Sport, Media and Regional Identity

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Edited by

Simon Gwyn Roberts

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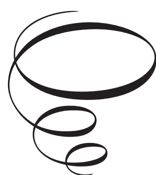

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

SIMON GWYN ROBERTS

The Oude Kwaremont is a two kilometre stretch of cobbled road, little wider than a farm track, in the south-east corner of Belgian Flanders. A less likely sporting arena would be difficult to imagine, yet on one Sunday in April it is transformed into the centrepiece of arguably the most distinctive celebration of a regional sporting culture in Europe. The Tour of Flanders bike race (*Ronde van Vlaanderen*) has, since its inception in 1913, come to symbolize the stateless nation of Belgian Flanders. There is a museum in nearby Oudenaarde devoted to this one event, and it is estimated that half a million fans line the roads of Dutch-speaking Belgium for the race.

It also generates a vast amount of news media attention. Indeed, like many bike races the Tour of Flanders was launched primarily to boost sales of a newspaper. And, in common with the *Giro d'Italia* (Tour of Italy) and the *Vuelta Espana* (Tour of Spain), it also conceived its role as one of nation building from the outset. The founder of the *Ronde*, Karel Van Wijnendaele, also co-founded the Flemish-language newspaper *Sportwereld*, which focused on what it saw as the historic grievances held by the Flemish half of Belgium: angered at the traditional social and cultural dominance of the Wallonian French-speaking half of the country.

Sportwereld addressed the Flemish people in their own language, giving them confidence as Flandrians (Woodland, 2013). The first race deliberately attempted to encompass as much of Flemish (Dutch) speaking Belgium as possible because, in Van Wijnendaele's words "all Flemish cities had to contribute to the liberation of the Flemish people". Nico Mattan of the sports newspaper *L'Equipe* made a more recent attempt to encapsulate the links between the race and the nation by highlighting the fact that "many great names of Flemish cycling live on the course. This closeness doesn't exist in any other country. That's what gives us our identity" (2004). And, whereas the *Giro* and *Vuelta* have had to negotiate

the complex identity politics of diverse *nation states* since their inception, the Ronde is lent its vitality and identity by the fact that it represents a *region*, which in this case is also a stateless nation.

The short but viciously steep cobbled hills that make up the race (*hellingen* in Dutch/Flemish) can be viewed as archetypal 'place-myths' that feed the wider media-driven construction of icons and legends linked with the event itself. Urry (1995, p. 194) notes that the English Lake District came to be visited in the nineteenth century only because a 'place-myth' developed about what had historically been considered a 'barren and inhospitable' landscape. Visitors are attracted by the mediated place-myths that are gradually constructed around such regions.

The cobbled climbs of Flanders, otherwise entirely anonymous muddy tracks, assume a kind of supernatural cultural significance founded on the drama of this particular event, and the centrality of it (and the sport of cycling) to Flemish identity and culture. The names (*Koppenberg, Oude Kwaremont, Kruisberg, Patterberg*) have gained an iconic status because of the events that have taken place upon them: and this is exploited by a news media keen to promote that sense of place which connects to what Urry (1995, p. 2) describes as 'consumption' – how a sense of place is not simply given but is culturally constructed, most notably by the news media. The *hellingen* are archetypes of this tendency towards cultural constructions of the regional landscape: with the associated sporting event central to subnational identity. For example, a famous incident in 1987 saw Danish rider Jesper Skibby break away from the rest of the field but fall on the cobblestones of the exceptionally steep and rutted Koppenberg. The race director, close behind in his car, felt unable to stop with the pursuing cyclists just behind and the road too narrow to reverse. The director ordered his driver to continue up the absurdly steep track, destroying Skibby's bike in the process, with the cyclist still lying on the cobbles. The event is still frequently referenced by the Flemish (and international) sporting press, which serves to further mythologize both the brutality of the Koppenberg and the difficulty of the wider race. Such events are central to the news media's construction of the event, its famous incidents and dramatic history. As Mangan (1998, p. 2) asserts: "Sport not only reflects culture: it shapes it."

Mediatizing and mythologizing the regional landscape

Intimate links between sport and region can be found in many different contexts. From the muddy farm tracks of Flanders, we move to the terraced streets and bare moors of the north of England. Every Easter, the

town of Horwich on the edge of Bolton and Greater Manchester sees around 400 runners gather for the Rivington Pike fell race. First run in 1890, it involves a 2.6k dash to the top of the Pike, a prominent local landmark on the edge of the Pennine hills, following Old Will's Road and the cobbled 'concrete path', before a flat-out sprint back to the town which the leading 'Pike Racers' will complete in around six minutes. Like the *Ronde*, the course is lined with enthusiastic local supporters for whom the event is an important link with a wider sense of cultural identity associated with the region of northern England. Sports like fell running, brutally tough and determinedly non-commercial, are an important part of this regional sense of identity. And like the *Ronde*, the exploits of the leading local runners are detailed in the sports pages of the local papers, albeit without the accompanying financial inducement. At the fell race, a series of modest trophies is the only reward for amateur athletes who train every day and may well run 100 miles each week over the moors and mountains of Northern England.

Both events take place in a distinctive landscape: they are not Himalayan or Alpine in scale, but they have been invested with a wider cultural significance because of a specific sporting event that celebrates those distinctive landscapes – by making them a feature of the difficulty of the event and associating those sporting heroes that are able to overcome the difficulties those landscapes present with the event itself.

The news media was and is central to the construction of Flemish cycling heroes like Tom Boonen, Brik Schott, Roger de Vlaeminck, and northern English fell runners like Joss Naylor and Billy Bland. But while the media's links with national identity are well documented (Anderson, 1983; Billig, 1995), the media's links with regional identity receive less attention. Sport is frequently used in the metaphorical sense to celebrate nationhood and national pride: as Edensor (2002) points out, sporting performance expresses particular forms of embodied capital valued by particular groups. Despite the facility of sport to provide an occasion for the parading of national antagonisms, however, Edensor concedes that it can also stoke ethnic and regional rivalries. He points to club football in Mauritius as a vehicle for the performance of ethnic rivalries: "Here, sport seems to undercut any attempt to establish a national identity, foregrounding ethnic rivalries which continue to be more affective sources of identity than the Mauritian nation" (p. 80). Numerous similar examples of sporting *regionalism* taking precedent over sporting *nationalism* occur globally, from the expressions of civic and provincial pride familiar in Italian football to the intense local rivalries in 'l'Ovalie' (the land of the oval ball: France's south-western rugby heartland).

Aside from the construction and celebration of regional and local rivalries, often in an attempt to gain and hold a coherent audience, the media also constructs the landscape itself by turning innocuous country lanes and cobbled cart tracks into sporting arenas, lending them an iconic status which is – or becomes – redolent of place. For Rawnsley (2000, p. 3) material human agency utilizes space and location with a complexity which goes beyond simple geographical determinism, while Tuan (1974, p. 4) coined the word 'topophilia' to define the attachment that people have to a particular place. Place, in other words, is not just a 'thing' in the world, but a way of understanding the world. It suggests value and belonging, whereas space implies economic rationality. Place, as with the Koppenberg, is invested with significance – because places imply attachments and connections between people and place. For Carter, Donald and Squires (1993, p. vii) spaces do not ground identifications, but places do. Space becomes place by being *named*, by embodying the symbolic and imaginary investments of a population. In short: "Place is space to which meaning has been ascribed". By such a process, Belgian farm tracks become 'legendary', helped along by a news media keen to pursue the commercial advantages such hyperbole can offer.

For Tuan (1977, p. 149), place can be as small as the corner of a room or as large as the earth itself. In this volume of chapters on the links between sport, the media and regional identity, the descriptor 'regional' can be read in many ways: from the role of sport in the civic pride of a city through to its symbolic importance in stateless nations like Scotland, Flanders, Silesia or Wales.

The increasing potency of identity politics across Europe can be seen in many of the examples that follow in this volume, with sport acting as a vehicle for the promotion and celebration of regional and sub-national identities. Carter et al (1993, p. ix) argued (in the context of the early 1990s) that this trend demonstrated a resistance to global forces, whilst also pointing out that identity politics was simultaneously a product of those forces. This 'resistance' to homogeneity has given rise to the development of new communities of interest and belief and (we might add) the resurrection of old ones. These processes, particularly in the sporting sense, are not entirely unproblematic: but they need not be exclusive, aggressive or introspective in tone, indeed they frequently celebrate the opportunity to engage with the wider world from a different point of departure.

Two of the most celebrated and frequently invoked examples of the links between sport, identity and region are the English county cricket team of Yorkshire and the Basque football team Athletic Bilbao, both

infamous for their exclusive approach to player recruitment: the subtext being that it is apparently self-defeating in its fanatical purity. In fact, Athletic Bilbao's *Cantera* policy has always been relatively flexible in its 'Basque only' recruitment approach, referring more to the importance of nurturing players through a youth development system; and its rules have been loosened over time. Similarly, Yorkshire cricket is not immune to the globalization of sport, relaxing its chauvinistic 'Yorkshire-born' rule in 1992 and later abandoning the link completely to sign the teenage future global icon Sachin Tendulkar. In both Bilbao and Yorkshire, however, the original motive behind the recruitment policy was the same: to show the clearest possible link between the perceived sanctity of the region, or stateless nation, and its representation in a sporting context. These can, and do, act as a proxy for political development: independence in the case of the Basque country, regional devolution in the case of Yorkshire. Indeed, in the absence of powerful local government or strong civil societies, argues Goldblatt (2014), English football clubs have become a vital component in sustaining distinct urban identities.

Some sports with a clear link to region show a progression through various forms of place relationship: but almost always defined against a bigger, more nebulous 'other', which may be the nation state, or (like the Tour of Flanders) focused on redressing the balance of power within a country or addressing historical grievances. At the regional level, Rawnsley (2000, p. 3) argues that the North of England's sense of place is 'condensed and distilled with intensity' via the pages of an influential local print press. Sport has often been central to the modern construction of stateless national identities. Welsh rugby union is one of the better known examples of this phenomenon, where the exploits of contemporary sporting heroes blur with a mythologized past (Williams, 1985). The Welsh folk singer Dafydd Iwan, whose songs are frequently invoked by rugby and football crowds, offers a defining example of the latter with his rousing 'Yma o hyd', intended as a rallying cry for the Welsh nation ("we are still here – despite everything and everyone, despite 'the old enemy', we are still here"). Similar sentiments evoking a mythical past and 'us against them' imagery are transnational, common to both stateless and small nations worldwide.

Indeed, Shields (1991, p. 3) argues that the marginal status of peripheral areas often arises from being seen to represent 'the other pole to a great cultural centre'. In a broader context, Bhaba (1990, p. 1) referenced the 'impossible unity of the nation as a symbolic force' despite attempts by nationalist discourses to produce the idea of the nation as a continuous narrative of national progress.

'Us against Them': Region and Rebellion

The code of rugby league is perhaps the best example of a sport that has, over time, seen its relationship with 'the other' evolve upwards through several scales of magnitude – from early civic rivalry to a latter-day celebration of regional identity. The news media was often the driving force behind this evolution, as it sought to nurture an audience by emphasizing locality, loyalty and identity. Huggins (2000, p. 138) outlines the historical relationship between the media and civic pride, with his suggestion that nineteenth century newspapers in north-east England initially fostered notions of identity in sport at a local or sub-regional level more than a regional level, and that this process involved the metaphorical 'scoring of points' over other local papers. Support for a local team and attacks on regional rivals became a part of that process as the new daily papers, emerging in the region from the 1870s onwards, competed for a regular sporting readership and "castigated the bias of other newspapers" (Huggins, 2000, p. 140). For Huggins, the sporting reports in the regional press were of central importance in shaping perceptions of identity, and constructing sporting legends. Sports reporters created the dominant motifs around which the various sometimes contradictory strands of sporting identity were constructed. They drew on images drawn from local industry and local pride in their descriptions of sporting competition.

Media-driven identity construction can take time. Huggins (2000) argues that in much of North-East England, both local and sub-regional identities had to be constructed almost from scratch and that the media was central to this. It took some time, he says, for communities to have a clear sense of their own identity, partly because they were new, formed by in-migration to work in new industry.

The local media in nineteenth century Yorkshire and Lancashire gave rise, indirectly, to the still extant notion of the 'rugby league town', in which the club and the sport itself are central to its civic identity and its view of itself as different to its football-playing neighbours. Warrington's rugby league team, for example, celebrates a much wider and older sense of its local heritage through its traditional nickname ('The Wire'), a reference to the town's wire-pulling industry. Similarly, other towns in north-west England like St Helens, Widnes and Wigan are known – both regionally and nationally – for their connection to the sport of rugby league, to the extent that the sport has a defining role in their civic identities.

The game of rugby league evolved, and its self-image evolved with it. Still determined to celebrate its marginalized, outsider status, it gradually

shifted from localized civic rivalries to become part of the wider symbolism of northern working-class history and identity (Collins 1998, p. 201), a process that began soon after the code split from the doggedly amateur game of Rugby Union. It was discriminated against by the middle class, southern English establishment, and its oppositional status helped it establish a clear identity. For Collins, the Northern Union (NU) "became part of northern identity" (1998, p. 201) by transcending the more parochial county-based sporting identities of the nineteenth century, and the game gradually transcended civic pride to celebrate a wider regionalism: "Despite the fact that the NU was initially forged from national forces in which regionalism played a subordinate role, as the NU sought to develop its own identity it naturally assimilated the customs and culture of its location...the new game prided itself on being Northern" (Collins, 1998, p. 200). While working-class civic pride in town and immediate locality remained a potent force, this too began to merge with a sense of what Collins describes as corporate 'Northernness'.

For Powell (2007), the idea of 'region' is categorically different from other conceptualisations of places, like home, community, city, state and nation: in that region must refer not to a specific site but a larger network of sites. Region is always a relational term, he argues, because a region can never be an isolated space, withdrawn from larger cultural forces and processes: "When we talk about a region, we are talking not about a stable, boundaried, autonomous place but about a cultural history, the cumulative, generative effect of the interplay among the various, competing definitions of that region" (p. 5).

Despite traditionally being used to define and isolate networks of places and spaces, Powell suggests that regionalism can provide a rhetorical basis for making claims about how spaces and places are connected to conceptually broader patterns of meaning. Sport is often integral to this process, given definition by a media eager to define and address a coherent regional audience. For Collins (1998), the code of rugby league offers a prime example of these processes: "In an era of increasingly national culture and identity, the development and meaning of the NU demonstrated not only that regionalism survived but also how it changes and reformulated itself in new circumstances."

For Carter et al (1993, p. ix) the logic of modernization and globalization frequently led to representations of localized identities as regressive and undermined the old allegiances of place and community. But the burgeoning of identity politics, and civic forms of nationalism, reveal a clear resistance to such universalizing strategies. In this sense the links between sport and region become a celebration of the local, the

regional and the distinctive; emblematic of community and continuity. The chapters that follow explore that sense of the counter-hegemonic, where sport is celebrated by a media often keen to promote notions of difference, which might verge on rebellion in some contexts, conceived as resisting global homogeneity or national hegemony. At other times, they may merely reflect a commercial nose for the local audience's tastes: but there is always the sense of preserving something important, a celebration of the diversity that makes us human.

Chapter Summary

This book takes a deliberately relaxed approach to the notion of 'region', with chapters covering various definitions of the 'sub-national'. It will be readily appreciated that strict definitions are impossible. For example, Silesia, examined by Wojciech Woźniak, is both a modern Polish Voivodeship (province) as well as a wider historic region spreading across the Czech and German border, and its boundaries have shifted over time. In the chapters that follow, definitions of 'region' range from English counties and urban identities through to the plurinational composition of contemporary Spain. Notions of 'region' are susceptible to geographical context: what makes a region in one context may well make a nation in another. There is a temporal element to this too. It is well documented, for instance, that the British Isles hosted many distinct regional versions of 'football' before the rules were codified in the later nineteenth century. These were, one assumes, a vehicle for community bonding and pride. An anonymous report describes a version of the game in South Cardiganshire in the early nineteenth century in which the entire population, male and female, rich and poor, "indulged in the game of football with such vigour that it became little short of a serious fight…the parishioners of Cellan and Pencarreg were particularly bitter in their conflicts" (Anonymous, 1887). Towns were divided, in Llanwenog near Lampeter for example, between the 'Bros' from the high ground of the parish, and the 'Blaenaus' from the lowlands.

It is with some regret that the volume is restricted to European exemplars. Clearly, there is scope for more work to be done in this area, and it is likely that a truly global perspective would generate equally interesting examples from the likes of Australian sport (where the notional 'Barassi line' divides the country between Australian rules football and an enthusiasm for both Rugby codes), indigenous South American sports (Huka Huka, for example, a form of wrestling associated with the state of Matto Grosso in Brazil) and East African distance running, where the town

of Iten in Kenya has long been associated with elite athletes, and where running remains a source of prestige within small local social networks based on competition, hierarchy and cooperation (Carrey, 2012).

In the chapters that follow, Wojciech Woźniak looks at the links between industrial heritage and football in the Polish region of Silesia. The Silesians have traditionally been somewhat marginalized in Polish political discourse, dismissed as either 'not Polish enough' or 'too German' since the early years of the 20th century. Woźniak links the real and imagined glories of the Silesian sporting past with collective memories of the region's industrial heritage; identifying media-driven performances of historical and cultural heritage as crucial symbols of identity, frequently mobilized by the supporters of Silesia's leading football clubs.

Alec Charles examines the cultural impact of sport on David Peace's 'Red or Dead' arguing that the inherent futility of Bill Shankly's quest for footballing success is simultaneously extraordinarily heroic and epically human; it is the more heroic precisely because it is doomed eventually and repeatedly to fail. Charles examines the ways in which Peace uses football as a metaphor for sustaining identity and therefore the possibility of the continuation of the community itself. *Red or Dead* both generates and plays upon an overwhelming nostalgia for this intimate correspondence between football and community, one which fosters a spirit of identification with club and team and thereby sponsors a sense of regional and class identity. Charles argues that Peace's novel suggests that sport might transform suffering into the consolation of solidarity.

Mark Rowe examines the historical links between cricket and English regional identities, centred on the old counties which retain a symbolic significance despite the many changes that central government in the UK has wrought on local government. He argues that the local sports media has often been central to those definitions, and links its decline with the decline of country cricket as a distinctively English cultural and sporting phenomenon.

Emer Connolly focuses on Gaelic games, stressing the regional aspects of Irish traditional sport. In particular, she examines the ways in which Gaelic games simultaneously celebrate a sense of Irish nationhood and separateness, while also providing communities with a specific sense of region and locality, with Gaelic games organizations central to the life and culture of those communities; touchstones for community pride and identity.

Daniel Barredo Ibáñez and Martín Oller Alonso undertake a statistical analysis of the Spanish sports press, arguing that their research suggests a systematic sub-national bias towards the opposing sides in '*El Clasico*',

the Castilian Real Madrid and the Catalan Barcelona. Like Manchester United, both have long been established as global brands, yet their significance as proxy national sides and the political subtext that runs alongside is as relevant and potent as ever.

David Williams takes a retrospective view of the reporting of local sport, focusing on the English county of Essex. Williams uses Essex sport as a prism through which to view the importance of community to the local news press, arguing that in the post-war years British sport was more about survival than success. The local newspaper industry used local sport as a vehicle for re-engaging with the community in a deliberate attempt to recreate the 'halcyon days' of the 1930s. Williams argues that the early 1950s represent the 'golden age' of British local journalism: with weekly newspapers integral to the survival and revival of local sport after WWII.

Paul Clark examines the phenomenon of the 'franchise club', and the impact that commercially-driven changes of location can have on local communities. He focuses on the Scottish example of Livingston Football Club, drawing on comparisons from other countries and other sports.

Guy Hodgson's chapter also looks at the continuing role of local identity in the context of global economic forces with his chapter on Manchester United. Hodgson examines the displacement that stems from the mediatized perception of the club as 'global brand', while local supporters struggle to come to terms with that shift. He poses questions that are now relevant to large football clubs across Europe: do they still have a place in the fabric of their communities? Hodgson finds that the answers are more nuanced than many observers instinctively suppose.

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CHAPTER TWO

THE SPIRIT OF THE NORTH: THE SOCIO-CULTURAL IMPACT OF FOOTBALL IN DAVID PEACE'S *RED OR DEAD*

ALEC CHARLES

The first in his 'Red Riding' series (a tetralogy which charts the social politics of the North of England in the 1970s and 1980s through an epic of serial killings, police brutality and corruption in a fantastical parallel to the narrative of the Yorkshire Ripper investigation) David Peace's novel *Nineteen Seventy Four* features the discovery of the corpse of a murder victim with two swan wings sewn onto its back (Peace, 2008a, p. 51-52). This is Peace's version of an Angel of the North, an angel of death, an arbitrarily and brutally savage avenging angel. Its wings are, as Peace (2008c, p. 163; 2008d, p. 45) repeats, "huge and rotting things." As Peace (2007, p. ix) writes at the opening of the first of his football novels, *The Damned Utd*: "our wings that cannot fly […] our wings are thick with tar."

If Peace's North mirrors in its nightmarishly cold comfortlessness the mythological landscape of George R.R. Martin's *Game of Thrones*, then it lacks Martin's magical and anachronizing romanticization of that bleak reality – but it shares the fantastical symbolic resonance of that landscape. Martin's North offers a contrast between the stark isolation, harsh justice and cold logic of its heroes' castle at Winterfell and the anarchic frozen wastes of the Wildlings and the White Walkers beyond the Wall, a realm of fundamental unreason. In Peace's work, the Pennine Hills serve a similar function to Martin's Wall.

At the start of *Red or Dead*, representatives of Liverpool Football Club travel across the Pennines from Liverpool to Huddersfield in order to bring back that wild northern footballing genius Bill Shankly – "in the shadows of the hills, in the shadows of the mills" (Peace, 2013, p. 6). The Scottish Shankly represents the wildness of the North, not of the geographical North of England, but of a truer North, an imagined and symbolic space –

an otherness engendered for centuries in the fears and fantasies of a self-consciously metropolitan South. Like Edward Said's sense of the western notion of the Orient – of the West's simultaneous terrors and "shivers of delight" in response to that perceived otherness (Said, 1985, p. 59) – this is merely a construction or projection, but it is no less powerful for that.

Peace's novel represents the wild naturalness which Shankly seems to exude as one which dispels chaos and maintains and perpetuates balance. This is as contradictory as such projections tend to be. Shankly's vision therefore is very different from the corrupt anarchy which characterizes the infernal, hope-abandoned North of much of Peace's other fiction (which is an alternative but similarly illusory imagining of northernness). Shankly may be a son of the wilderness, but he's no anthropophagous revenant.

Peace's Pennines – which such characters as ACC Peter Hunter in *Nineteen Eighty* repeatedly traverse as they trek between Liverpool or Manchester and the true North of Huddersfield or Leeds – both divide and define Peace's North. They represent the spine of his imaginary homeland, one which draws and holds together the disparate elements of this unruly kingdom, and at the same time offer a metaphor for that realm. They are not merely as barren, blasted, wild and rugged as Emily Brontë's moors; they also offer their world-weary travellers arduous journeys which seem Sisyphean in their unending futility.

This is the North, Peace's police thugs repeatedly chorus through his 'Red Riding' books (and even more volubly through their 2009 television adaptation): *We do what we want*. The law of Peace's North is a law of remorseless lawlessness. Yet there is a pattern to the relentlessness of this rejection of the effete structures of civilized order. Finely structured yet obsessive repetition is central to Peace's work; his prose follows a Beckettian formula of relentless patterns of recurrence. As Peace pointed out in 2009, in a special edition of BBC Two's *The Culture Show* dedicated to his work, "there is a kind of natural repetition to your life" – and his work uncompromisingly echoes that patterning.

Peace's tirelessly exhaustive and exhausting cycles of repetition are at once hypnotic and almost soporific: they make his novels almost – but brilliantly *not quite* – unreadable. Peace's fiction is characterized by a ruthless insistence upon repetition, one which echoes at once a late postmodernist sense of entropy and a Freudian notion of the death drive. Freud (1984, pp. 293, 308-309, 311) traces a "compulsion to repeat which over-rides the pleasure principle" back towards "*an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things* […] a kind of organic elasticity" which eventually represents "the instinct to return to the

inanimate state". These endless repetitions, so desperate to impose meaning and order, obscure and attenuate all possibilities of order and meaning: they represent, in their echoes of existential entropy, degraded copies of copies of copies, reflections of reflections of reflections – *mise en abyme*. The compulsive repetitions which underpin the fiction of Samuel Beckett and David Peace – the obsessively detailed doings of Watt, Molloy or Shankly, say – do not extend life so much as they exhaust it – so much as they drive us towards emptiness and extinction. As Jean Baudrillard (2005, p. 32) suggests, these processes undermine the possibility of meaning even as they attempt to compensate for its disappearance: "the simulacrum is not that which hides the truth, but that which hides the absence of truth."

It is perhaps obvious enough that the game of football (not just a single game of football, but the grinding cyclicity of the sport) does something remarkably similar: it functions simultaneously as a consolation for a lack of meaning and as a model and an engine for the desolation of meaning. But if this is not obvious enough outside the writings of David Peace, it becomes agonisingly clear within his work. The futile and inescapable spirals of recurrence – the vicious circles – which for Peace seem to characterize a mode of northern working class identity are reflected not only in the existential sloughs and false epiphanies of the serial killer and the irredeemably grim paralysis of institutional corruption and violence but also in the null and endless play of the beautiful game itself. This is a game whose sunny beauty – in the "bright and brilliant sunshine […] the lovely spring sunshine" (Peace, 2013, p. 138-144) – is in Peace's imagination almost constantly countered by ugliness, violence, darkness and silence. Yet this moral diminution is only *almost* constant and irresistible. As we shall see, *Red or Dead* offers the possibility (albeit the slim possibility) that football's repetitions might comprise an enduring common tradition, a solid foundation for cultural identity.

In his influential account of *Fiction and Repetition*, J. Hillis Miller (1982, p. 5-6) differentiates between two varieties of repetition identified by Gilles Deleuze: the Platonic and the Nietzschean. The former performs the recurrence of an unchanging and absolute ideal; the latter witnesses the inevitable deterioration of analogue copies, ungrounded simulacra, a vertiginous spiral of eternal recurrence (Deleuze 1994, p. 11). This abyssal spiral of repetition mesmerizes, transforms and recruits its subjects, insofar as, as Nietzsche (1973, p. 84) supposes, "when you gaze long into an abyss the abyss also gazes into you."

Football, for the most part, resembles this Nietzschean form (as do serial killing and civic corruption): "Repetition. Repetition – Fields of loss

and fields of hate, fields of blood and fields of war" (Peace 2007, p. ix). Football represents a spiral of repetition which can only ultimately decline into defeat – as Peace (2013, p. ix) supposes in *Red or Dead*: "Repetition. Repetition. Repetition. After the harvest, the failed harvest." Yet before that inevitable decline might this sporting tradition perhaps offer not only cultural consolation but also, therein, societal and existential sustenance, as it not only transfixes but also transfigures its participants?

If Peace's theme is the entropic repetition of experience – and of a particular mode of experience – then Peace's work is also about football itself, about "the repetition of football; the repetition within each game, within each season, within the history of each club, the history of the game" (2007, p. 188). Football may be symbolic of a particular mode of, and perspective upon, human existence; it may also be indicative, typical and causative of that mode of existential identity (football as metaphor, symptom and *raison d'être*); but, for Peace, it is more important than that. Through Peace's work in literary fiction (and television and cinema), football becomes intrinsically linked with this sense of cultural identity, with these cultural identities: of northern-ness and of working-class-ness, and in particular of a convergence of the two. Football may represent a form of decaying repetition; but in the incessant obsessive repetition of Peace's *Red or Dead*, as Peace's quasi-autistic text immerses its readers in the fixated and transfixing mind of Liverpool manager Bill Shankly, there remains the dream (the fantasy) that this repetition may both offer and discover renewal. This comes somehow to resemble a redemptive resurrection rather than a hollow soulless revenance – the possibility that, just for once, in this magical, nostalgic realm a Platonic idealism might overcome Nietzschean nihilism.

Northern lights

Dean Lockwood (2011, p. 57) has suggested that Peace's vision of the "destitute dead cities of the North" foregrounds a "failure to belong." But while that holds true of his 'Red Riding' novels, and indeed of his first football novel *The Damned Utd*, the sense of northern identity offered by *Red or Dead* is not irrevocably disparate; on the contrary, it is grimly optimistic; it finds hope for redemption in its shared sense of struggle, in its community of adversity.

The myth of northern-ness is a recurrent theme in the novels of David Peace: the internal tensions and external conflicts that lie at the heart of a sense of the northern English identity. As a homogeneous entity, this sense of identity of course a myth; but that is not to say that common (or related)

geographical, social, cultural and economic factors have not played their parts in shaping the diverse identities of the communities of these regions.

Peace's four 'Red Riding' novels – *Nineteen Seventy Four*, *Nineteen Seventy Seven*, *Nineteen Eighty* and *Nineteen Eighty Three* – explore the violence, corruption and random cruelty of a fantasized version of his native Yorkshire, a realm of anarchy, incoherence and unrelenting, unforgiving repetition. They replay Dante's *Inferno* in a godless universe bereft of any possibility of salvation. His novel *GB84* examines institutional corruption on both sides of the UK Miners' Strike, an industrial dispute which divided a nation. His two football novels *The Damned United* and *Red or Dead* also reflect a spirit of the English North, albeit from very different perspectives. Both novels follow crucial moments in the careers of iconic football managers (Brian Clough and Bill Shankly respectively). Like ACC Hunter in *Nineteen Eighty* (a Manchester cop investigating corruption in Leeds), both men are outsiders (and both are 'northerners': one is a Yorkshireman and the other a Scotsman) – but one novel is a story of (mitigated) triumph, the other of unmitigated disaster.

The Damned Utd – since filmed as *The Damned United* (2009) – tells the story of Brian Clough's catastrophic forty-four days as manager of Leeds United in 1974. Clough's hell is made all the worse by the fact that in the unrelenting mills of the beautiful game, there is no possibility of closure or climax or escape: "if you think it's hell now, you wait until you bloody lose at home to Luton on Saturday, away at Huddersfield Town, and then go out of the European Cup in the first fucking round to Zurich" (Peace 2007, p. 277).

Red or Dead by contrast tells the morally triumphant tale of Bill Shankly's fifteen years as the manager of Liverpool Football Club, and Shankly's integration into the community and the identity of club and city, as he leads Liverpool out of the Second Division to win the UEFA Cup, the FA Cup (twice) and the First Division Championship (three times). *Red or Dead* is Peace's epic: a gargantuan account of Shankly's era at Liverpool and of his life in retirement thereafter; a 700-page portrait of its time and place.

Yet both novels – despite their clear differences in tone – continually refer to the endless, pointless statistics of the game, the endless, pointless cycles of its matches. *The Damned Utd* includes several entire pages which merely comprise football division score/position tables; *Red or Dead* features pages of match results *ad nauseam* – and indeed *ad absurdum*. Much of *Red or Dead* (hundreds of pages of the novel) comprises repetitive and formulaic descriptions of football matches, their key action, location, weather, scores and crowd sizes.

Why does Peace do this? Is he merely emphasizing the *ennui* of football; or is he, through Shankly's obsessive perspective, attempting to articulate the nature of the shared experience and identity which his novel explores and celebrates? Bill Shankly is famous for having declared that although "some people believe football is a matter of life and death" he was convinced that "it is much, much more important than that." Peace appears to adopt Shankly's philosophy: that the game of football offers a distilled version of life itself, or at least of a particular kind of human experience; of the experience of those whose lives are defined by the game.

Even Bill Shankly in the heights of his victories veers and vacillates between triumph and tragedy; that is his (and our) tragedy, the tragedy of those whose social, cultural and emotional identity is defined by this fickle and ultimately cruel sport whose glorious cusps are immanently transient.

Football is, after all, an apt enough metaphor for the trials of life: "if you think in sporting analogies," Harold Wilson tells Bill Shankly in *Red or Dead* (Peace, 2013, p. 578), "it helps you in other walks of life." The hackneyed nature of such analogies only serves to underline the hackneyed nature of the situations they describe: conditions of infernally repetitive and tedious routine. Cliché is sometimes utterly appropriate; no more so than when the worlds of football and existential emptiness coincide.

Football, Peace tells us, has no end, no *telos*: it is an unremitting process, as bleak as the life which Peace depicts. Paradoxically, one might say that football, in the long term, has no *goal*. Yet there seems something redemptive, albeit absurdly redemptive, in the recognition of this situation.

Albert Camus (1975, p. 111) ended his account of the myth of Sisyphus with the suggestion that, insofar as "the struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart" we must "imagine Sisyphus happy." Camus was of course himself a footballer: he played in goal for Racing Universitaire d'Alger. If, as Camus suggests, the struggle itself is sufficient to fill one's heart, then the managers, players and supporters of Liverpool Football Club continue, like Sisyphus himself, to "walk on, walk on, with hope in [their] heart[s]." Their anthem – like the game itself – offers a possibility unknown to Sisyphus: that this struggle might be shared. This recognition of a shared struggle (and therefore of a common identity) seems somehow to ameliorate their suffering: we're all in this together; you'll never walk alone.

The hell experienced by Sisyphus was, of course, that he was condemned for all eternity to roll a boulder to the top of a hill, only to watch it roll back down again. David Peace's portrayal of association football is certainly Sisyphean: it offers little more than the briefest

moments of respite (of triumph, noise, action, warmth, colour and light), as when the rock rests just for a moment at the top of the hill, moments which only seem by contrast to underline the silent, dark, cold, grey, empty paralysis of human – and specifically, it seems for Peace, of northern working class – experience: “this wilderness, this drunken, dark and lonely place where the only sound is the sound of your own name repeated endlessly: Cloughie, Cloughie, Cloughie” (2007, p. 329).

Whannel (2011, p. 100) sees Peace’s rendition of Brian Clough in *The Damned Utd* as representative of a tradition of “northern working class men” within which he discerns a “romantic nostalgia for community”. But where Clough fails, Peace’s Shankly triumphs: even (and especially) in his failure, Shankly epitomizes and propagates a sense of the redemptive identity of community, one defined both by region and by class.

Epic fail

Inasmuch as the epic is the text which captures or seeks to capture the *zeitgeist* of its nation or its culture, then Peace’s work is epic or proto-epic: like *The Iliad*, *Battleship Potemkin* or *Paradise Lost*, it captures not merely a snapshot of its time but the symbolic essence and origin of the culture it portrays. The experience it depicts is not merely typical but functions archetypally in relation to the cultural identities it represents.

Charles (2011, p. 64) has observed Peace’s earlier echoes of T.S. Eliot; and *The Damned Utd* offers Peace’s version of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, the epic which defined the Europe of the Modernist age. Where Eliot’s poem brings the 137th psalm (“By the waters of Babylon we sat and wept”) into his London of 1922 (“By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept”), Peace transposes the sentiment to Leeds in 1974: “By Elland road I sat down and wept” (Peace, 2007, p. ix).

For Peace’s Bill Shankly in *Red or Dead* – again echoing Eliot’s symbolic-ironic quest for modernity’s grail – football represents an escape from what he repeatedly describes as “the wasteland […] the wilderness” (Peace, 2013, pp. 320, 385, 531, 686) – the irredeemably unstructured meaninglessness of contemporary experience. Thus for Shankly the FA, League or European Cups come to represent “in the wasteland […] in the wilderness […] the grail” (Peace, 2013, p. 312).

This fantasy offers Peace’s Shankly the opportunity “to believe in redemption” (Peace, 2013, p. 346). As Harold Wilson tells Bill Shankly (Peace, 2013, p. 705, 707), football thus becomes a form of religion, and this perspective is underlined by Peace in a scene in which Shankly, returned for a moment from the obscurity of his retirement, appears again

before his devoted supporters: “Thousands of supporters were down on their hands and on their knees […] Bill Shankly walked among them […] Bill Shankly touched their bowed heads” (Peace, 2013, p. 624).

This devotion to the game, *Red or Dead* repeatedly stresses, is reinforced by culture and location. In Shankly’s Liverpool the love of football seems both a response and an antidote to the intensity of socio-economic adversity. There appears to be something “about Liverpool that breeds this sort of fanaticism […] whether it is politics, football or religion” (Peace, 2013, p. 706). In the historical moment of Shankly’s Liverpool, politics, religion and football seem to become one: “The football is everything,” says Shankly (Peace, 2013, p. 686) – “Where you only see empty factories and people on their knees, I see a beautiful city and a great people […] It is the football that helps to keep them proud, it is the football that helps to keep them passionate. Because there is still an intense and powerful passion for football in this city.” Shankly sees football as providing a vital point of purpose and identification for the city’s working people, just as those working people represent and sustain the identity of football itself (Peace, 2013, p. 687): “What we do on Saturday provides a purpose and a focus for the people […] football is the working man’s sport […] The working man is the club. You cannot make a football club without him.”

This community of supporters thus derives its identity from the sport but also gives the sport its identity, impetus and purpose: “they inspire the team” (Peace, 2013, p. 884); “the belief […] flows from the stands onto the pitch into the players” (Peace, 2013, p. 688); “no one should ever underestimate the supporters of Liverpool Football Club” (Peace, 2013, p. 621); “not only did we win the Cup on the field, we won it on the terraces as well” (Peace, 2013, p. 492). At the parade celebrating Liverpool’s victory in the UEFA Cup, Peace’s Shankly emphasizes the symbiotic mutuality of this relationship: “the reason we have won is because we believe in you and you believe in us” (Peace, 2013, p. 450).

The game immortalizes its fans; they share in its own immortality (which is why it must never end): “Bill knew people would always remember the supporters of Liverpool Football Club” (Peace, 2013, p. 358); “Bill wanted the players of Liverpool Football Club to always remember the supporters of Liverpool Football Club” (Peace, 2013, p. 625).

Like *The Damned Utd*, *Red or Dead* is set in an era before the transformation of the football club into a global corporate brand. Shankly’s Liverpool FC sustains itself economically and emotionally through the fans on the terraces. Throughout the novel Peace obsessively lists the

numbers of supporters present at each match, and returns time and again to their chants and their songs: “forty-three thousand and forty-one folk had come to Anfield” (Peace, 2013, p. 42); “seventy-two thousand, four hundred and eighty-eight folk came to Goodison Park” (Peace, 2013, p. 91); “fifty-one thousand and ninety-two folk came” (Peace, 2013, p. 255); “fifty-one thousand, four hundred and thirty-five folk came” (Peace, 2013, p. 318); “fifty thousand, four hundred and ninety-one folk watched John Toshack score again” (Peace, 2013, p. 405). And, of course, in amongst all the other interminable songs and chants: “the supporters of Liverpool Football Club now singing […] *you’ll never walk alone*” (Peace, 2013, p. 168).

This is Liverpool before satellite television, and before Hillsborough for that matter, a club which has not yet been prostituted to, and betrayed by, the corporate giants of the mass media (or more specifically of Murdoch’s Sky and Murdoch’s *Sun*). This is still a club which is defined by, and which still defines, its regional identity – though the spectre of television haunts the landscape of Peace’s novel, a ghost from the future set to devastate the identity of the game and of its communities, to return its fragile possibilities of redemption to the anarchy of the waste land.

Thus Bill Shankly and his team labour “for this club and for this city” (Peace, 2013, p. 497): in its moment of triumph, Liverpool FC, just for a moment, *is* Liverpool. *Red or Dead* displays a nostalgia for this sense of a community brought together in a time of adversity (like the football truce of Christmas 1914, or the spirit of the Blitz). This stereotypically northern form of nostalgia was satirized in the poverty porn prototype of Monty Python’s ‘Four Yorkshiremen’ sketch (1967) and in Harry Enfield’s ‘It’s Grim Up North’ (1989), but was recognized perhaps rather more sincerely in the words etched into the vinyl of the original release of The Smiths’ *The Queen is Dead* (1986): “fear of Manchester – them was rotten days.” These might have been hard times, but at least they were ours. Aptly then did that Smiths album include the track ‘Frankly, Mr Shankly’ (a phrase incidentally which *Red or Dead* echoes – Peace, 2013, p. 114).

Though *Red or Dead* posits this sense of identity as almost unique to a particular time and place, this sense of regional identity is made meaningful and empowering not by the socio-economic factors of its originary geography but by its condition of cultural sharedness. It is this sharedness which is specific and special to the Liverpool and to the Liverpool Football Club which Peace’s novel and its nostalgia evoke. It is through such a commonality of identity (through identification with shared experience and perspectives) that communities are envisaged and thereby engendered. Locally defined team sports very often, of course, play a

crucial role in this process. They impose meaning upon meaninglessness; and their particular cultural power lies in the fact that they do not appear to be doing so, that they, in their offers of endless visceral gratifications, do not appear to have an immediate socio-political function. Their ideological influence is subliminal, and is all the more influential for that.

The game thereby reflects and reinforces the senses of adversity and tenacity which underpin the community's experience and identity; the team and its supporters are as one in this: "you had to fight against failure, you had to struggle against defeat […] for the hopes of the people" (Peace, 2013, p. 264). Thus, Peace (2013, p. 331) writes of how, at times of the greatest difficulty, "the supporters of Liverpool Football Club did not surrender. They kept cheering and they kept singing. And so the players of Liverpool Football Club did not surrender. They kept struggling and they kept trying." And again Peace (2013, p. 347) writes: "the supporters of Liverpool Football Club did not fall silent. They did not surrender […] and the players of Liverpool Football Club did not surrender."

The long game

For Eliot (1944), as for Camus, "there is only the trying." For Beckett (1984) also, the struggle is all: "Try again. Fail again. Fail better."

So too for Peace's Shankly: "you have learnt to always keep trying […] to always keep struggling" (Peace, 2013, p. 325); "work hard […] don't give up" (Peace, 2013, p. 660); "Bill knew you could never give up – You could never ever give up – Never, ever give up" (Peace, 2013, p. 385-386).

For Shankly the struggle that is football becomes a model for the struggles of economic and biological existence. Shankly sees the northern working class's economic struggle for employment in precisely the same terms (Peace, 2013, p. 704): "Not giving in is the thing. So you've got to try and fight it […] unemployment is a terrible thing. But you've got to try and fight it." He offers yet the same perspective upon the human struggle against mortality itself (Peace, 2013, p. 374): "The battle against age, the war against death. The battle you could not win, the war you could never win. But the battle you must try to fight […] The war you must try to win […] Bill knew you had to try to beat death. You had to try, you had to try."

"Hardship," Peace (2013, p. 703) writes, "seems to push people into […] really tough games." Thus the struggle that is football comes to emanate from and to epitomize the northern working class experience (specifically the socio-economic experience of the people of Liverpool).