1

National Fictions, Fictional Nations

Yo quiero mar y montaña
hablando mi propia lengua
Y a nadie pedir permiso
pa' construir las patria nueva
Cueca de la Confederación Unida de los Trabajadores (Chile)

From the shimmering swirl of waters where many, many thoughts ago the slave-ship first saw the square tower of Jamestown, have flowed down to our day three streams of thinking. One swollen from the larger world here and overseas, saying, the multiplying of human wants in culture-lands calls for the worldwide cooperation of men in satisfying them. Hence arises a new human unity, pulling the ends of the earth nearer, and all men, black, yellow, and white.

W. E. B. du Bois

In Europe and the United States, for the most part, the triumphant literary depiction of nationalism is Romantic. It is part of an earlier period when the forming of nations was a European concern, and before the experience of colonialism, world war and Fascism had soured people on what Edward Said has called nationalism's 'heroic narratives'. But the nationalist mood is, aesthetically as socially, more strongly felt in the emergent societies of the world today, including those ethnic or regional breakaways on the European continent itself (Basque, Irish, Albanian, and so on).

The terms of the phrase 'Myths of the Nation' are confusing because of their multiple meanings, which multiply still further when considered together. Myth as distortion or lie; myth as
mythology, legend or oral tradition; myth as literature *per se*; myth as shibboleth – all of these meanings are present at different times in the writing of modern political culture. If one inclusive sense can be given, it is Malinowski’s, where

myth acts as a charter for the present-day social order; it supplies a retrospective pattern of moral values, sociological order, and magical belief, the function of which is to strengthen tradition and endow it with a greater value and prestige by tracing it back to a higher, better, more supernatural reality of initial events.¹

As for the ‘nation’, it is both historically determined and general. As a term, it refers both to the modern nation-state and to something more ancient and nebulous – the natio – a local community, domicile, family, condition of belonging. The distinction is often obscured by nationalists who seek to place their own country in an ‘immemorial past’ where its arbitrariness cannot be questioned. The British cultural historian, Raymond Williams, has commented on the need to distinguish between these senses:

‘Nation’ as a term is radically connected with ‘native’. We are born into relationships which are typically settled in a place. This form of primary and ‘placeable’ bonding is of quite fundamental human and natural importance. Yet the jump from that to anything like the modern nation-state is entirely artificial.²

This impatience with the apparently divisive and warlike character of nationalism is very common among European critics in the postwar period, who work either within a Marxist tradition of ‘internationalism’ or a liberal tradition of sensible ‘patriotism’, perhaps most of all in Britain and the United States where even Left social critics (until very recently) have ritually denounced ‘imperialism’ while withdrawing their support from the oppositional forces that imperial legacy has inevitably unleashed.

For we often hear that nationalism is dead. Despite explosive independence struggles in the Philippines, El Salvador, Sri Lanka and dozens of other places, many seem convinced of this. Some point to global developments that cast nationalism in