the family. Such a meaning is to be understood when Criseyde tearfully reproaches Pandarus for encouraging her to get embroiled in a love-

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[6] *Canterbury Tales*, I. 2717–18. Chaucer quotation and citation is from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. L. D. Benson (Boston, 1987).

affair. How can she trust 'straunge', she says (using the plural adjective as a substantive) when the one she took to be her best friend betrays her in this way (*Troilus and Criseyde*, II. 411). Finally, and in the most strict construction, 'straunge' is used to refer to people who are not members of one's family, in the sense of blood-relatives. In the *Clerk's Tale*, people are worried that 'a straunge successour' may take Walter's heritage if he has no heir (IV. 138): they mean someone who is not a member of the ruling family. January has the same concern in the *Merchant's Tale* lest his heritage 'sholde falle/In straunge hand' (IV. 1439–40) if he does not marry and get an heir.

There was, one might say, a disposition in the language to reinforce and solidify relations within groups.[7] One could call it, pessimistically, a linguistic architecture of xenophobia, or one could, in a better mood, call it a linguistic embodiment of the principle of community, but it seems embedded in the language through which that community expresses and identifies itself. The word 'disposition', borrowed from the language in which medieval people talked about one's 'disposition' in relation to the stars, is a useful one, since it avoids the suggestion of a determinism in language so rigid that escape from the prison-house is impossible. But it may be optimistic to think so, since escape is at the least very difficult, and certainly the views of Chaucer on the subject of 'strangers' were to some extent already formed in the language he inherited.

The language thus reinforced those ideological systems by which communities identify themselves and exclude others. And one can go on from there, to other kinds of evidence, in documents and records as well as literary texts, to show that linguistic systems of exclusion and community identity-formation operated at every level. If one looked, for instance, at some of the realities that surrounded late fourteenth-century Londoners like Chaucer, one would find that from the point of view of London citizens a large number of their fellow-Londoners were, as far as the record went, 'foreigners' (in the language of the records, usually 'forinsecus'), being poor, unenfranchised and condemned to perform only the most menial tasks needed by society.[8]

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[7] The structure of Indo-European words of non-kinship social relation can only be understood, says Benveniste (*Indo-European Language and Society*, p. 294), by 'starting from the idea that the stranger is of necessity an enemy, and correlatively that the enemy is necessarily a stranger' (cf. Levi, in note 2, above).

[8] The information in this paragraph is mostly from S. L. Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London* (Chicago, 1948), pp. 3–16, and is more fully treated in Pearsall, 'Strangers', pp. 48–50.

There were also the 'foreigners' who came from out of town to sell their goods. These people were a menace to the citizens, since they tended to undercut monopolistic price-fixing, and they needed to be excluded, not just controlled. The guild and municipal records are full of the city's attempts to do so. Langland is conscious of the painful lives of at least some of these people ('the wo of this wommen that wonyeth in cotes'),[9] but in principle he is hostile to them, whether in the person of the humble workers (characterised as layabouts) who frequent Glutton's tavern, or as the hated 'regraters' or unauthorised retail-dealers.[10] In Chaucer the principle of exclusion operates so fully as to make them all in effect invisible, unless we find them among the riff-raff of petty criminals who dwell in the 'suburbes' of the city in the *Canon's Yeoman's Prologue* (VIII. 657–61).

Immigrants from other parts of England, who were urgently needed to replenish a declining population and provide workers for London's rapidly expanding cloth-industry, constituted another class of foreigners. They were of course a particular target for Londoners' hostility and scorn, and those from Norfolk, close enough to London to be an important source of immigrants and yet far enough away to be utterly foreign, seem to have come in for more than usual abuse. In having the Reeve, perhaps the nastiest person on the pilgrimage, come from Norfolk, Chaucer is certainly playing on Londoners' contempt for *parvenu* immigrants from that area, a hostility the more virulent since they came to London in such numbers.[11]

There seems no reasonable way of finding subversive self-contradiction at the heart of Chaucer's project here, in the modern post-structuralist fashion, and it should not be a matter for surprise that a great poet like Chaucer should follow so readily the linguistic fault-lines of class and regional prejudice, either in excluding whole classes of people from his poetry and making them invisible, or in selecting a particular class for abuse. It is, in a way, inevitable that he should do so: it is a structural principle of the language, and in the formation of the communities that identify themselves in that language. The principal thing that establishes a Londoner as a Londoner, then as now, or an Englander as an Englander (or a New Yorker as a New

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[9] William Langland, *Piers Plowman: An Edition of the C-Text*, ed. D. Pearsall, York Medieval Texts, second series (1978), C. IX. 83.

[10] *Piers Plowman*, C. VI. 362–75; C. III. 82, C. VI. 232.

[11] See T. J. Garbaty, 'Satire and Regionalism: The Reeve and His Tale', *Chaucer Review*, 8 (1973), 1–8.

Yorker), is their scorn of those who do not belong to the group that marches under the banner of that sign. Obviously, the group will have some intrinsic and objectively definable qualities as well; but these are less important in identifying the group than the structure of boundary-markers, or 'linguistic border guards', as Armstrong calls them.[12] Thus for Barth the 'critical focus of investigation' is 'the ethnic *boundary* that defines the group, not the cultural stuff it encloses', while Armstrong deplores the tendency of theorists of nationalism to look for "essences" of national character instead of recognizing the fundamental but shifting significance of boundaries for human identity'.[13]

The historical realities of Norfolk-hood to which Chaucer refers are relayed to us in a characteristically literary way, as part of a fictional narrative of experience, and with allusion to what had become a familiar topos of anti-Norfolk satire.[14] And a similar point can be made about Chaucer's literary encapsulation of the most murderous outbreak of anti-immigrant hostility in London history. There had been spectacular street-killings of 'alien merchants' from Italy in 1370 (Nicholas Sardouche) and 1379 (Janus Imperial), as much the product of a general hostility towards foreigners as of economic jealousy, but these were sporadic events, not part of a pattern.[15] The 'merchant strangers' were rich men, and there were not many of them. The case was different with the Flemish immigrants who had settled in London in quite large numbers to work for low pay in the London cloth-industry: they were systematically persecuted by the authorities with specially oppressive regulations, and pursued by their fellow-Londoners with hostility and suspicion. There were of course economic motives for hatred, fear and suspicion, and a different account from mine might want to place more stress on those economic causes, and on the fomenting of ethnic

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[12] Armstrong, *Nations before Nationalism*, p. 8.

[13] Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, p. 15 (his italics); Armstrong, *Nations before Nationalism*, p. 4. Gerald Newman, in *The Rise of English Nationalism: A Cultural History 1740–1830* (New York, 1987), lays the usual stress on 'the importance of *aliens and outsiders* in the formation of group consciousness' (his italics), and reinforces the point by adding: 'This consciousness does not simply form itself, as an ineluctable fact of the natural world' (p. 55).

[14] See T. Turville-Petre, *England the Nation: Language, Literature and National Identity 1290–1340* (Oxford, 1996), p. 142.

[15] See A. Beardwood, *Alien Merchants in England 1350 to 1377: Their Legal and Economic Position*, Mediaeval Academy of America, Monograph Series, No. 3 (Cambridge, Mass., 1931), pp. 80–4; *Select Cases in the Court of King's Bench, under Richard II, Henry IV and Henry V*, Vol. VII, ed. G. O. Sayles, Selden Society, 88 (London, 1971), pp. 15–21, 40–1; P. Strohm, 'Trade, Treason, and the Murder of Janus Imperial', *Journal of British Studies*, 35 (1996), 1–23.

hostility by employers in order to divide employees and prevent them making common cause. There is evidence that this did happen,[16] but the attribution of agency in such matters to the repressive apparatus of authority is perhaps too easy and comfortable an explanation.

The massacre of the London Flemings took place on Friday, 14 June 1381, the day when the villagers and craftsmen from Kent had their rebellion hijacked by the London rabble. Excited by their successes at the Tower and the Savoy, the rioters fell upon the group that they were structured to hate even more than they hated their oppressors, and the massacre that followed is described in every one of the chronicles of the Peasants' Revolt.[17] Chaucer's account of the massacre is well known. It forms a brilliant comic climax to the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, and it provides a superlative example of Chaucer's readiness to allow his poetry to flow in the ideological currents of his age and to 'literaricize' its nasty realities.

> Ran Colle oure dogge, and Talbot and Gerland,
> And Malkyn, with a dystaf in hir hand;
> Ran cow and calf, and eek the verray hogges,
> So fered for the berkyng of the dogges
> And shoutyng of the men and wommen eeke
> They ronne so hem thoughte hir herte breeke.
> They yolleden as feendes doon in helle;
> The dokes cryden as men wolde hem quelle;
> The gees for feere flowen over the trees;
> Out of the hyve cam the swarm of bees.
> So hydous was the noyse—a, benedicitee!—
> Certes, he Jakke Straw and his meynee
> Ne made nevere shoutes half so shrille
> Whan that they wolden any Flemyng kille,
> As thilke day was maad upon the fox.   (VII. 3383–97)

We share Chaucer's sense of fun with more than a slight uneasiness, along with a further sense of embarrassment that our uneasiness may be dictated by prudently self-serving assumptions of political correctness. But there is no doubt what Chaucer is doing. The lines are brutally trivialising and also cruelly suggestive of the glee that some Londoners may have felt at the fortuitous removal of a public nuisance by an equally contemptible rabble. It's dog eat dog, and a humorous good riddance. There may be some parody, in the passage, of Book I of

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[16] See Pearsall, 'Strangers', p. 57, and n. 40.
[17] See especially the account in the reliable *Anonimalle Chronicle*, quoted in translation in R. B. Dobson, *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381* (1970; 2nd edn, 1983), p. 162.

Gower's *Vox Clamantis*, where Gower portrays the rebels as a rabble of domestic animals run wild,[18] but the effect of this would only be to make Chaucer's appeal more cliquish, and the Flemings more expendable, as part of a literary joke.

Of course, there are ways in which the sense of unease, which many have described themselves as experiencing in reading the passage, can be alleviated.[19] One is simply to relieve Chaucer of any responsibility, historically, for his text by pointing to his role as a mere 'author-function' within his text, and to his 'text' as an array of floating signifiers. Another is to recall that Chaucer deliberately diffuses authorial responsibility in the *Canterbury Tales* by assigning the tales to different tellers, himself merely ventriloquizing their voices. One can also argue, with the *Nun's Priest's Tale* as with the *Prioress's Tale*, that the context reverses the apparent direction of the meaning of the passage: in other words, the narrator is in some way inadequate, and the views that the narrator puts forward, or that are embodied in the tale that is told, are ironically undercut because of our recognition of that inadequacy. So the lines in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* are a repudiation of the views of those who take them to be crudely dismissive of the lives of these unimportant and objectionable people. These three views could be summed up, in the manner of Wayne C. Booth,[20] as the 'Go away, author, you don't exist' position, the 'Come back, author, all is forgiven' position, and the 'It's all someone else's fault' position.

There seems, though, little point in continuing to complain about this passage, or in *blaming* Chaucer, or in attempting further to salvage Chaucer for modern liberal sentiment. He lived when he did, shared the mentality of his age, flattered the prejudices of the class that sponsored him, even if at times with a deodorising dash of ironic self-reflexivity. What is more important is to recognise how susceptible Chaucer has been, partly through his readiness to aestheticise difficult social realities, to modern attempts to appropriate him for a variety of ideologies of 'Englishness', with all that that term implies of xenophobia.

It would be sobering to think that part of the reason for the extraordinary popularity of Chaucer in the last two centuries has

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[18] See S. Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381*, The New Historicism: Studies in Cultural Poetics, 27 (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1994), p. 217.

[19] Paul Strohm, for instance, in *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), argues that the 'troubling social implications' of the passage are evaded through the dehistoricizing effects of the tale's stylization (p. 165).

[20] W. C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago, 1974), p. 37.

been that his writing confirmed and nourished, in the subtlest and wittiest and most pleasing ways, an Englishness that his readers could feel comfortable with, an Englishness that was rooted in insularity and therefore in a prejudice, implicit or explicit, against 'strangers'. In other words, the xenophobia which is a special point of pride in the proclaiming of English national consciousness—the 'wogs begin at Calais' theme—has historically been nourished by a reading of Chaucer which has found in him all the qualities that the English want to think of as peculiarly their own. The idealisation of Chaucer as the poet of a particular kind of Englishness makes his poetry serviceable to deriving forms and manifestations of national consciousness, some of them obnoxious.

The point I have to make here is that this idealisation of Chaucer as the poet of Englishness has little or no basis in his poetry. Chaucer has been described above as participating fully in contemporary linguistic and other structures of community identity-formation. These structures can be thought of as a series of interconnected circles of common interest, most of them to do with some sort of class affiliation. They are circumscribed or defined by the manner in which they exclude those who are deemed not to belong within the circle. An individual will belong, or perceive himself to belong (for 'self-ascription' is a vitally important element in the making of these communities[21]—they are, in Benedict Anderson's phrase, 'imagined communities'[22]), within a number of these circles, and particular medieval individuals that we now might lump together under some common label like middle-class or bourgeois will belong within different sets of circles. Chaucer's situation, both real and imagined, is very different from Usk's, and from Hoccleve's, and from Gower's, more subtly different than from Langland's or from Lydgate's, but no less remarkably different.

But with all this said, there is one circle of common interest which Chaucer never seems desirous of moving in or even recognising, and that is England. I am conscious that the nation is a more complicated phenomenon than the forms of community-identity that I have so far

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[21] 'Self-ascription' is the term used by Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, pp. 13–15, to describe how people declare themselves to belong to this or that group, even though there may be large differences, objectively considered, within it. V. H. Galbraith, 'Nationality and Language in Medieval England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 4th series, 23 (1941), 113–28, puts it crisply: 'A nation may be defined as any considerable group of people who believe they *are* one; and their nationalism as the state of mind which sustains this belief' (p. 113). Cf. also Armstrong, *Nations before Nationalism*, p. 291.
[22] B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (1983; revised edn., 1991), p. 6.

been talking about, but the structural paradigm I originally set out still works, I think. Scholars are generally agreed that the most important period in the development of the English nation and of the idea of the English nation was the sixteenth century. Richard Helgerson and Alan G. R. Smith have argued this case from their different points of view, and Liah Greenfeld has put it even more strongly: 'The original modern idea of the nation emerged in sixteenth-century England, which was the first nation in the world': most recently, Andrew Hadfield, Gerald Hammond, and Claire McEachern have attempted to identify the emergent moment of English nationhood in relation to particular texts.[23] The Reformation was clearly important in identifying an England for the first time fully isolated from Catholic Europe, and John Bale and John Foxe both speak of England as the nation of the elect; Bale personifies England the nation as 'widow England' in *King Johan* (the dead husband is the true British church, put away at the time of the Augustinian conversion).[24] And the renewed Spanish threat towards the end of the century, as well as the highly successful personal rhetoric of majesty devised by and for Elizabeth, clearly gave some spur to the celebration of the Protestant nation in the *Faerie Queene* and the portrayal of the nation embodied in the monarch in *Henry V.* In both cases, assertion of difference, of identity through opposition, seems to me the decisive factor in welding together different elements making for a sense of national community.

Even so, these are only preliminary moves in the making of the modern nation-state, which seems to have come into existence, along with the ideology of nationalism, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; in fact, Elie Kedourie, Ernest Gellner, and E. J. Hobsbawm would go so far as to argue that nations are produced by the ideology of nationalism, working on, transforming, even inventing pre-existent forms of national identity.[25] This may be so, but there are

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[23] R. Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England* (Chicago, 1992); A. G. R. Smith, *The Emergence of a Nation-State: The Commonwealth of England 1529–1660* (1984; 2nd edn., 1997); L. Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), p. 14; A. Hadfield, *Literature, Politics and National Identity: Reformation to Renaissance* (Cambridge, 1994); G. Hammond, 'How They Brought the Good News to Halifax: Tyndale's Bibles and the Emergence of the English Nation State', *Reformation*, 1 (1996), 11–28; C. McEachern, *The Poetics of English Nationhood, 1590–1612*, Cambridge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture 13 (Cambridge, 1996).

[24] See Hadfield, *Literature, Politics and National Identity*, pp. 57–9, 77–8.

[25] E. Kedourie, *Nationalism* (1960), p. 9; E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, 1983), pp. 48–9; E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge, 1990; 2nd edn., 1992), p. 9.

decisive material changes at work too. If we accept the definition of the
nation offered by Anthony D. Smith, 'a named human population
sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories,
a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights
and duties for all members',[26] then it seems obvious that the early to
mid-nineteenth century must be the crucial period of development,
since the articulation of nationhood can only become truly national
when there are the beginnings of an adequate system of communica-
tion and information-dissemination, namely the railways and the
newspapers.

But English medieval scholars have not been content to be left out
of this exciting new game, and there have been various attempts to
identify medieval moments of emergent English nationhood. A recent
book by Thorlac Turville-Petre points to the years 1290–1340 as a time
when what he calls 'national feeling' and 'the expression of national
identity' come into prominence.[27] Certainly there are a number of
writers at this time—the Kentish author of the romance of *Arthour
and Merlin* ('Freynsche use this gentil man/Ac everich Inglische
Inglische can'), the northern author of the biblical history of the *Cursor
Mundi* (written in English 'For the love of Inglis lede,/Inglis lede of
Ingland')—who argue vigorously that English should be the language
of England, and who seem therefore to be promoting a kind of linguis-
tic nationalism, calling into existence an as yet shadowy nation.[28]

Language, it is true, is an important part of national identity;
indeed, a nation can hardly begin to exist in any terms until it is
perceived as a community of people who speak the same language.[29]
But the remarks of these authors, about England and the English
language, and further of Robert Mannyng, Robert of Gloucester and
the author of the *South English Legendary*,[30] are evidence only of

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[26] A. D. Smith, *National Identity* (1991), p. 14.

[27] Turville-Petre, *England the Nation*, p. v. Turville-Petre refers (pp. 24–5) to other studies that
have argued similarly for the existence in the Middle Ages of some strength of national
identity and awareness. See especially B. Guénée, *States and Rulers in Later Medieval Europe*,
translated from the French (1971) by J. Vale (Oxford, 1985).

[28] Turville-Petre, *England the Nation*, p. 21.

[29] Not all scholars accept the primary importance of a common language to a sense of
national identity: see Armstrong, *Nations before Nationalism*, p. 241. But England seems a
special case, even though the weight of Galbraith's reservations about the 'national' status of
the English language at this particular period ('Nationality and Language', pp. 114, 124) must
be acknowledged.

[30] Turville-Petre, *England the Nation*, pp. 14–19.

fragmentary, sporadic, regional responses to particular circumstances, not of a wave of English nationalism sweeping the country. These writers are culturally under-capitalised: this is not where great changes will be initiated. There may be a temptation to relate these phenomena, in terms of the structural paradigm, to the baronial opposition to Henry III, which, since the barons took special exception to the French courtiers that Henry III had surrounded himself with (in his attempt to emulate Louis IX as a European monarch), may look like some assertion of Englishness. But it was not: the leader of the barons was Simon de Montfort, a Frenchman who spoke no English, and what the barons wanted, as always, was not England for the English but England for themselves, and more of the say to which they felt themselves entitled in the national councils.

Turville-Petre points also to other evidences of national identity that were emerging at this time. Of one of them—geographical integrity—it is hardly necessary to speak, since England, with or without Scotland and Wales, had always had the advantage over places that were not islands of being immediately recognisable as a territorial unit, a *there*. But to the establishment of nationhood on the basis of a national history, or the history of a race, there were severe obstacles. The foundation history of the island was that of the Britons, and the hero was Arthur, who had made all his reputation slaughtering the cruel and treacherous and uncivilised people who were now the English. Geoffrey of Monmouth had got round this, in a way, by treating the story as the legitimation of serial invasion and conquest and thus flattering his Norman patrons, but this could not be a happy answer for long (and of course for the more austere student of history it was an extremely gloomy answer right from the beginning).[31] Geoffrey's successors came up with a variety of strategies for dealing with the problem. The author of *Arthour and Merlin* quite simply calls the Anglo-Saxons Saracens and asserts that Arthur's Britons are the people we now call the English. The others just went away. Robert Mannyng invented a whole episode in which the Anglo-Saxon conquerors are conquered by a Briton called Engle who lands at Scarborough and turns the vile Saxons into a fine handsome people called the English, named after himself, of course.[32]

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[31] See L. W. Patterson, 'The Romance of History and the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*', chapter 6 in his *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature* (Madison, Wisc., 1987), pp. 197–230.
[32] See Turville-Petre, *England the Nation*, pp. 76–89, 125–7.

When English did take over as the spoken and written language of the vast majority of English people during the latter part of the four-teenth century, there was unexpectedly little trumpeting of national identity, perhaps because England was not at the time at war with France. Chaucer did of course choose to write in English, and it is to his influence and example that some large part in the rapidity of the linguistic shift must be ascribed; and he does talk about 'the king's English' in the prologue to the *Treatise on the Astrolabe* ('And preie God save the king, that is lord of this langage', line 56), thereby acknowledging a bond between the monarch and the language which Henry V was to find extremely useful as an instrument of policy. A national language is an important constituent element in national identity, as I have said, but in itself it is more of an enabling condition than a determining characteristic. Chaucer's idea in using English was in any case not to assert an independent national identity but to enable England to take its place among those more advanced nations of Europe—France and Italy—that had already an illustrious vernacular. English is part of Chaucer's European project. As Elizabeth Salter says, 'His use of English is the triumph of internationalism.'[33]

Of national feeling or a sense of national identity—whether it has to do with ideas of national or racial history, with England as a land, with ideas of national character, or with opposition to some hostile national other—I find little or nothing in Chaucer. The framework story of the *Canterbury Tales* is set in England—'And specially from every shires ende/Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende' (*General Prologue*, 15–16)—and this is an important innovation. England is being fully *recognised*, so to speak, perhaps for the first time, as a real place. But it is not a place for which we are encouraged to feel a particular affection, as a beloved land or heritage-site, and the pilgrims and the people who inhabit those of the *Canterbury Tales* that are set in England[34] are on the whole a pretty unsavoury lot. The Flemings are killed by an English mob, but the massacre as Chaucer alludes to it is not an outburst of national feeling; the Londoners are a rabble, and just as contemptible, to the observing eye of the would-be patrician, as their

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[33] E. Salter, 'Chaucer and Internationalism', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 2 (1980), 71–9 (see p. 79).

[34] Namely, the three *fabliaux* of Fragment I (*Miller's Tale, Reeve's Tale, Cook's Tale*), the two coarse anecdotes of Fragment III (*Friar's Tale, Summoner's Tale*), the *Nun's Priest's Tale* and the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*. The *Man of Law's Tale* is set partly in an oddly antique Anglian Britain, and the *Wife of Bath's Tale* in the faery-infested Britain of King Arthur.

victims. Chaucer's references to Arthurian legend are patronising and faintly contemptuous, as to a bad joke that has grown stale with repetition.[35]

The reading of Chaucer as the poet of Englishness did not properly develop until the nineteenth century, though there was a time in the early fifteenth century when he played a part in a political programme of national legitimation. At this time Henry V did indeed make strenuous efforts to encourage the use of the English language in official documents as part of a programme to promote a sense of English national identity which would be triumphantly symbolised in his own person as monarch. He encouraged the use of English in the Chancery, so that by the end of his reign, a few short years, English was the norm in Chancery documents where at the beginning it had been the exception.[36] When in 1422 the London Company of Brewers made their famous decision to keep their records in future in English instead of French, they made a point of saying that they were proud to do so because of the encouragement Henry V had given to the English language.[37] Henry also, while still Prince of Wales, set Lydgate on his way translating the vast Latin prose history of Troy into English, not just because it was an exemplary story of chivalric exploits (it took Lydgate some while to find that it wasn't), but because it seemed to the king a slur on England and the English language that the greatest story of antiquity should be represented in Latin and French but not properly in English.

> Bycause he wolde that to hyghe and lowe
> The noble story openly wer knowe
> In oure tonge, aboute in every age,
> And y-writen as wel in oure langage
> As in Latyn and in Frensche it is.[38]

Chaucer, meanwhile, was recruited to the national cause as the founder of the newly elegant and prestigious English ('the firste fyndere of

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[35] See *Wife of Bath's Tale* (III. 857, etc.), *Squire's Tale* (V. 95, 287), *Nun's Priest's Tale* (VII. 3212).

[36] See J. H. Fisher, 'Chancery and the Emergence of Standard Written English in the Fifteenth Century', *Speculum*, 52 (1977), 870–99; M. Richardson, 'Henry V, the English Chancery, and Chancery English', *Speculum*, 55 (1980), 726–50; J. H. Fisher, 'A Language Policy for Lancastrian England', *PMLA*, 107 (1992), 1168–80.

[37] See Richardson, 'Henry V', pp. 727, 739–40; Fisher, 'A Language Policy', pp. 1171–2.

[38] *Troy-Book*, ed. H. Bergen, Early English Text Society, Extra Series 97, 103, 106, 126 (1906–20), *Prologue* 111–15.

oure faire langage') that was to embody the aspirations of nation-hood, and was acclaimed thus in lavish terms by Hoccleve and Lydgate.[39]

Henry V's motives in encouraging the use of English are clear. He considered that a nation's language is to some extent an embodiment of its identity (and he made this explicit in the instructions he gave to the English ambassadors at the council of Constance in 1415—'The peculiarities of language', he told them, 'are the most sure and positive sign of a nation in divine and human law'),[40] and he wanted that identity reinforced in every way that he could, not just to inte-grate the national effort in the war against France, but to ensure that that sense of identity was focused and symbolised in the person of the king. The French campaign of 1415 was, in some measure at least—like the encouragement of English in official and literary circles—an assertion of the unified identity of nation, language and king. The whole episode is in fact a striking example of what John Armstrong, in his book *Nations before Nationalism*, describes as the operation of the state in the production of the nation, and it is where Henry V bears for a moment a striking resemblance to Kemal Ataturk. Such operations will depend for their permanence on the resources that are put into them and the degree of cultural penetration that an admin-istration can achieve.[41]

Henry's campaign on behalf of the national language was power-fully influential, at a certain level, while it lasted, but it died with him, or before him, when the immediate circumstances that prompted it had passed away. Indeed, the legacy of the dual kingdom of England and France with which he burdened his brothers and his son was one that

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[39] See particularly Lydgate, *Troy-Book*, II. 4697–700. The quotation in the text is from Hoccleve, *The Regement of Princes*, ed. F. J. Furnivall, Early English Text Society, Extra Series, 72 (1897), 4978.

[40] F. R. H. Du Boulay, 'The Fifteenth Century', in *The English Church and the Papacy in the Middle Ages*, ed. C. H. Lawrence (New York, 1965), p. 211, cited in Richardson, 'Henry V', p. 741. J.-P. Genet, in 'English Nationalism: Thomas Polton at the Council of Constance', *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, 28 (1984), 60–78, makes it clear that Henry's pronouncement was not just a declaration of abstract principle but a strategic move in the debate that was taking place at the Council concerning the relative voting power to be given to the different national delegations. The French delegation was scornful of the English claim to parity (e.g. in terms of number of bishoprics) and the English were anxious about the ambiguous status of the 'Britain' they claimed as the nation (*natio anglicana sive britannica*, p. 74).

[41] Armstrong, *Nations before Nationalism*, pp. 129–30. For the problems in identifying the 'state' with the nation, see Genet, 'English Nationalism', p. 77.

worked against any exclusively English sense of national identity.[42] There is a good deal of 'nationalistic' anti-French propaganda in the English poetry of the fifteenth century,[43] evidence of the role that the French had played since the twelfth century (and have continued to play) as the principal agents of English national self-construction, always available to stand for everything that the English do not want to be, according to a structural pattern that seems impervious to political accommodations.[44] But the idea of the nation in these poems is only imperfectly articulated, and the story of English nationhood in the fifteenth century, as in the thirteenth and fourteenth, is one of local manoeuvres, of surges of enthusiasm slopping back into indifference, of historical contingencies and short-lived glories.

Chaucer is certainly seen in the fifteenth century as the founder of English poetry, as the first to give high status to English as a literary language, but this is a specialised claim for the poetry of a cultural elite and has only indirectly to do with English nationhood. And even when the narrative of nationhood begins to be more fully told, Chaucer plays no significant part in it at first.[45] In the sixteenth century Chaucer is seen against a classical or Italian background, as a writer who has given English poetry respectability, brought it to a point where it can claim some place among the great poetries of Europe. In the seventeenth century he is decried as old and obsolete, or blamed for having corrupted English by importing whole cartloads of foreign words. Dryden praises Chaucer memorably in the Preface to the *Fables* (1700), and is proud that Chaucer was an Englishman, but his highest commendation, as befits a neo-classical commentator, is reserved for Chaucer's portrayal of 'our Fore-fathers and Great Grand-dames' as they are representative of a universal human nature.[46] Elsewhere in the eighteenth century there are a few references here and there to Chaucer and other

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[42] See L. Patterson, 'Making Identities in Fifteenth-Century England: Henry V and John Lydgate', in *New Historical Literary Study: Essays on Reproducing Texts, Representing History*, ed. J. N. Cox and L. J. Reynolds (Princeton, 1994), pp. 69–107.

[43] See V. J. Scattergood, *Politics and Poetry in the Fifteenth Century* (1971), pp. 41–99. He comments on the increase of 'nationalistic feeling' in the poetry of the period (p. 42).

[44] See Newman, *The Rise of English Nationalism*, p. 75: 'A consciousness of France as England's military, commercial and diplomatic enemy was one of the foundation stones of the national mind' (see also p. 124).

[45] The survey that follows is based on the invaluable collections of material in C. F. E. Spurgeon, *Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion* (Chaucer Society, 1908–17, in 5 Parts; in 3 vols., Cambridge, 1925), and D. Brewer, *Chaucer: The Critical Heritage*, 2 vols. (1978).

[46] Dryden, Preface to the *Fables*, quoted in Spurgeon, *Chaucer Criticism and Allusion*, I. 279.

early poets as 'old British oaks',[47] but this is a patronising not an idealising version of his Englishness. The first allusions I find to Chaucer's Englishness as an embodiment of a permanent and idealised national identity are in the immediate aftermath of the Napoleonic wars, which most scholars of nationalism, as I have said, take to be an extremely significant period in the development of that national spirit of identity.

Linda Colley, in her book, *Britons*, describes the Napoleonic wars as the climax of a period when 'Great Britain was made out of that remarkable succession of wars with France'.[48] Her thesis is substantially the one I have stated:

> Men and women decide who they are by reference to who and what they are not. Once confronted with an obviously alien Them, an otherwise diverse community can become a reassuring or merely desperate Us. This was how it was with the British after 1707. They came to define themselves as a single people not because of any political or cultural consensus at home, but rather in reaction to the Other beyond their shores.[49]

So it was that the threat of invasion in 1803 was met by the assertion of the changelessness of British identity:

> . . . Let them see
> How unchanged the British name.
> Let the ruffians know that WE
> ARE IMMUTABLY THE SAME . . .
> Shew them that age to age bequeaths
> The British Character complete.

Britain has a kind of immune system which immediately comes into operation with the threat of foreign bodies—

> All Party diff'rence would at once be o'er
> Soon as a HOSTILE FRENCHMAN trod the shore.[50]

The French meanwhile, in accordance with what was by now a very old tradition, are characterised as all the things the British are not— frivolous, unstable, immoral, deceitful, hypocritical, over-sexed and at the same time effeminate.

And it is now for the first time that Chaucer becomes, not just an

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[47] John Hughes, in his edition of Spenser (1715): see Spurgeon, I. 340.
[48] L. Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837* (New Haven and London, 1992), p. 7.
[49] Colley, *Britons*, p. 6.
[50] These two quotations are from popular broadsides of 1803, cited by S. Cottrell, 'The Devil on two sticks: Franco-phobia in 1803', in *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity*, ed. R. Samuel, 3 vols. (1989), I. 259–74 (pp. 263, 261).

English writer, but a representative of the nation in its idealised self-imaging form, an agency in the nationalistic production of the idea of the nation. Robert Southey, for instance, says in 1814 that 'strong English sense and strong English humour characterize his original works'.[51] An anonymous writer in the *Retrospective Review* for 1824 speaks of Chaucer's poetry as 'an essential portion of the authentic history of his country. . . of the history of the national mind'.[52] Another anonymous writer in the *Edinburgh Review* of 1837—and these writers are just as important in representing and conveying these broad shifts in consciousness as better-known writers—says that though Chaucer was indebted to French and Italian writers, he was above all 'a national poet formed by national circumstances, and appealing to a nation'. 'It was in Chaucer that the literary spirit of the English people, vigorous, simple, and truthful, found its voice, [in] a poetry especially robust, catholic, and manly.'[53] A Scots writer, James Lorimer, in a review of Nicolas's edition of Chaucer in the *North British Review* for 1849, says of Chaucer:

> He lived among a people possessing in the highest degree those distinctive features, that sharp and prominent nationality which distinguishes the present inhabitants of England from every other people . . . joyous and exuberant reality . . . hatred of 'humbug' . . . [a spirit] that though it was revolutionary in appearance, it was conservative at heart. . . .[54]

The Great Exhibition of 1851 marks something of an epoch in the development of national self-consciousness. It was a powerful stimulus to national pride, and the beginning of an increasingly self-glorifying and by implication xenophobic form of nationalism. Chaucer is not readily available for appropriation to the more extreme forms of late Victorian jingoism, but he continues to be loaded on to the bandwaggon of the new Englishness: as Carolyn Collette shows, writers 'sought to place Chaucer himself as a sign of pre-eminent Englishness at the heart of nineteenth-century English life'.[55] For H. H. Milman, author of the great *History of Latin Christianity* (1853), Chaucer is

> resolutely, determinately, almost boastfully English. . . . The creation of native poetry was his deliberate aim; and already, that broad, practical,

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[51] Southey, in a review of Chalmers' *English Poets*, quoted in Spurgeon, II (Part ii), 67.
[52] Spurgeon, II (Part ii), 155.
[53] Spurgeon, II (Part ii), 220; Brewer, *Critical Heritage*, I. 315.
[54] Brewer, *Critical Heritage*, II. 90.
[55] C. P. Collette, 'Chaucer and Victorian Medievalism: Culture and Society', *Poetica*, 29–30 (1989), 115–25 (p. 115).

humorous yet serious view of life, of life in its infinite variety, that which reaches its height in Shakespeare, has begun to reveal itself in Chaucer.[56]

J. R. Green, in his *Short History of the English People* (1874), one of the most important and influential and widely disseminated nineteenth-century works of popular history, speaks of Chaucer as having 'the sturdy sense and shrewdness of our national disposition. . . . The genius of Chaucer was . . . English to the core.'[57] One of the fullest statements of this view of Chaucer's Englishness comes from another Scotsman, Alexander Smith, writing on the poet William Dunbar in 1863. He finds Chaucer like the novelist Fielding:

> In both there is constant shrewdness and common sense, a constant feeling of the comic side of things, a moral instinct which escapes in irony, never in denunciation or fanaticism; no remarkable spirituality of feeling, an accep-tance of the world as a pleasant enough place, provided good dinners and a sufficiency of cash are to be had, and that healthy relish for fact and reality, and scorn of humbug of all kinds. . . which . . . we are accustomed to call *English*.[58]

It is the poet Swinburne who identifies in Chaucer (1880) 'the great gift of specially English humour' combined with 'the inseparable twin-born gift of peculiarly English pathos'.[59]

One can of course recognise different degrees of discernment in the qualities in Chaucer that are selected for admiration, or at least detect signs that some people have actually read some of his poems. But sometimes hysteria takes over, even in otherwise sensible people. 'He hates Friars, because they are not English and not manly', says F. D. Maurice (1866),[60] and Matthew Browne, in a book called *Chaucer's England* (1869), rants on and on: 'Who is an Englishman more English than Chaucer?'; the *Canterbury Tales* 'contain more Englishness than any other poem in the language'.[61] Conscious that he should explain

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[56] Spurgeon, II (Part iii), 24. The role of Shakespeare in the production of this new ideology of nationhood is of course another and more important story.

[57] Spurgeon, II (Part iii), 118.

[58] Brewer, *Critical Heritage*, II. 126. It is interesting confirmation of the paradigm of 'con-struction through difference' to see 'humbug' singled out again (as by Lorimer, above) as specially un-English, when non-English people would normally perceive the opposite to be true.

[59] Spurgeon, II (Part iii), 131.

[60] Spurgeon, II (Part iii), 83.

[61] Matthew Browne [a pseudonym for William Rands], *Chaucer's England*, 2 vols. (1869), pp. 47, 49–50. Browne's insistence on Chaucer's 'manliness', which we have seen before, is remarkable: George Meredith speaks of Chaucer likewise (1851), egregiously: 'Tender to tearfulness—childlike, and manly, and motherly;/Here beats true English blood richest joy-ance on sweet English ground' (Spurgeon, II [Part iii], 3).

what this Englishness consists in, Browne tells us that Chaucer is bluff, open, manly, solid, well-balanced, genial, common-sensical, *normal*, the qualities, he says, that have made the English the best colonists and missionaries in the world. What is extraordinarily important in all this is not the imputation of these qualities to Chaucer—there are available, after all, for a literary work, only different kinds of misinterpretation[62]—but the appropriation of Chaucer, as the possessor of these qualities, to a particular kind of jingoistic national pride—especially given that Chaucer is, *historically*, in his own time, and in his own view of things, above all a European rather than an Anglocentric poet, as Elizabeth Salter has so eloquently made clear to us.[63]

None of the American writers of the period, of course, say anything of this kind in their commentaries on Chaucer—Thoreau, Longfellow, Lowell, Child. Their silence concerning Chaucer's 'Englishness' is not surprising; but there is something else. American writers were developing their own kind of national consciousness, and it differs in an interesting way from the English kind. The English kind is xenophobic and exclusive; the American kind is transcendental and inclusive. Americanness is a superior form of being, but it is one to which all human beings, of any race, may aspire, even if they do not live in the United States. Crèvecoeur, in his *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) spoke of Americanness as an essential though latent quality inherent in individuals which a new political and geographical environment merely encouraged to reveal itself,[64] while Whitman, in the Preface to *Leaves of Grass* (1855), speaks of 'the Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth'.[65] This is a different notion from the idea of England, so powerful in the late nineteenth century, as the country of God's chosen people, with a divine mission to bring the values of Englishness to the barbaric peoples of Africa and Oceania, the lesser breeds without the law. This is the imposing of a will and consciousness upon others, or upon the Other; the

[62] At the same time, it is striking that Langland, whose views of community identity-formation we have seen to be shaped in the same way as Chaucer's, should be so much more resistant to appropriation: he has been misread, but not, I think, misread so against the grain as Chaucer.
[63] See 'Chaucer and Internationalism' (note 33, above); also her *Fourteenth-Century English Poetry: Contexts and Readings* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 120–40.
[64] J. Hector St John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, Introd. by M. T. Gilmore (1971), Letter III, pp. 43–44.
[65] Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, ed. H. W. Blodgett and S. Bradley (New York, 1965), p. 709.

American version is the unforced realisation of an ideal Americanness within oneself.

I am not arguing that Chaucer's facetious dismissal of the Flemings of 1381 was in itself an example of the contempt for foreigners that was needed to define English nationalism. My argument is that Chaucer has been read or misread, or lent himself to being read, in ways that have helped nourish a particular form of xenophobic national consciousness. It appears in muted form in some English critics of Chaucer in the twentieth century. F. R. Leavis avoided Chaucer, but amongst his followers there was a strong tendency to import his special brand of Anglo-centricity ('If one is uneducated in one's own literature one cannot hope to acquire education in any serious sense by dabbling in, or by assiduously frequenting, any other')[66] into the reading of Chaucer. It is there in John Speirs, who argues '(on the evidence of the unity of English literature since Chaucer) that there has been *one* complex English organic community from the thirteenth century';[67] it is there too in Ian Robinson, who considers that 'by seeing England whole, by seeing the connection between the parts, Chaucer created the whole he saw', and that his achievement was 'the creation of a national literature, a place where a nation can begin to find and recognize itself'.[68] An expedition to the remoter heights of lunacy would find G. K. Chesterton. 'Chaucer is the father of his country', he says, dizzyingly, 'rather in the style of George Washington'. In a final vision, he sees him as the primordial giant of Albion, 'with our native hills for his bones and our native forests for his beard'.[69]

The history of the attempt to make Chaucer serviceable in the cultivation of a certain kind of national pride is worth recovering. The purpose is not to prove that national pride is always a bad thing[70]—it has an important role in creating a sense of community in times of danger (though one would assume that this role is withering away as far as

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[66] F. R. Leavis, 'How to Teach Reading', in *Education and the University* (1943), pp. 105–34 (p. 134).
[67] J. Speirs, *Chaucer the Maker* (1951), p. 16.
[68] I. Robinson, *Chaucer and the English Tradition* (Cambridge, 1972), p. 283.
[69] G. K. Chesterton, *Chaucer* (1932), pp. 15, 216.
[70] The power of nations to 'inspire love, and often profoundly self-sacrificing love', is spoken of by Benedict Anderson, in *Imagined Communities*, p. 141. He conveys a vivid intuitive sense of that power by contrasting the experience of standing before the 'Tomb of the Unknown Soldier' with the imagined experience of standing before the 'Tomb of the Unknown Marxist' (pp. 10–11).

England is concerned, to be replaced by some sense of European union-hood or, less hopefully, by smaller and more viciously competitive tribal loyalties). Nor is the purpose to prove that Chaucer was xenophobic. It doesn't matter: if it did, one could say that, though he shared the attitudes towards outsiders that prevailed in the communities he belonged to, there is no English poet who is *less* interested in England as a nation. What I am arguing is that Chaucer, through the aestheti-cisation and ironisation, characteristic of his poetry, of social and political issues relating to the identity of communities, lent himself to appropriation. The point of talking about Chaucer and Englishness, or rather the imputation of Englishness to Chaucer (the 'nationalization' of Chaucer), is to show how the apparently non-political and non-aligned writing of a great poet can become the instrument of an unrelated and historically powerful ideology.