

The end of English

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'It is my revolt against the English conventions, literary and otherwise, that is the main source of my talent,' James Joyce once told a friend (O'Connor, 1967: 143). In an old familiar paradox of English modernism, it is the colonised and dispossessed who shall inherit the literary earth. Sean Golden, in a brilliantly suggestive essay on this subject, sees the Irish and Americans who seized the commanding heights of 'English' literature earlier in the century as able to carry through this audacious feat of inverted imperialism precisely because they lacked those vested emotional interests in an English literary tradition which hamstrung the natives (Golden, 1982: 427-438). James, Conrad, Eliot, Pound, Yeats, Joyce and Beckett could approach indigenous English traditions from the outside, objectify and appropriate them for their own devious ends, estrange and inhabit English culture in a single act, as those reared within its settled pieties could not. Positioned as they were within essentially peripheral histories, such artists could view native English lineages less as a heritage to be protected than as an object to be problematised.

A Joyce or an Eliot could ramble across the whole span of European literature, shameless *bricoleurs* liberated from the oedipal constraints of a motherland. When John Synge pulled off the improbable trick of seeming to write in English and Gaelic simultaneously, he was revealing the profoundly dialogical nature of all such modernism, which inflects its own interests in the tongue of another, inside and outside an hegemonic discourse at the same moment, the parasite which – as with the pokerfaced conventionalism of Wilde and Shaw – merges into the very image of the host. The emigrés who turned themselves into Little Englanders (James, Conrad, Eliot) did so with all the studied self-consciousness of the *parvenu* anxiously seeking paternal approval, flamboyantly anglicised outsiders who became, self-parodically, more English than the English, hi-jacking their cultural baggage with all the insouciance of the circus clown who nips off with the suitcase the strong man has been struggling to lift. It was never easy to know whether Oscar Wilde, son (so they said) of the dirtiest man in Dublin, was flattering English high society with his effortless imitations or impudently sending them up.

The pact between modernism and colonialism is early twentieth-century England, today being repeated with a difference in Latin America, turns on a profound historical irony. If the Irish were partly liberated from the dead-weight of English bourgeois tradition, free since the days of Laurence Sterne to parody, subvert and disrupt, this was only possible because England over the centuries has stripped *them* of their native culture, thrown their national identity into dramatic crisis in a familiarly modernist way. Ireland became a devastated terrain in which everything had to be invented from scratch – in which, as with the brazenly opportunist narrators of Samuel Beckett's fiction,

you made it up as you went along, turning political oppression to artistic advantage. Hence the later Yeats's solemn fiction of a homogeneous Anglo-Irish lineage, scooping the ill-assorted Swift, Goldsmith, Berkeley and Burke into portentous mythical continuity; hence Eliot's habit of knocking off what seemed convenient from the European past, then piously consecrating this eclectic *mélange* of scraps and leavings with all the dignity of Tradition. 'Nothing is stable in this country,' wrote Joyce's brother Stanislaus; and it was exactly this sense of slippage and erasure, this chronic colonial incapacity to say who one was, which helped to nurture an Irish modernism at just the point where the realist, imperialist British were able to name themselves all too well. The effects of the empire striking back can still be felt today, in a British isles whose finest poet is Irish, and whose major radical critic is Welsh.

'English literature' was the product of a Victorian imperial middle class, anxious to crystallise its spiritual identity in a material corpus of writing. No sooner had this discourse been refined to a point of maturity, however, than it was violently assailed by three structurally interrelated phenomena: the Great War, the explosion of modernism and the mutation of the capitalist mode of production. All three phenomena are marked by an internationalism deeply at odds with the fostering of a national cultural formation. The Great War rocked those national securities to their foundation, at the same time as it lent increased impetus to the task of reinventing them as a refuge from ideological catastrophe. It is no accident that 'English', as moral discipline and spiritual balm, developed apace in postwar Cambridge, as a whole alternative identity for an exhausted imperial nation in accelerated decline. But if English literary *criticism* takes root in this period, English *literature* does not. Major literary production shifts in large measure from the imperialist heartlands to the colonial or post-colonial periphery, leaving metropolitan criticism bereft of an appropriate contemporary object and bending it inexorably backwards, away from a despised and alien modernism to an imaginary past. Modern English criticism, in other words, was *structurally* regressive from the outset, even as it sought to occupy the progressive role left open by its dismissal of the avant garde. Hence the notorious ambiguities of *Scrutiny*, at once spiritual vanguard and reactionary rump, urgently responsive to the exigencies of the present at precisely the moment it pressed back into an idealised past. In this contradictory situation, criticism confronts the unenviable destiny of becoming its own avant garde, doubly estranged from its contemporary cultural moment in that the past it pits against it is itself an idealised construct. *Scrutiny* became a displaced, distorted 'modernity', catching up in its vibrant, polemical, programmatic forms of cultural campaigning something of the pathbreaking zeal of the European avant garde, while stoutly repelling most of the products of modernist Europe in its critical content. Caught precariously between imperialist hegemony and modernist revolt, English criticism was forced to counter the rebarbative realities of late capitalist culture with an *earlier* phase of bourgeois ideology: that of a liberal humanism already in the process of being historically superseded, on the defensive even in Matthew Arnold's day, a residual trace from a more buoyant, sanguine myth of bourgeois man. That this is still the major subjacent ideology of English studies

half-a-century later is testimony both to the astonishing tenacity of that ideology, and to the increasing irrelevance of the entire project.

Scrutiny shared with modernism a certain marginal location, a resistance to the dominant metropolitan culture. If Ireland and New England were peripheral enclaves, then so in a different sense was Leavis's East Anglia. From both vantage-points, one could try to reevaluate and reconstruct the dominant culture from the inside. The difference lay in the fact that what *Scrutiny* (and Bloomsbury) attempted – to oppose to both middle-class philistinism and upper-class frivolity the humane face of a liberal nonconformist Englishness – was never a plausible tactic from the standpoint of the colonies. Joyce's *Ulysses* opens with the figure of the well-meaning English liberal Haines, who from Stephen Dedalus's viewpoint is of course no more than the acceptable face of Dublin Castle. H.G. Wells, recommending in a review that Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* should be bought, read and locked up, whined that 'There is no discrimination in (its) hatred (of the British), there is no gleam of recognition that a considerable number of Englishmen have displayed a very earnest disposition to put matters right with Ireland . . . it is just hate, a cant cultivated to the pitch of monomania, an ungenerous violent direction of the mind' (quoted by Golden, 1982:429). Joyce, of course, knew the stink of that Gladstonian earnestness about Ireland well enough, the well-meaning disposition of those who carried through the executions in Easter 1916.

From *Scrutiny's* provincial standpoint, modernism and monopoly capitalism were akin in their cosmopolitan rootlessness, comrades in crime. It is a savage irony that their cult hero D.H. Lawrence spent his life tearing restlessly from one bit of the globe to another, a deracinated 'modern' if ever there was one. And *Scrutiny* was not of course wrong to discern a collusion between modernism and monopoly capitalism. For modernism's bold dissolution of national formations, that heady transgression of frontiers between both art-forms and political states which led Philippe Sollers to describe *Finnegans Wake* as the greatest of anti-fascist novels, was of course made possible in part by the chronic nation-blindness of modern capitalism, which has no more respect than *The Waste Land* or the *Cantos* for regional particularism. The contradiction of such a system is that in order to secure the political and ideological conditions for the international circulation of commodities, it needs to exploit exactly the national allegiances and identities which its economic activities constantly undermine. In this sense, one can appreciate just what a desperate wager modernism must seem from a native nonconformist viewpoint: in seeking to challenge the oppressiveness of bourgeois nationhood it must surrender itself inexorably to the rhythms of monopoly capitalist internationalism, beginning as Brecht said from the 'bad new things' rather than the good old ones, permitting history to progress (as Marx said) by its bad side. For Leavis, there was a choice between being at home in your own language and being exiled in another's; but such a choice was not open to a Joyce or a Beckett, for whom one might as well be homeless in all languages as dispossessed in one's own. It is because the modernist colonials are exiled in their own speech, the tongue of the oppressor, that they can cast

a cold eye on the notion of 'rootedness' – which is not to say that they did not have to pay, sometimes dearly, the price of a certain deeper deracination, as well as the cost of political isolation and aesthetic elitism. For Joyce and Beckett, as for Conrad before them, the paradigm case of the problematical nature of all discourse is to be disinherited in and by one's 'mother tongue'; modernist cosmopolitanism, so to speak, merely universalizes the pain. One can trace this difficulty today in the poetry of Seamus Heaney, where a stubbornly specific regionalism (that of Catholic Derry) strives to articulate itself in a deftly cosmopolitan medium, in a linguistic pact constantly threatened with infidelity on both sides.

Since nobody actually lives absolved from all local allegiance, not even a Joyce in Trieste or a Pound in Rapallo, there is always an inevitably utopian moment in all such modernism – an assertive wager that one can be at home everywhere, in an equitable circulation of tongues, myths and identities of which the *Wake* is prototypical. And this, of course, is often enough compensation for the actual pains of exile. Those contemporary theories which would have us kick the referent and live euphorically on the inside of some great intertextual tangle of signs are, whether they know it or not, the appropriate coding of this real historical situation, and too often repress its actual misery. The utopic euphoria of such modernism corresponds in fact to an earlier moment of the twentieth-century capitalist mode of production, one which, despite Sollers's comment on the *Wake*, pre-dates the century's most virulent outbreak of nationalism, as well as the post-war consolidation of an international monopoly capitalism about which there seems little exhilarating. The cosmopolitan confidence of the early modernists has a different historical root: not only in the apparent promise of a more dynamic phase of capitalist technology, but in the more assertive international presence of its historical antagonist, the working class which like the modernist artist knows no homeland. If art for the modernist writer was the name of that other, geographically unlocatable space where national identities crumbled, exploitation was its name for the world proletariat, and oppression for its subjugated groups and peoples.

British capitalism, however, had none of the restless dynamism which might have plausibly thrown up a Futurism of Constructivism. What attracted the 'Little Englander' literary emigrés to these shores, from James and Conrad to T.S. Eliot, was precisely the relatively settled nature of bourgeois hegemony, fruit of several centuries of imperialist domination abroad and class-collaborationism at home. Inertly traditionalist, replete with literary realism and liberal empiricism, English culture proved peculiarly resistant to the modernist experiment, just as for exactly the same reasons it inspired it by reaction in such writers as Joyce and Lawrence. England's closedness to modernism, which it 'exported' to the margins, meant on the one hand a welcome exclusion of subversive cultural forms; but it was at the same time a sign of capitalist stagnation and decline, and the ideology of 'Englishness' thrived on this backwardness. Shaken though it is in the early modernist period by severe class struggle, it is still at this point far from clear that England is finished – far from obvious that some refurbished 'nativism' à la

Scrutiny, for all its regressive aspects, may not play some role in a national reconsolidation. In such a context, modernism could be defused and domesticated, judiciously blended as in the later Eliot with a suitably Anglican tone and sensibility. Eliot could be aligned with Donne and Hopkins rather than with Mallarmé and Valéry; and it was the role of English criticism to effect such an alignment.

Besides, England still had at this point one powerful internationalist response to modernist cosmopolitanism: empire. If empire proved a breeding ground for modernism, as in the case of Ireland, it could also act as a bulwark for the mother country against it. English was a language in which one could be internationally at home, subsuming all regional particularities from Kerry to Kuala Lumpur, and thus resolving at a stroke the painful antithesis between parochialism on the one hand and global rootlessness on the other. Empire was England's secret weapon against a promiscuous modernism: the mere fact of the global reach of the English language was enough to buttress an indigenous culture otherwise grievously threatened with decline. Englishness thus survived the modernist onslaught, which not long after the death of Lawrence had come to seem like a minor foreign aberration; but it then had to confront the much graver threat of the loss of empire itself. In the very enclave of Cambridge English in the critically crucial 1920s, *A Passage to India* was already presaging this catastrophe, ominously marking the limits of realist and liberal empiricist discourse while quite unable itself to venture beyond them. The regional particularism so favoured by the Leavises returns with a vengeance in the middle decades of the century, rearing its head in the unpleasantly unfamiliar form of the various national liberation movements which detach one colonial society after another from British hegemony. The response of 'English' to this development would be the pathetic farce of 'Commonwealth Literature'. 'English' begins to lose its global guarantee, and plunges its liberal humanist guardians into a severe dilemma. For if that liberalism is restless with ruling-class imperial arrogance, its own belief in the centrality of the native was historically supported by just such an imperial system. The demise of *Scrutiny*, and the opening up of the major period of struggle against British imperialism, are historically coincident.

It is characteristic of what might loosely be called the modernist sensibility, from Baudelaire to T.S. Eliot, that the archaic and the innovative, the primeval and the modern, begin to enter into what Walter Benjamin would call 'shocking constellations' with one another, so that in the very act of 'making it new' one finds oneself excavating in recycled forms the eternally recurrent genealogies of a buried past. This uncanny convergence of the old and the new is nowhere more striking than in the curious parallelisms between colonialism and late capitalism, the pre- and post-industrial. What liberal humanism speaks up for, against the aesthetics of modernism, is the unitary subject, linear history, the self as agent, the world as knowable and totalisable – all ideological notions thrown into instant disorder by the colonial experience. A chronically backward colony like Joyce's Ireland lends itself to modernism as well as it does precisely because such notions are phenomenologically unworkable. In such conditions, the subject is less the strenuously

self-mastering agent of its historical destiny than empty, powerless, without a name; linear time, which is always so to speak on the side of Caesar, becomes cyclical, repetitive, untotisable, denuded of tradition and teleology; the great unities of subject and object beloved of bourgeois idealist epistemology are inoperative from the outset, the object a blank, fragmented materiality sunk in the nausea of the quotidian, the subject a mere function of its circumstances, depthless and dispossessed. Meanwhile, altogether elsewhere, a classical bourgeois narrative of unified subjects, 'total' history and instantly intelligible signs conducts its triumphal existence, as the metropolitan fullness which drains the colonies dry.

What will be steadily eroded in the development of late capitalism, however, is precisely this apparently stable antithesis between colonial margin and metropolitan centre. For as capitalism evolves beyond its great liberal-progressive epoch, it will come to seem as though the literature of modernist colonialism acted all along as the secret negative truth of the hegemony which produced it, prefiguring the final destiny of metropolitan society itself. As liberal capitalism yields ground to consumerism, it is as though a whole society undergoes the spiritual depletion and disinheritance previously reserved, with particular violence, for its meanest colonials. The margin shifts to the centre: now it is as though the very subjects of metropolitan capitalism are empty, dwindled, decentred, effects rather than agents, linear history struck vacuous by the ceaseless return of the commodity, cultural tradition brutally extirpated by the fetish of the Now. 'Primitive' mythology, repressed by the Enlightenment, returns with a vengeance: human life seems once more determined by great constant forces invisible to the naked eye, which shuffle around the contingent bits and pieces of reality in those gratuitous kaleidoscopic patterns we call 'change'. And just as the colonies seemed particularly hospitable to fantasy, to the dissolution of any stable reality in the great fracturings of repressed desire, so fantasy in the form of consumerism and the media now becomes structural to metropolitan society. Much of this, of course, was already evident in 'classical' modernism; what happens in the post-modern period is, first, that with the spread of consumerist capitalism these phenomena cease to be the artistic vision of an elite and penetrate more deeply into everyday life; and, secondly, that they become dissociated from the more positive, subversive, exhilarating impulses which earlier attended them. That positivity is once more 'exported': as all of this occurs within metropolitan society, the previously inert colonies gather strength in a striking historical inversion, begin to assert agency and fashion an intelligible history, translate dreams of freedom into political reality.

In the so-called post-modern condition, then, what was previously displaced to the margins returns to haunt the very centre: it is now not just Joyce's spiritually paralytic Dublin, but the stalely overfamiliar global village of international monopoly capitalism, which revolves endlessly in the closed circuits of its mythologies. In this situation, 'English' begins to shed the last of its tattered credentials as any kind of ideologically plausible discourse. That discourse, I have argued, was seriously jeopardised by the Great War, but paradoxically consolidated by it. It was besieged almost instantly by modern-

ism, but managed successfully to repel the alien invader. It had then to endure the loss of its global guarantee in the collapse of empire, but could still always turn back to a native tradition, constructing a literary lineage for itself from Hardy to Larkin in the manner of the young fogeys of *PN Review*.

What threatens it today is nothing less than the dissolution of its own subjacent ideology of liberal humanism, increasingly discredited by the later development of the very capitalism for which it was once so eloquent an apologist. The experiences of both modernism and colonialism were kept at bay, but in the latest historical irony now offer to repossess the metropolitan culture from inside in the shape of post-modernism. The fact that Donald Davie, one of the most vociferous spokespersons for post-imperial Little Englandism, actually emigrated to the USA some time ago is a nice irony: *actual* England is now, culturally speaking, pretty much like North America, and where you happen to be to launch your jeremiad is in that sense neither here nor there.

Perhaps the most minatory aspect of post-modernism for the ideology of English is its audio-visual character. This is not to espouse some glib mythology of the 'death of the novel', all of whose ritually issued obituary notices have proved remarkably premature. Those who regard writing as some charmingly archaic form no doubt have George Meredith rather than Robert Maxwell in mind. Nevertheless, it is a telling irony that contemporary literary theory has never been so obsessed with writing (admittedly in a suitably expanded sense of the term) in a cultural world where Rambo is only for a dwindling rump of us a French poet. The call for cultural studies, against some narrowly conceived literariness, is thus no more than a recognition of the inevitable. The mighty battles between parochial nativeness and modernist cosmopolitanism are being repeated in our own time, but this time as theory, which begins at Calais. The terms of the conflict, however, are not quite the same as they were in the age of Joyce. At that time, as I have argued, it was still in some sense plausible for a native Englishness, buttressed by the reality of empire, to affirm itself, in a social order which had not yet witnessed the discrediting of liberal humanism as thoroughly as in our own. That ideology is still by no means to be underestimated: it remains powerfully entrenched in the academic institutions, and in the wider society still corresponds to some, though by no means all, the imperatives of late capitalism. But it is significant that in a period of capitalist crisis the guardians of English are now in danger of erasing the 'liberal' from the phrase 'liberal humanist'; and it is also significant that they are today quite incapable of anything like the robust, aggressive campaigning of a *Scrutiny*, falling back instead on chauvinist gut reactions dressed up as spiritual intuitions. If Leavis did not see the need to tangle with 'theory', this in part reflected a certain confidence as well as a certain nervousness – the sense of a tangible cultural tradition being 'richly present', concretely demonstrable, and capable of enthusing a good number of acolytes. Today, the paucity of that intuitionism is painfully obvious, a clumsy, transparently rearguard action with nothing of the Leavisian *élan*; it is 'theory' which nowadays recruits the kind of committed, zealous young disciples which Leavis did in his day. The end of empire, in

short, has taken its toll: in a post-imperial, post-modernist culture, 'English', which for some time now has been living on like a headless chicken, has proved to be an increasingly unworkable discourse, if not in the cloistered universities then most certainly in the inner city schools. The struggle between that and 'theory' in some ways re-enacts the battles of modernism, but does so at a more explicit political level. Some of the most vital arguments *within* contemporary literary theory, like the dissensions between 'high' modernism and the revolutionary avant garde, concern the relative merits of a 'negative' and a 'positive' politics. It is possible to see Derrida, or even Paul de Man, as 'negatively' political in something like the way Adorno saw Beckett, or as Joyce saw his own writing. The modernist artists, however, were forced to devote too much time and energy to their own painful extrication from untenable cultural situations to address these political questions at all directly; today, because we have less of such writing, or because much of it has been absorbed and defused, we have discovered a new terrain – theory, criticism – from which such questions can be launched. The current deconstruction of the very opposition between 'criticism' and 'creativity' is perhaps in one sense a reluctance to acknowledge the passing of 'high' modernism: they had the *Cantos*, we have Jonathan Culler. On the other hand, it involves a recognition that the subversive impulses of modernism can indeed migrate from domain to domain, are indeed portable across styles of discourse as across political frontiers. Whatever the historical losses, it is 'theory' which today attracts something of the virulent hostility once reserved for an Eliot or a Pound. The final discrediting of 'native Englishness' in a post-modernist epoch at least clarifies the issues at stake: as the material conditions which historically supported the ideology of 'English' have been gradually eroded, it is clearer than ever that the only conflict which finally matters is between the internationalism of late capitalist consumerism, and the internationalism of its political antagonist.

References

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