Chapter One

Corn Kings: Disraeli, Hardy, and the Reconciliation of Nations

Alas, the country! how shall tongue or pen
Bewail her now uncountry gentlemen?
The last to bid the cry of warfare cease,
The first to make a malady of peace.
For what were all these country patriots born?
To hunt, and vote, and raise the price of corn?

—Byron, The Age of Bronze, Canto XIV, 1823

Dear Sugar, dear Tea, and dear Corn
Conspired with dear Representation
To laugh worth and honor scorn
And beggar the whole British nation.

—Ebenezer Elliot, “The Four Dears,” 1833

Dusty, hot, and thirsty, Michael Henchard stops for a drink at the furmity woman’s tent, and there he sells his wife. This drunken act committed by Henchard, the itinerant hay-trusser who will become mayor of Casterbridge, at the obsolescent Weydon-Priors Fair, is one of the last vestiges of a pre-industrial England, representing an agricultural identity that will be not only uprooted and transplanted, but also mythologized and memorialized in the construction of a modernized and bureaucratized national identity. Both Thomas Hardy in The Mayor of Casterbridge (1886) and Benjamin Disraeli in Sybil (1845) romanticize the past, but whereas Hardy recalls multiple histories

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that cannot be revived, merely remembered, Disraeli looks to a particular past to envision a future in which England staves off change by restraining the growth of industrial capitalism and reverting to its feudal and agricultural roots. Both *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Sybil* are set in rural England during the turbulent years before the 1846 repeal of the Corn Laws. I identify repeal of these import tariffs on the price of grain, intended to protect agrarian landowners, as one of the most significant turning points in the construction of imperial national identity. Though *The Mayor of Casterbridge* was published in 1886, more than forty years after *Sybil*, Hardy’s text allows us to trace the development of national identity from agrarian English to urbanized British and brings into focus the reasons Disraeli’s vision ultimately failed to capture the national imagination enough to derail liberal “progress.” For both authors, this shift from rural regionalism to the nationalism forged from industrial capitalism is represented by the legislation, commodification, and consumption of grain.

Hardy explains that furmity is a “mixture of corn in the grain, flour, milk, raisins, currants, and what-not”—a nourishing, substantial concoction that recalls a fictionalized, even mythologized Arthurian England of meadows and mead, goodmen and grog. Furmity, like the act of auctioning a woman, represents rural England, the England before the repeal of the Corn Laws, when Englishness was tied to the countryside and agriculture, to blood and land. Although Henchard embodies this version of identity—a corporeal, tangible Englishness—later in the novel, the Scottishman Farfrae will represent the incorporation and modernization of British identity, a bureaucratic identity based on urbanization and centralization. According to Eric Hobsbawm, “The basic characteristic of the modern nation and everything connected with it is its modernity,” but though Disareli disavows modernization, Hardy eulogizes this transition from land and blood to paper and ink, a sort of reverse transubstantiation in which the tactile body will be rarefied and reduced to the abstractions of language.

Although this transition is inevitable, despite the protestations of Tories such as Disraeli, the past and the rural will be rescued and revivified by the modernizing impulses of nationalism. Tom Nairn expresses a “suspicion that modernization theory [is] simply over-rational and ‘bloodless’ as an explanation for processes in which so much unreason is typically manifested, and so much literal blood has been spilt. It leaves too much out; it accounts for the material or vested interests in nationalism rather than its ‘spell.’” Nairn continues, “But where is the ‘spell’ located? [Benedict] Anderson notes its psychological and emotive nature, but suggests no originating source. I believe