

Julian Barnes, *Pulse* (Jonathan Cape, 2011)

We have come to expect the precision with which Julian Barnes portrays his characters and turns them into people we know, or at least could know. As in *England, England*, the stories in his recent collection perfectly capture the English identity, the *pulse* of the nation. *Pulse* is grounded in all that is quintessentially, stereotypically English: the English dinner party, gardening, the seaside, rambling in the Moors, marmalade, the Tube.

Yet there is a noticeable difference this time around, as heralded by the very first story, 'East Wind'. Something foreign is blowing into this previously and grandly self-contained, self-assured island: a wind from the East, from the Urals, overtly symbolizes the narrator's reflections on the new face of England. 'Nothing to stop it,' he says of the wind, but this sentiment can be applied effortlessly to the wind of immigration blowing from the East as he muses about England becoming more Catholic and the good work ethics of Polish builders. The narrator assumes his waitress must be Polish. 'Must be one of those Eastern Europeans who were all over the country nowadays ... come over here in vans and coaches, lived in rabbit warrens, made themselves a bit of money. Some stayed, some went home' (4).

At one time the British held sway over three quarters of the world; in these stories the world seems to be holding sway over it. The guests at the regularly held dinner parties by Phil and Joanna include an American. The after-dinner discussion is not centred on British politics, but the French word for balls, the war in Iraq, the American presidential candidates. And marmalade, it turns out, comes from a French word. 'All the great etymologies are wrong,' asserts one guest. From this another surmises, 'Perhaps UK really stands for something else,' which is quickly met with the response: 'Uro Konvergence.' This clear jab at the EU's Euro Convergence criteria leads the guests to a discussion of what it would be like to 'finally become Europeans' and 'live happily ever after'. Barnes must intend the irony of these statements, as they drive at the heart of the age-old alignment of England with Europe geographically but not in terms of national or personal identification.

The stories of the first section are interspersed with the four dinner parties of Joanna and Phil, allowing the dinner party discussions to form the backbone, or central thread of the collection. The question of an English identity is more subtle in most of the other stories in *Pulse*, but is still present on an individual level. The questions of a nation dealing with an immense increase in immigration are reflected in the identity crises and, significantly, in the failed relationships of the characters. Repeatedly, the stories in *Pulse* emphasize the differences that drive an immovable wedge between people. Nearly all of the relationships portrayed fail. The overriding message is one of despairing incompatibility with the other – *any* 'other' – be it a cigarette smoker and her boyfriend who hates smoking, or a couple who maintains their relationship by knowing absolutely nothing of the other (and, not surprisingly, when Vernon learns of his girlfriend's secret past, she flees).

The title of the collection comes from the final story, 'Pulse' in which the narrator's father decides to try Chinese medicine to cure his inability to smell. The father informs his sceptical son that the Chinese recognise six pulses – three on each side. The narrator ridicules the 'mysterious new pulses' (209): 'Oh, for Christ's sake,

Dad. There's only one pulse, you know that. By definition. It's the pulse of the heart, the pulse of the blood' (211).

The crux of the story, however, is more complex than Western vs. Eastern, one vs. the multiple. The story begins with the narrator remembering his mother and father as they were when he was young, in all the glory possible for memories. Now, not only is his father ailing, but his mother is dying. Amidst the struggles and grief upon learning of his mother's prognosis, the narrator pines, 'Perhaps we were just too exhausted. We needed to talk about Normal English things, like the probable effect on local businesses of the proposed ring road' (221). His wish for Normal English things certainly links to his wish for his mother to continue to live – life as normal, the undying, unchanging Mother England.

The narrator's wife (in one of the many very short-lived relationships of the book) points out that his mother cannot be the perfect person he imagines and suggests that all relationships depend 'on mutually assured self-deception' (210). This sentence ties back to the events in 'East Wind' in which Vernon and Andrea stay together until he learns that she is not in fact Polish but from the former Eastern Germany, allowing 'Pulse' and 'East Wind' to act as a frame for the other stories.

If 'East Wind' and 'Pulse' are in fact meant as a thematic enclosure, then the alternative offered by them to relationships with the 'other' may also be applied throughout the book. To avoid failed relationships and misunderstandings we should not overlook differences, but overlook identity. An interesting concept indeed for transnational studies.

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