

THE LADY TURNS BACK: THE THATCHERITE DISCOURSE ON THATCHERISM



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This paper analyses the discursive and narrative strategies of Thatcherism. It focusses upon Mrs Thatcher's recently published autobiography which, because it situates itself in the context of British politics since 1945, is a privileged site for uncovering how Thatcherism rewrites the language of politics, renarrates the national past and disqualifies all other voices. Thatcherism presents itself as a manichean battle for freedom and truth that repeatedly asks the nation to relive World War Two, its 'finest hour', whether the fight be against internal or external enemies. The Iron Lady herself assumes the role of Churchill while simultaneously laying claims to ordinariness to maintain her populist appeal. One of the major appeals of Thatcherism was its attempt to abolish complexity and uncertainty by suggesting that the future could be lived through the past and that values were simply right or wrong. But Thatcherism could not deal with the ambiguity produced by disagreement between friends and could only claim to be a defence of Britishness if considerable violence were done to the national past. In either case the contradictions ultimately show through.

Margaret Thatcher left No. 10 Downing Street in November 1990 having been ousted by her party but never having lost a general election and proceeded, among other things to write her account of her years in power (*The Downing Street Years*).¹ This is how she recounts her arrival in that same street, eleven and a half years earlier, having won her first election:

The crowds extended all the way up Downing Street and out into Whitehall. Denis and I got out of the car and walked towards them ... When we turned to the cameras and reporters, the cheers were so deafening that no one in the street could hear ... I quoted a famous prayer attributed to St Francis of Assisi, beginning, 'where there is discord, may we bring harmony' ... the rest of the quotation is often forgotten. St Francis prayed for more than peace; the prayer goes on: 'Where there is error, may we bring truth. Where there is doubt, may we bring faith. And where there is despair, may we bring hope.' The forces of error, doubt and despair were so firmly entrenched in British society ... that overcoming them would not be possible without some measure of discord (19).

The quotation and the accompanying narration are very revelatory of the Thatcherite project. The new leader's first typically populist reaction is to go to the people directly rather than the press. Her speech, which is far from what is expected in a political context, immediately suggests that we are dealing with someone who will break with convention. The vision proposed is manichean - of polar and irreconcilable opposites rather than minor differences. Moreover, what were abstract dangers in St Francis' original, have become concrete presences that can thus be battled with and driven out. However, the speaker is

¹ References to Thatcher, M. *The Downing Street Years* (Harper Collins, 1993) will simply give the page number.

not the source of the aggression. It comes from the occupying army which is already "entrenched" in Britain. The speaker creates for herself the role of prophet - the bringer of truth and faith. She promises not only political change, but also a radical renaming of what has gone before. She also implicitly proposes a narrative model which she will be able to use to recount her years in office - that of the battle of the crusader for truth and hope against the forces of error and despair.

A few pages later, she introduces us to the interior of the premier's residence:

In some ways 10 Downing Street is an unusual sort of home. Portraits, busts and sculptures of one's prime ministerial predecessors remind one of the nearly 250 years of history into which one has stepped. As prime minister one has the opportunity to make an impact on the style of No. 10. Outside the flat I had displayed my own collection of porcelain, which I had built up over the years. I also brought with me a powerful portrait of Churchill from my room in the House of Commons. It looked down on those who assembled in the antechamber of the Cabinet Room (23).

Mrs. Thatcher reveals here her desire to rearrange history by giving central position to a man who encapsulates a certain vision of Britishness and of the place of Britain in world affairs - the island nation that stood out against tyranny. We will be attentive, as we read her accounts of her years in office, to this arrangement of history, to the accompanying construction of a national character that will justify her political project, and to how she articulates her account of her own years in office with her vision of the national past. At the same time, we will consider how, despite her claims to Churchillian grandeur, her populist project demands that she maintain her ordinariness, which in her case must take the form of 'respectable femininity' - thus the porcelain.

Perhaps the most influential and discussed definition of Thatcherism is that of Stuart Hall who labels it "authoritarian populism", that is the linkage of popular themes and discontents (law and order, immigration, education standards, the undermining of family values) with a thoroughgoing critique of social democracy in a way that justifies the reinforcement of the state and the 'freeing' of the market. Hall sees this as a new hegemonic project, an attempt to replace rather than to merely reform the social democratic consensus (1983, 19-39). He noted that, at least on the ideological level, Thatcherism was becoming hegemonic: "The crisis has begun to be 'lived' in *its* terms. This is a new kind of taken-for-grantedness; a reactionary common-sense, harnessed to the practices and solutions of the radical right" (Hall 1983, 30). Other analysts expressed reservations. Gamble points out that hegemony is not only ideological but implies domination within the political sphere and the establishment and maintenance of a profitable regime of capital accumulation (1988, 236-41). Hirst puts the success of Thatcherism down to opportunism rather than principle and to the failure of the other parties to offer convincing alternatives rather than to any mass conversion of the electorate (1989). Ivor Crewe points out that the British people remained stubbornly attached to features of the social-democratic consensus and suggests that the success of Thatcherism can be attributed more to the contrast between a cohesive Tory party with a strong purpose, and disorganised, unconvincing opponents than to any sea change in British politics (1988, 25-49).¹ Some dispute the idea of Thatcherism's newness, pointing out that some 'Thatcherite' policies had already been introduced by both Labour and Conservative governments in the 1970s. Others accuse Hall of concentrating too heavily on ideology and see Thatcherism primarily as a response by the ruling class to

¹ For a concise account and critique of the arguments of Crewe and Hirst see A. M. Smith 1994, 43-49.

the political and economic crisis of British capitalism (for a concise account of these debates see Gamble 1988, 179-207).

However, Mrs Thatcher herself has no doubts about the dramatic break she has made with the past. She will rename the previously hegemonic social democratic consensus as error and cast its proponents as enemies in order to justify her battle for a new truth.

Egalitarianism and the notion of "fair shares" is recast as "envy" and "small shares" (12). The ideology of welfare, of needs and rights, is rewritten as passivity, dependency and the undermining of self-reliance and self-respect, and thus of morality. The public sector is now seen as wasteful and parasitic on the wealth-creating private sector. Public ownership is renamed state ownership. The state, when it interferes in the economy is seen in terms of bureaucracy, regulation and an infringement of freedom. Keynes, Mrs Thatcher informs those who do not know it, is dead! (51). Public and private sector activities are to be run on strictly 'business' lines. We read, for example, "there were only two criteria which could apply to pay ... The first was affordability ... The second was recruitment" (44-45). Members of society are addressed as taxpayers, who are presumed to be hostile to public spending rather than as citizens who might claim rights. The market, previously seen as blind and unjust, is now presented as an efficient and democratic means of providing individuals with choice. The social democratic period of compromise between labour and capitalism between 1945 and the 1970s is renamed socialism, so that Thatcher can write, for example: "[u]nlike the US, Britain had to cope with the poisonous legacy of socialism - nationalisation, trade union power, a deeply rooted anti-enterprise culture" (159). Freedom, a dangerous word, that can subversively be linked to 'from' (freedom from want, freedom from oppression), is tied repeatedly to free enterprise:

It was the job of government to establish a framework of stability ... within which individual families and businesses were free to pursue their own dreams and ambitions (14).

I was again asking the Conservative Party to put its faith in freedom and free markets (15).

This linkage of individual freedom with free enterprise and labelling of the post-war period as anti-enterprise state socialism is crucial to the Thatcherite reordering of national history. It allows a campaign for free market liberalism to present itself as a war of national liberation, an attempt to restore freedom to a freedom loving people.

The key government in the post-war period is the Labour administration, elected in 1945 on a landslide majority, which establishes the main framework of the welfare state. This is conventionally seen as one of the great reforming governments in modern British history. Mrs Thatcher delegitimizes it by labelling its term in office the "austerity period" and referring to a postwar "collapse of national morale" (12). She suggests that post-war changes are imposed on the people by an unrepresentative elite, saying, "[s]een from afar, or from above, whether by a socialist gentleman in Whitehall or by a High Tory, socialism has a certain nobility ... Seen from below, however, it looked very different" (12). She herself can thus assume the mantle of great reformer. She writes, quoting one of her own speeches, "the great Tory reform of this century is to enable more and more people to own property. Popular capitalism is nothing less than a crusade to enfranchise the many" (568-569).

Finally, consensus itself comes in for savage redefinition in another Thatcher speech quoted in the book:

To me consensus seems to be: the process of abandoning all beliefs, principles, values and policies in search of something in which no one believes, but to which no one objects ... What great cause would have been fought and won under the banner 'I stand for consensus'? (p. 167)

The key Thatcherite metaphor of the battle for truth provides us with two narrative paradigms which occur again and again, on a small and a large scale as the narrative unfolds. The first and major paradigm is that of the battle proper. This takes the form of identifying an unsatisfactory situation which means that the interests of Britain or of free enterprise / freedom are under threat. A cause, usually embodied by an enemy figure, is named and the forces of righteousness are mobilised by a determined, decisive and vigorous leader and usually prevail, reestablishing British interests or those of free enterprise / freedom. The second, minor paradigm is when the leader analyses a situation and forcefully states the truth about it to a second party who may or may not have the sense to accept it. The two paradigms interweave constantly: the statement of the truth, of that which is, is usually followed by the statement of that which must be done, of the battle which must be fought, as in the following example, an edited down extract from Mrs Thatcher's initial diagnosis of the problems of British industry:

... the truth is that too often British industrial products were uncompetitive ... Nothing less than changing that reality - fundamentally and for the better - would do ... the root of Britain's industrial problem was low productivity ... The overmanning resulting from trade union restrictive practices was concealed unemployment ... Outdated capacity and old jobs have to go to make the most of new opportunities ... the fact is that in a market economy government does not - and cannot - know where jobs will come from ... I was determined that the Government should not become enmeshed ... in the obscure intricacies of 'norms', 'going rates' and 'special cases' ... So it was important that ... I stood firm against suggestions of pay policies. ... the whole approach based on prices and incomes controls should be swept away (92-94).

Unequivocal judgements about what is ("products were", "the root ... was") join with general economic truths ("old jobs have to go", "government does not") to impose the single correct path that must be followed. The discourse redundantly underlines its own truthfulness ("the fact is", "the truth is"). The truths and the actions they necessitate are impersonal - policies are dictated by objective laws of economics and realities of situations rather than personal judgements or ideological motives. The text constructs a vital role for the leader figure. Firstly, she gives voice to the impersonal truths. Secondly, her strength of will is needed to ensure the correct path is followed ("I was determined", "I stood firm"). War with the trade unions, for the sake of the nation, clearly lay ahead.

In the early pages of her book, Mrs Thatcher returns to her key memories of the earlier war against Hitler:

I drew from the failure of appeasement the lesson that aggression must always be firmly resisted. But how? The ultimate victory of the Allies persuaded me that nations must co-operate in defence of agreed international rules if they are either to resist great evils or to achieve great benefits. That is merely a platitude, however, if political leaders lack the courage and far-sightedness, or ... if nations lack strong bonds of common loyalty (11).

The Second World War provides the perfect justification of the dominant Thatcherite war paradigm, anchoring it to a key moment of national history. It provides the perfect manichean scenario of a battle in which Britain stands, at times alone, for democracy, justice and liberty. It provides the key Thatcherite lesson that enemies - conceived always as aggressors - must be fought head on, as appeasement will only lead to greater concession. By stressing the need for internal unity - "bonds of common loyalty" - it also provides a key linkage between internal disunity and external struggles. Thatcherism, as long as it can identify external enemies, can accuse internal opponents of leaving the nation vulnerable to attack. Finally, of course, it provides the Churchillian model for the coura-

geous and far-sighted leader figure that we will find in subsequent Thatcherian battle narratives. A double rewriting is of course necessary. More recent battles must be rewritten in the manichean terms of the War but the War itself must be rewritten to yield Thatcherite lessons. Mrs Thatcher writes, “[m]y life ... was transformed by the Second World War” (11). It would perhaps be more accurate to write, “my Second World War (and my other past experiences) were transformed by my later convictions”.

History gave Margaret Thatcher an unexpected opportunity to lay claim to the Churchillian mantle early in her prime ministerial career, in the shape of the battle for the Falkland Islands / Malvinas, which could be lived as the Second World War in miniature. Mrs. Thatcher writes, “[w]e were defending our honour as a nation and principles of fundamental importance to the whole world - above all, that aggressors should never succeed and that international law should prevail over the use of force” (173). Britain’s “experience of the danger of appeasing dictators”, (192) teaches it that Argentina must withdraw and that “a common or garden dictator” cannot be allowed to “rule over the Queen’s subjects and prevail by fraud and violence” (181). Mrs Thatcher is aware of treading in the footsteps of a previous British leader. She writes, “I am glad that Chequers played a large part in the Falklands story. Churchill had used it quite a lot during the Second World War” (193). Allies and some British politicians waver, but Mrs Thatcher herself, as always, is the incarnation of the national spirit. She says on television, “I’m standing up for the right of self-determination, I’m standing up for our territory” (210). The Falklands War becomes a turning point in British history, a reversal of a decline that had been encapsulated by the Suez crisis when British forces had had to pull out of Egypt due to American led pressure on the pound sterling. Mrs Thatcher writes, “[s]ince the Suez fiasco in 1956 British foreign policy had been one long retreat ... Victory in the Falklands changed that” (173).¹

The Cold War is also narrated as a war of principle against an unscrupulous and undemocratic enemy. Mrs. Thatcher and President Reagan are not merely defending the West, they are fighting a “crusade for freedom” and their cause is “as much spiritual as political or economic” (776). As if to underline the spirituality of the ‘crusaders’ the British leader, who places remarkably little emphasis on church-going at other times, visits churches in both Russia and Poland as well as consulting the Pope (778). On her visit to Poland she shows her ability to turn herself into a living symbol by dressing in green, the colour that symbolises hope in that country (779). Again she finds herself walking in the footsteps of Churchill, either by making cold war style speeches (see 481) or by visiting places where Churchill and Stalin had talked (see 483).

The Thatcherite battle against the internal Left is justified in three major ways. Firstly, the Left is presented as unfreedom, and thus a diluted version of Soviet oppression. Secondly, it is seen as subverting democracy and institutions such as the family that are the basis of social stability, thus weakening the nation’s will to resist external enemies. Thirdly, its policies are deemed to lead to economic failure. The Thatcherite attack on the Left is presented either as a war of liberation or as an attack on subversion, but in either case the aggression is imputed to the Left rather than the Tory government. However, the Left can make counter-claims to democratic legitimacy that have to be undermined if the Thatcherite assault is not itself to be seen as an attack on democracy. Tory election triumphs are used to suggest that the Left no longer has the support of the British people. Mrs

¹ The Falklands becomes, like World War Two, a paradigm through which other battles can be lived. For example, Mrs Thatcher recounts thus her reaction to her landslide election victory of 1983, “[c]rowds had gathered at the end of Downing Street and I went along to talk to them as I had on the evening of the Argentine surrender” (304).

Thatcher tells us, for example, making characteristic claims of a decisive victory and permanent change:

The 1983 general election result was the single most devastating defeat ever inflicted upon democratic socialism in Britain. After being defeated on a manifesto that was the most candid statement of socialist aims ever made in this country, the Left could never again claim popular appeal for their programme ... (339).

But electoral defeat is not enough to rid the country of socialism, for two reasons. Firstly, socialism is built into the institutions of the nation which will themselves have to be transformed to deprive Labour of its electoral base. Secondly, the Labour Party attempts to deceive the British people by hiding its extremism beneath a moderate image (see 582). Moreover, behind the democratic Left there lurks "the hard Left ... revolutionaries who sought to impose a Marxist system on Britain whatever the means and whatever the cost" (339). After their defeat in 1983, they are "free from constraint and thirsting for battle on their own terms" (339). Their power, Mrs. Thatcher tells us, "was entrenched in three institutions: the Labour Party, local government and the trade unions" (339).

Mrs Thatcher legitimates her campaign to reduce trade union rights by presenting herself as the defender not of the interests of capital against organised labour but of ordinary trade unionists and democracy against oppressive and unrepresentative union leaders. We read, for instance, of the "problem of trade union power ... exploited by the communists and militants who had risen to key positions within the trade union movement" (97), and are told that "the unions' power over their members was more or less absolute" (98). The main battle between Mrs Thatcher and the unions is precipitated by the miner's strike of 1984 - 1985. The dominant metaphor, and thus the framework of interpretation, is imposed by the chapter title, "Mr Scargill's Insurrection" (p. 339). The miners (led by Arthur Scargill) are cast as "the shock troops for the Left's attack" (339), who will wage "guerilla warfare" (361) across the country. As with the Falklands, great issues and principles are at stake. Mrs Thatcher informs us that the dispute threatened the country's economic survival, and that it involved "threats to democracy" (370). We are faced with the usual manichean oppositions. We are told of the "devious ruthlessness" (364) of the NUM (National Union of Mineworkers) leaders and the "savagery" of their methods (371). On the other hand, the Tory leader expresses repeated humanitarian concern for the working (i.e. strike-breaking) miners and their families (360, 377). As usual, it is the other side which has provoked the conflict. Mrs Thatcher had to be ready for "the coal strike which the militants would some day force upon us" (341-2). The struggle is between right and wrong with no room for compromise, no middle-ground while the situation dictates its own impersonal course of action: "It was crucial ... that the NUM's claim that uneconomic pits should never be closed should be defeated, and be seen to be defeated" (364).

As with other disputes with the Left, Mrs Thatcher casts herself as defender of the many against the undemocratic, extremist few. She depicts the eventual defeat of the strike as a victory for, "the whole working people of Britain who kept Britain going" (377). The customary links are made between the 'enemy within' and enemies without. The miners, we are told, received support from Libya and from the Soviet Union while their leaders are compared to the IRA (370-371). We are again invited to read events through the World War Two paradigm. The National Coal Board has been guilty, says Mrs Thatcher, of "appeasement and collaboration" (p. 342) in its dealings with the NUM. She goes on to quote the miners' leader's reference to the strike as another "Battle of Britain" (350), referring back to the famous air battle which prevented invasion of the country in 1940.

Thatcherism is more at ease at dealing with conflicts with clearly defined enemy figures, like the miners or the Argentinians, than with complex situations or relationships. The

European Community presents her with a series of foreign targets against whom she can defend British interests, but unfortunately these potential enemies are also her allies and partners, which will introduce, as we shall see, unwelcome complexity into the scenario. The earlier accounts of battles are described in terms of the by now familiar dichotomies. Mrs Thatcher, the straight-talking defender of financial realism, free enterprise and British interests against profligacy, bureaucracy, centralism and Delorsian socialism. These early struggles (mainly over Britain's budget contributions) are grouped in a chapter entitled, "Jeux sans frontières", with its double implication of something not to be taken seriously and a contest with allies with whom one must compromise, rather than with enemies whom one can defeat once and for all in open battle. The battle paradigm is now tempered with sporting metaphors. Mrs Thatcher refers to "British victory on points" (727), and a result which is "much better than a draw" (737), as well as to the "the best tradition of Gallic gamesmanship" (540).

However, as Mrs Thatcher realises that her partners are in fact serious, that federalism is not just a game, the tone changes markedly. She writes, "from then on the Community environment in which I had to operate became increasingly alien and frequently poisonous" (727). She is faced with a range of opponents led by what she habitually refers to as the "Franco-German axis", and explains: "[i]n the face of these powerful forces I sought for allies within the Community and sometimes found them; and so my strategic retreat ... was also punctuated by tactical victories" (728). Although uncharacteristically in retreat, she is undaunted and will do what the situation impersonally demands: "there was no option [she informs us] but ... to raise the flag of national sovereignty, free trade and free enterprise - and fight" (728). With the disintegration of the Eastern bloc and the reunification of Germany, Mrs Thatcher foresees the revival of what she calls "the German problem" (790), that is of the tendency for an over-powerful Germany to dominate Europe. She sees contemporary Germany in terms dictated by the experience of two world wars and tells us, with her words freezing history into essence, "Germany has always looked east as well as west, though it is economic expansion rather than territorial aggression which is the modern manifestation of this tendency" (791). Germany will dominate a federal Europe. The solution, again with strong echoes of world wars, is for an Anglo-French entente and American presence in a Europe of nation-states (see 791, 815). However, Mrs Thatcher was not able to fight the battle for her kind of Europe because of events in her own party which led to her deposition.

Mrs Thatcher's portrayal of herself as bearer of certain truths and her conception of politics in terms of war, manichean conflicts and simplistic binary oppositions is the key to her portrayal of the history of her party and the character of her ministers. Tory acceptance of consensus is rewritten as "retreating ... before the Left's inevitable advance" (104) while World War Two is again clearly evoked. There are references to "appeasement" of the Left's social and economic policies (625-626) while defeat of her opponents in the Party is described as "the second Battle of Britain" (155). Previous Tory governments have spoken the language of principle but betrayed it in their actions (see 13). Complex policy differences are thus collapsed into a simple opposition of attack and retreat, principle and hypocrisy. Mrs Thatcher's followers are assessed in terms of their battle-readiness, the three core variables being courage, loyalty and conviction. Key economic ministers, for example, must be "true believers in our economic strategy" (26). Willie Whitelaw, Mrs Thatcher's first Home Secretary, is praised for "loyalty" and supporting the leader "steadfastly" (27), while John Nott is appointed because of his "commitment" although we are told, "[h]is vice was second thoughts" (27). Mrs Thatcher's main opponents are christened "wets", because, we are told, "they were judged to be shrinking from stern or difficult action" (51). Throughout her period in office, she is hampered by the small size of

forces loyal to her. She writes, "I had said at the beginning of the government 'give me six strong men and true, and I will get through.' Very rarely did I have as many as six" (149). Her prime-ministerial career comes to an end because of the "panic" of back-benchers (832) and because of the "desertion" and "betrayal" of the cabinet (855). The war metaphor turns the non-support of friends into treachery and cowardice. She compares the end of her career to that of Churchill and remarks that "[a]t least, however, it was the British people who dismissed him from office" (829), although she notes that he too was undermined from within the party (851). Ultimately, the only people she can consistently rely on are the uniform, unambiguous men of the police and army, who, with their erasure of personal opinion and their disciplined obedience, are the perfect supporting actors in the Thatcherite battle narrative. Many are the references to the efficiency and discipline of the police and the armed forces.

When we first considered Mrs Thatcher's St Francis of Assisi speech we looked at how it promised a battle for truth. Thus far, we have concentrated on the battle paradigm. We will now turn to the other key component and consider how Mrs Thatcher legitimizes her own voice and delegitimizes all competing voices, essentially by mobilising notions of truth and falsehood but also by claiming to be speaking, unlike others, for the people and ultimately the nation.

The Thatcherite truth, because it is truth, takes one form only. Falsehood however appears in multiple guises. Rhetoric is one. It is used to denote a hypocritical or dishonest contrast between words and actions, as we saw when Mrs Thatcher described the gap between the rhetoric of previous Tory governments and their actions (see, for example, 13). Thatcherism claims to match words precisely to actions, most obviously in its frequent references to carrying out manifesto promises. We read, for example, "[w]e gave immediate effect to the pledges in our manifesto" (32) and later, "I had the right team of ministers to implement the reforms set out in our manifesto" (589). Socialism, on the other hand, always has a "hidden agenda" (562). The Labour leader, we are informed, "regarded words - whether speeches or the texts of manifestos and policy documents - as a means of concealing his and the Labour Party's socialism" (360). The Communist block is associated, as one might expect with all kinds of untruth; "lies" (66), "propaganda" (88), "slogans" (475). Mrs Thatcher is, in contrast, established as a plain speaker of the truth: "It would have been easy to tone down my criticism of the Soviet regime. But I was not prepared to do so" (477). Other leaders exploit the theatrical, performance element in language. As she approaches a Commonwealth conference, Mrs Thatcher predicts, "we would be in for plenty of posturing from those intent on cutting a figure on the international stage" (516). Her contributions are rather different; "I began [she tells us] by detailing the evidence" (516). Unsurprisingly, Mrs Thatcher is not impressed by diplomacy which obscures the truth which she, in her undiplomatic language, must deliver. She says at one stage, "I saw no reason to conceal our views behind a diplomatic smokescreen" (35). The "wets" in her party speak in a "highly sophisticated code, in which each phrase had a half-hidden meaning and philosophical abstractions were woven together" but, the Tory leader tells us, "[t]his cloaked and indirect approach has never been my style ... I thrive on honest argument" (129). Her voice is always a personal one so that her words are a clear expression of personal belief. She quotes one of her speech writers saying, "no one writes speeches for Mrs Thatcher: they write speeches with Mrs Thatcher" (302).

The sincere Thatcherite voice, grounded in conviction and empirical knowledge of 'the facts' is not to be confused with voices distorted by emotion or passion. These latter failings, which ironically are usually used by males to disqualify female voices, are attached to Mrs Thatcher's enemies in the party. The case of Michael Heseltine, her opponent in the final leadership struggle, is perhaps the most telling. In his disputes with the Prime

Minister he is swayed by “complex ... psychological drives” (424), is prey to fixations (430) and becomes “convinced he was the victim of a plot” (430). It was clearly madness to disagree with Mrs Thatcher.

Mrs Thatcher faces her greatest linguistic difficulties when dealing with the European Community. She is well-briefed (337), sets out “the facts” (80) and talks straight (442), but struggles in an un-English sea of connotation and elusive meanings. She adapts to cynical rhetorical games: “I had to assert persuasively Britain’s European credentials while being prepared to stand out against the majority on issues of real significance to Britain” (548). She can without difficulty translate “euro-jargon” into plain English (738). However, more complicated language games leave her strangely bewildered. The connotative dimension of language means that meaning cannot be controlled while ambiguity opens words up to future unforeseen interpretation:

anyone dealing with the European Community should pay careful attention to metaphors [she warns] ... by agreement to what were apparently empty generalizations or vague aspirations we were later held to have committed ourselves to political structures which were contrary to our interest (319).

Far too much of the Community’s history had consisted of including nebulous phrases in treaties and communiqués then later clothing them with federal meaning which we had been assured they never possessed (761).

Mrs Thatcher is forced to embark on a crusade to defend pure denotation and immediate transparency by saying not only what things mean but by ruling out non-acceptable present and future interpretations; “I decided that I would go to Dublin with a speech which would set out what political union was not and should never be” (761).

Mrs Thatcher’s construction of an image of herself as plain-talking, honest broker is one of the essential foundations of her populist appeal. She speaks to the people in ‘ordinary’ language and this direct contact is constantly maintained. Key moments are the manifesto (the contract with the people), the public meeting (for which she expresses a strong preference), the television appearance and the speech. The speech, with its unmediated contact with the public, allows the leader to confirm that she is still in touch with popular sentiments even if colleagues may have turned against her. After her famous Bruges speech, for example, she notes; “to the horror of the Euro-enthusiasts who believed that principled opposition to federalism had been ridiculed or browbeaten into silence, there was a great wave of popular support for what I had said” (746). She thus speaks for the people who would otherwise be silenced by the elite.

She establishes her own ordinariness in the key early stages of her narrative. She writes, “[m]y background and experience were not those of a traditional Conservative prime minister ... I had grown up in a household that was neither poor nor rich”, and is thus able to conclude, “I did not feel I needed an interpreter to address people who spoke the same language. And I felt it was a real advantage that we had lived the same sort of life” (10). As she rises to power, there is a risk that this automatic affinity with ordinary people will be lost and she will be absorbed into the establishment. Her narrative, however, gives clear indications that this has not occurred. The first chapter illustrates this perfectly. It is subtitled “to the palace”, referring to the initial meeting with the Queen, but this is more than compensated for by the chapter heading, “Over the shop”, describing Mrs Thatcher’s new position living in a flat above No. 10 Downing Street, but also affirming continuity with her humble past when she lived over her father’s grocer’s shop. Thereafter, although she moves among presidents and prime ministers, she will continue to present herself as an ‘ordinary’ woman by references to hairdressers and dressmakers. She says, recounting the preparation for the 1987 general election, “I took a close interest in clothes, as most women

do" (p. 575). Her ordinariness remains present to the end. As she leaves Downing Street for the last time she writes, "Crawfie wiped a trace of mascara off my cheek" (861). The fact that she is one of the people as well as their leader is perhaps most strongly affirmed when she describes the final moments of the Falklands War. She says, "[l]ike everyone else in Britain, I was glued to the radio for news" (234).

To make sense of her achievements, to justify her actions, and to claim her place in History, Mrs Thatcher has to insert her period in office into a longer term national history. We have already seen the foundational importance that the Second World War holds in her battle narratives. The war is mythologised - it becomes the key manifestation of an ahistorical national essence, Britain's love and defence of freedom. Freedom itself, as we saw, is tied to free enterprise, so that her struggles against trade unions, Argentinian dictators, the Labour party or world communism, are all fights on behalf of Britishness. She herself, as someone who has always 'instinctively' believed in these national values is thus, like Churchill before her, the incarnation of the national spirit. This is brought out when she describes her preparation for an election campaign saying, "[w]e always paid attention to the colours of the national flag when deciding on what I should wear" (575).

This essential Britishness brings out some of the tensions in Thatcherite discourse, as the following example will show. After a battle with the European Community, The Iron Lady quotes a Kipling poem about "our English forefathers" [the Saxons] as seen by a Norman;

The Saxon is not like us Normans. His manners are not so polite.
But he never means anything serious till he talks about justice and right.
When he stands like an ox in the furrow with sullen set eyes on your own,
And grumbles, 'This isn't fair dealing', My son, leave the Saxon alone (82).

The most worrying point is the clear racialization of Britishness, its rooting in some Anglo-Saxon nature. The irony is that the poem about British defence of justice is written by Britain's leading imperial writer at a time when large parts of the globe are enjoying British unfreedom. The empire has to be hinted at yet erased in contemporary nationalist discourse. Hinted at to justify Britain's greatness and global role, yet erased because it undermines Britain's role as beacon of freedom and democracy and because, as it has now been lost, greatness cannot be seen to depend upon it, but must instead be seen as an inherent part of the national character.¹ The perfect match between essential Britishness and Mrs Thatcher's ideological needs would also suggest that essences need constant updating to suit current circumstances.²

Essences are reassuring. They stabilise a shifting world. This is part of the appeal of Thatcherism. Faced with a radically uncertain future that threatens national identity itself, it suggests that the way forward is for an unchanging nation to fight an unchanging battle. Uncertainty is abolished. The future will simply be a continuation of the past. A world of baffling ambivalence and terrifying complexity is rendered clear as a manichean schema puts everything in its place and assigns it a clear value (good or evil, right or wrong). There is no need to doubt oneself, or negotiate when faced by those with different opinions. They are enemies and battle must be waged.

¹ For a consideration of how that earlier right-wing populist, Enoch Powell, established himself as the voice of the people's suppressed truths, see A. M. Smith 1994, 145-6.

² For a discussion of the Powellite vision of empire as "accidental and external" to Britishness, see A. M. Smith 1994, 131-135.

Margaret Thatcher's book is a story of battles won, a triumph of the will - the Falklands, the Cold War, the miners' strike, general elections, denationalisation. The result would seem cut and dried. But lurking in the pages, is an unThatcherlike coded message of failure. The economic legacy is not secure; national influence is ultimately linked to economic strength not the qualities of the leader; her successor may not defend her legacy; the key battle on Europe may be lost in a sea of metaphor and ambiguity; socialism is deeply rooted in institutions and the national culture. It would seem ultimately that neither an iron will nor the reshaping of language can abolish uncertainty.

Mrs Thatcher's stories throw up two great ironies. The first is that her story of individual influence effects an almost complete erasure of the self. The 'I' of the work has two essential functions - one to carry out the impersonal imperatives of situations, the other to voice impersonal truths. Ultimately, all that remains beyond these narrative functions are the few traits designed to mark Mrs Thatcher as an 'ordinary' woman, but these, precisely because of their ordinariness, fail to establish individuality. Notions of subjectivity, of past errors or lessons learnt, would have given existential density to the persona, but these are manifestly ruled out by a discourse that claims to voice objective and context independent truths. The Iron Lady, like the Cheshire cat, ultimately vanishes, leaving nothing but a dress in the colours of the Union Jack.

The second great irony is the absolute centrality she accords to the Second World War, for it was during the war that public opinion shifted decisively in favour of the Welfare State. Mrs Thatcher evades this point completely, referring as we saw to an unexplained "collapse of national morale" when Labour come to power in 1945. Britain's 'finest hour' must be rigidly separated from a move to the left, for defence of freedom and collectivism must be kept at opposite semantic poles to prevent the collapse of the entire Thatcherite ontology, even if some historical furniture may need rearranging in the process. The vision of the British people that she requires to accompany her portrait of Churchill, and her collection of porcelain, is provided by Henry Moore's "scenes of people sleeping in the London Underground during the Blitz" (24). Whether it be the war or the 1980s, Britain could take it.

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