Introduction: The decline of Britain and the rise of English

In the nation that is not
Nothing stands that stood before

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This book contends that British modernism imagined the world as an array of discrete yet interconnected localities. It argues that modernist writing abjured the Victorian fantasy of a planet divided into core and periphery, home and colony in favour of the new dream of a decentred network of places and peoples described, analyzed, and managed by a cosmopolitan cast of English-speaking experts. Far from representing the last gasp of a nation on the wane, a ‘structure of compensation’ for a culture tortured by a sense of its ‘belatedness’, modernism joined hands with an interdisciplinary archive of scholarship and commentary to imagine a world of which England was no longer the centre but in which English language and literature were essential components of an abstract or virtual differential system that spanned the globe.¹ To substantiate this claim, I concentrate on the infamous narratives of decline that characterize early twentieth-century fiction. I read these tales not only for the myriad ways they argued that England no longer occupied the core of an ever-expanding empire, but also for how they revised the very distinctions between British nation and English culture on which empire-building depended. I observe that such stories elevated English while devaluing Great Britain. In the process, they helped authorize immigrants and colonial subjects to write fiction in English that privileged marginality for a cosmopolitan readership.

In the hands of Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and Joseph Conrad, English became exotic. Their writings accustomed readers to finding the

¹ For an account of modernism as the literary participant in an English culture convinced of its twilight status, see Meisel (5). This perception of modernism is, of course, widespread. For elaborations of the thesis that modernist narratives of decline reflected economic and social malaise, see also Bongie and Simpson.
very essence of high art in nonstandard, idiosyncratic prose. At the same time, they acquainted readers with a host of alien locales, many of which lay within England itself. In such places readers discovered English mongrelized into a various yet global, particular yet universal, popular yet elite medium. This transformation did not repudiate linguistic tradition per se, so much as transgress the rules that governed English culture in the Victorian era. *Mrs Dalloway, Ulysses,* and *Lord Jim* portrayed languages that were neither fully English nor fully foreign. From the islands of the South Pacific to the London suburbs, these novels discovered vernaculars that could be described only through a rhetoric of neither/nor. This is the rhetoric of litotes, or the double negative, which Michel Foucault characterizes as an attempt to move beyond arguments ‘for’ or ‘against’, and instead emphasize ‘what is not or is no longer indispensable’ (‘What is Enlightenment?’ 43). What was no longer indispensable for modernism, as it turned out, was English’s status as a standardized imperial language. The English vernaculars that appear in the pages of early twentieth-century fiction can best be understood as not *not* English, languages shaped by British imperialism that nevertheless represent clear attempts to reject the inside/outside alternatives that organized the peoples, cultures, and idioms of the British Empire in previous centuries.

This rhetorical innovation should be read as a key part of a broad and multifaceted social and cultural transformation habitually invoked by historians, economists, and other scholars of the early twentieth century. Although there is no end of discussion about exactly when modernity occurs or exactly what it entails, critics generally agree that one of its pivotal features is the emergence of systems and networks that reconfigured modes of communication and the lived experience of time and space. This contention is evident in writing that credits technologies with the dual effect of violating boundaries and establishing new types of interconnection. Barriers break down ‘horizontally across the face of the land and vertically across social strata’, according to Stephen Kern, as transportation improvements speed movement across continents and communication devices rapidly transmit privileged information to the

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2. “[G]lobalization [enacts] the uncoupling of the “natural” link between languages and nations, languages and national memories, languages and national literatures’, writes Mignolo (42).

3. Kern’s list of significant technologies entering general use around the turn of the century includes the ‘telephone, wireless telegraph, x-ray, cinema, bicycle, automobile, and airplane’ (1).
ears of the hoi polloi (316). Friedrich Kittler identifies psychophysical alteration that new technology engenders when he describes how human thoughts, bodies, and actions begin to appear as supplements to machinic activity. ‘Our writing tools are also working on our thoughts’, Kittler quotes from Nietzsche, ‘the first mechanized philosopher’ (Gramophone 200). He observes that to think of the human body as a kind of machine is to understand it in a comprehensively different manner. ‘Instead of the classical question of what people would be capable of if they were adequately and affectionately “cultivated”’, Kittler notes, ‘one asks what people have always been capable of when autonomic functions are singly and thoroughly tested’ (Discourse 214). One also asks what other kinds of machines people can be plugged into. And, further, one notes that to raise the problem of being embedded in a potentially expansive mechanical system also raises the problem of describing such a network.

Connectivity has a rather different valence in Rudolf Hilferding’s classic account Finance Capital: A Study of the Latest Phase of Capitalist Development. Technological innovation was spurred on by and enabled economic transformation, according to Hilferding. Railroads spearhead nothing less than a ‘revolution in transport’ that allowed producers to improve their turnover time and retailers to respond more rapidly to demand, especially in foreign markets (323). The export of capital was a signal event for producers and consumers, but it meant the most to specialists engaged in the activities of banking and speculation Hilferding associates with ‘finance capital’, an emergent economic segment dominated by Britain at the twentieth century’s dawn (315). ‘The export of capital was . . . an English monopoly’, he contends, ‘and it secured for England the domination of the world market’ (323). Although Britain soon lost its commanding position to Germany and especially the United States, according to Hilferding and Giovanni Arrighi it established the shape of what was to come: a model of international finance organized not only to ensure the rapid mobility of capital but also to focus economic activity on speculation in and accumulation of financial instruments.4

Envisioning the globe as an abstract system criss-crossed by economic and technological pulses of information and exchange had the paradoxical

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4 On this transition from British to American hegemony, see Hilferding 323 and Arrighi, Long Twentieth Century 219. The literature on this transformation of the economy is voluminous. Accounts that articulate it to changes in literature, the arts, and culture include Harvey’s description of the ‘casino economy’ in The Condition of Postmodernity and Jameson’s Arrighi-inspired ‘Culture and Finance Capital’.
effect of increasing interest in location. ‘The free flow of capital across the
globe’, David Harvey explains, combined with ‘the shrinkage of space that
brings diverse communities across the globe into competition with each
other implies localized competitive strategies and a heightened sense of
awareness of what makes a place special’ (271). Kern makes a similar
point, observing that technological spread affirmed the ‘plurality of time
and spaces’ rather than social, cultural, and geographic homogeneity (8).
Even as capital went global, it directed attention to small differences and
local variations.

Niklas Luhmann argues that this process of differentiation went so far
as to beg the ‘question of whether the self-description of the world society
is possible’ (430). Since ‘there is no longer a “good society”’, the broad
terms of culture as civilization proffered by the Victorians must necessar-
ily give way to more ‘regional delimitations’ and more or less connected
communication subsystems (430, xii). These feature vernaculars specific
to institutions and disciplines as well as idioms localized geographically.
Fredric Jameson takes the Luhmannian process of differentiation as a
defining feature of modernity – ‘the gradual separation of areas of social
life from each other, their disentanglement from some seemingly global
and mythic . . . overall dynamic, and their reconstitution as distinct fields
with distinct laws and dynamics’ (Singular 90). But Jameson also sees this
process as modernism’s condition of possibility, since this same differen-
tiation encourages an unprecedented sense of aesthetic autonomy and
literary specialization (Singular 146).

By imagining the proliferation of local Englishes on a planet-wide
scale, modernism laid the ground for the most utopian accounts of
globalization as free intellectual and commercial exchange. It also antici-
pated globalization’s neocolonial aspects by identifying an English that
was a cut above the rest. Novelists established a highly specialized literary
language that, in retrospect, seems clearly related to the rising authority of
the professions. Edward Said observes that ‘the intellectual hegemony of
Eliot, Leavis, Richards, and the New Critics coincides not only with the
work of masters like Joyce, Eliot himself, Stevens, and Lawrence, but also
with the serious and autonomous development of literary studies in the
university’ (The World, the Text and the Critic 164). Louis Menand

\[5\] On globalization as a freeing of exchange, see the Foreign Policy special study ‘Measuring
Globalization’. The widespread conclusion that globalization and less regulated trade go together
appears in Giddens as well and in Bhagwati’s essays in Stream.
\[6\] On globalization as neocolonialism, see Lazarus and Paul Smith.
identifies further grounds for embedding modernism amidst a range of developing professions, arguing that the ‘manner in which the modern artist tried to keep his ideological distance from the businessman, to guard the autonomy of his work, was also one of the ways in which the artist and the businessman were both, in spite of their self-conceptions, bound together’ (101).

As Harold Perkin explains in *The Rise of Professional Society: England Since 1880*, the modernist period saw the consolidation of a professional-managerial class fed by the growing institutions of the welfare state, a modern university system, and the financial service sector that made London the hub of global commerce. ‘The professionals are not just another ruling class’, Perkin claims, for their hierarchical rearrangement of labour around such notions as qualification and specialization ‘reach[es] much further down the social pyramid than ever landlordship or even business capital did’ (3). With the benefits of professional designation widespread, including the capacity to restrict the market for specific types of labour from plumbing to preaching, it is perhaps not surprising that professionalism spawned an ideology appealing even to those who did not benefit from it at work. Perkin argues:

> [S]ince the professional’s status and income depend less on the market than on his power to persuade society to set an agreed value on his service, the ideal implied the principle of a just reward not only for the particular profession but for every occupation necessary to society’s well-being. Since, too, the ideal is justified by social efficiency and the avoidance of waste, particularly the waste of human talent, it implied a principle of social justice which extended to the whole population. (8–9)

As Perkin goes on to note, professionalism could never fully live up to its social ideal. Not every form of social activity could lead to the sorts of benefits associated with established professions and even those were unevenly empowered and rewarded. Professionalism did away with the inequality of class society by shedding the ‘binary model [of] a small ruling class exploiting a large underclass’, but it replaced this with new ‘inequalities and rivalries of hierarchy’ (9).

The contradiction between professionals as a class and professionalism as an ideal resulted in tension that was both productive and broadly

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7 Based on such arguments, Robbins sums up the critical situation in his *Secular Vocations*. He observes that it is ‘no longer shocking’ to associate developments in English literature with professionalism (64).
transformative. The notion that all varieties of human talent were potentially valuable offered the possibility of redefining activities of all sorts. This was so because the primary bar to professionalization was not academic accreditation, Perkin argues, but rather successful persuasion: ‘The professions in general . . . live by persuasion and propaganda, by claiming that their particular service is indispensable’ (6). Accreditation and publicly verifiable qualifications were means for persuading people to treat a particular activity as specialized and even professional labor, but they were far from the only means.

Novelists of difficult fiction, for instance, could not earn diplomas or pass exams to gain recognition for their work. Their tactics were different, as I show in my first chapter chronicling the efforts of Joseph Conrad to persuade his friends, agents, and publishers to judge him by rules other than those applied to some run-of-the-mill author. His campaign to get himself designated as an elevated sort of writer, an expert who transformed adventure fictions into art, should be treated as an effort to professionalize his endeavour, despite the fact that it lacks the familiar institutional signs of accreditation. Conrad’s attempt appeared, we must remember, at a time when many of the professions we now recognize as such were only just beginning to form. In Chapter 2 I demonstrate that an ethnographer like Malinowski needed to do as much persuading as any modernist novelist, and that in this effort he borrowed liberally from the very fictional genres writers such as Conrad also sought to revise. I attend to another aspect of expertise in my third chapter when I focus on gender and imperial representation. I consider, for instance, how the pictorial representation of landscape, which in the nineteenth century might have been executed by any ordinary middle-class woman, came to seem a more demanding task featuring the sort of careful attention to cultural difference one finds in the likes of E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India.*

The success of Conrad and similarly inclined writers may well explain why literature provides Perkin with ‘[p]erhaps the best example’ of a field that successfully professionalized work on ‘subject matter [previously] accessible to the laity’ (*Rise* 395–6). Inside and outside the academy, literature sought to ‘become the humane discipline, the modern substitute for philosophy and theology’ (396). Not surprisingly, Perkin has in mind F.R. Leavis’s famed insistence that ‘liberal education should be centred in the study of creative literature [and] that for English-speaking people it must be centred in the literature of the English language’ (*Critic* 166). Leavis’s nativism notwithstanding, his definition of English as a linguistic rather than national category is apparent from the literary selections that
receive his attention. Francis Mulhern reminds us that in *The Great Tradition*, only one of Leavis’s chosen novelists – George Eliot – is English (‘English Reading’ 254). As Gauri Viswanathan’s foundational *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* demonstrates furthermore, the notion of English literature as the foundation of liberal education was not an entirely homegrown idea but one nurtured by colonial administrators in nineteenth-century India.

Literary study of the sort recommended by Leavis reveals an imperial aspect to professionalism largely missing from Perkin’s study. To be fair, *The Rise of Professional Society* does make pointed reference to the world outside England. It notes the importance of reforms to the Indian Civil Service that mandated qualifying examination in the wake of the so-called Indian Mutiny (371). The Boer War looms large over a discussion of turn-of-the-century debate about national efficiency (158–89). And decolonization, when it comes, makes an appearance as well. By and large, though, Perkin describes the rise of professionalism as an internal development. Thankfully, substantial scholarship allows us to see professionalism and imperialism operating in tandem. These works include disciplinary specific studies (such as Stocking, *After Tylor*; Mitchell, *Rule*; and Errington) as well as broader social accounts (such as Kuklick, *Savage*; Desai; and Cain and Hopkins). Equally important research considers modernism and imperialism side by side.\(^8\) I believe these accounts logically require us to take the next step and triangulate modernism, professionalism, and imperialism, which in turn allows us to redescribe them as components of a new whole.

The writing and study of literature shared strategy as well as tactics with other professions. Collaborating more or less inadvertently, experts learned to distinguish their discipline-specific idioms from one another and to categorize them as valid permutations of a fast disappearing imperial mother tongue. At the same time, literary specialists joined experts in fields ranging from anthropology to economics in focusing on regionalized social activity both inside and outside England. The local vernaculars they discovered differed from specialized professional idioms, but were similar insofar as they were idiomatic. The boundaries between them were not entirely stable, as professional writers compulsively

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\(^8\) Criticism such as Felski; Gikandi; North, *Dialect*; and Torgovnick informs my analysis of primitivism in Chapter 4. My fifth chapter on imperialism and local culture depends on Baucom; Esty, *Shrinking Island*; and Manganaro. My sense of modernism’s relationship to imperialism owes notable debts as well to scholarship that includes Said, *Culture and Imperialism*; Suleri; Duffy; and Bivona.
appropriated syntax and terminology from most every locality. Instead, specialized languages differed from regional varieties in their tendency to enforce a distinction between high and low cultural production in general. No more or less than anthropology, psychology, and economics, modernist fiction made linguistic facility necessary for understanding, administering, and mediating an infinitely divisible, multilingual, yet English-speaking globe.\textsuperscript{9} We owe the persisting distinction between global expert languages and regionally specific creoles to such innovation.\textsuperscript{10}

To understand modernist literature as part of a turn-of-the-century boom in increasingly authoritative specialized languages is to question a long-standing critical premise that rarefied language cannot have widespread effects. Such an assumption allows Michael Levenson, for instance, to define an aesthetic movement whose flight from tradition does little more than express a dying worldview. Here, modernism marks a historical ending, as Levenson argues that early twentieth-century novelists understood ‘a declining [British] liberalism . . . [as] a distinct literary opportunity . . . and a release from extra-artistic responsibilities’ (\textit{Genealogy} 53–4).\textsuperscript{11} By taking the novel to the level of high art, modernism appears to have abdicated any capacity to shape the social world that so clearly shaped it. An enduring formula dictates: the more complex the language, the narrower its social impact. Similarly, scholars concerned with the late twentieth century typically take modernism as an avant-garde beginning and thus restrict it to either anticipating the postmodern or going popular and losing its edge. Jameson reproduces this logic when he describes

\textsuperscript{9} On linguistic schemes for analyzing different varieties of English, see Pakir and Mufwene. See Willinsky and Pennycook on the persistence of British imperialism in the continued spread and use of English.

\textsuperscript{10} Bourdieu provides a sociological vocabulary for intellectual ‘uses’ of the people (‘Uses’). See also the World Bank publication ‘Local Dynamics in an Era of Globalization’, Ching and also Hay on the ‘coercive convergence’ that causes regional variation to emerge as a result of transnational management, and Sunder Rajan for a formulation of the persistent question within postcolonial studies about how scholarly methods shape the circulation of local cultures (Yusuf, et al.; Hay 525; Sunder Rajan 613). Twenty-first-century US hegemony still relies on this relationship between global and local knowledge, though that debt is occluded by America’s wish to inherit the mantle of British civilization while disavowing its imperial legacy. See Beard and Beard, W. Williams, and the recent writings of Ferguson. Tennenhouse observes that English fiction ‘allowed Americans to think of themselves as English, despite their political separation from England’ (178). See Kaplan and Pease on the notion of imperialism in American literary and cultural studies.

\textsuperscript{11} Classic iterations of this formula include Auerbach’s reading of Mrs Ramsay’s brown stocking as a symbol for futile attempts to order a shattered world, and Lukács’s description of formalism as solipsistic elitism (\textit{Realism} 39). More contemporary versions include Berman’s treatment of modernism’s ‘spectacular triumphs in art and thought’ as the culmination of 500 years of modernization undercut by a public ‘shatter[ed] into a multitude of fragments, speaking incommensurable private languages’ (17).
the ‘postmodern revolt’ as a commodified reiteration of early twentieth-century experimentation (*Postmodernism*). In either case, we are invited to understand modernist writings as cultural epiphenomena that may have reflected a wider structure of feeling but whose effects were more or less limited to a hermetically sealed realm of aesthetics. We have taken modernist autonomy at its word, in short, and granted modernist literature the authority to define the narrow confines of its influence to the scholarly and esoteric realm of the arts.\(^\text{12}\)

I propose instead to consider modernist fiction as an influential and productive component in a pivotal discourse of administration. I believe modernism rightly belongs within a history that does not stop and start somewhere around the turn of the twentieth century, but mutates and migrates from the mid-1800s to the present day. Modernist fiction was an active participant in what Perkin refers to as the twentieth-century ‘triumph’ of professionalism both as an ideal and as a mechanism for remaking institutions large and small throughout England and the British Empire. Allow me to show how I see the three ‘isms’ of modernism, imperialism, and professionalism working together by turning to the question of how to historicize modernism’s specialized aesthetics.

**The Rise of Litotes**

To be precise in our assessment of the world as modernism depicted it, we need to be clear about the social universe twentieth-century writers sought to displace. When Linda Colley charts the consolidation of Great Britain in the 1700s, she explains that Britons ‘came to define themselves as a single people not because of any political or cultural consensus at home, but rather in reaction to the Other beyond their shores’ (6). Nineteenth-century writers found it equally important to preserve a British identity opposed to the foreign cultures of Europe and the larger world, but considered this endeavour increasingly difficult to sustain. With the incorporation of new and far-flung territories, a significant portion of the globe that had been considered outside the nation came to occupy a place within it.\(^\text{13}\) At the same time, the new and strange cultures discovered in

\(^{12}\) On this point, see Jameson’s chapter ‘Modernism as Ideology’ in *Singular Modernity*.

\(^{13}\) Gikandi and Baucom recount British responses to pressure to preserve some kind of British essence. Even as artists and politicians alike agreed that the ‘modern British nation [could not] be imagined outside the realm of the empire’, Parliament rehabilitated a feudal ‘law of the soil’ as the ultimate test of citizenship (Gikandi 31; Baucom 8–9).
Africa and Asia seemed to contrast neatly with a British style of life. Britain absorbed entire continents that paradoxically served as the foreign substance against which a British essence could be defined. The very territories that helped designate the political entity of the British state were perceived as its cultural opposites. Africa and Asia were assimilated into Britain and simultaneously excluded from it. As V.Y. Mudimbe explains this chiasmatic logic, colonial peoples and places appeared in Victorian writing as ‘not only the Other who is everyone except me, but [also] the key which, in its abnormal differences, specifies the identity of the Same’ (*Invention of Africa* 12).

Such logic was interrupted by the early twentieth-century shift towards technological, financial, and professional interconnection. In the context of such epochal change, the place of Britain in the larger world necessarily changed as well. Three particular features were especially significant to the new conjuncture. First, anti-imperial writers from the colonies ever more aggressively appropriated the putatively English terms of nationalism and human rights. Second, a steady diet of imported goods and a growing immigrant population made clear that the exotic was as much an integral component of day-to-day life in the British Isles as English language and literature were part and parcel of colonial existence. Third, Britain found itself suddenly vulnerable to competition with the manufacturing powerhouses belonging to a next generation of empire builders in Germany and the United States.

Commentators responded both to these conjunctural changes and to the broader epochal shift by seeking to preserve some sense of English authenticity. Social critics portrayed the Empire as a threat to England’s security that required the adoption of extreme protective measures. General William Booth’s *In Darkest England* and William Reeves’s *In Darkest London* were among the tracts indicating that the infiltration of foreign elements was well advanced. They documented an influx of migrants rapidly transforming London into an ‘urban jungle’ and argued that only the sternest blockade could halt the invasion (McLaughlin 4–5). Popular fictions described international commerce as inherently dangerous. In the

14 For a good historical overview of Indian nationalism in this period, see Sarkar, *Modern India*, and on the various forms of African nationalism, see Davidson, *Let Freedom Come*.

15 On the importation of colonial objects and ideas, see Baucom, Daly, Gikandi, and Kuklick, *Savage*. For statistics on immigration, see Fryer.

16 Important histories on this geo-political contest include Robinson et al., *Arrighi*, and Hobsbawm.

17 Novels such as H.F. Lester’s *Taking of Dover* and Rider Haggard’s *She* also stoked fears of reverse colonization (Brantlinger 235).