In our time ‘Englishness’ has become a theme for speculation rather than dogma; twentieth-century writers have found it an elusive and ambivalent concept, a cue for nostalgia or for a sense of exile and loss. *Literary Englands* meditates on the contemporary meanings of ‘Englishness’ and explores some of the ways in which a sense of nationality has informed and shaped the work of a range of writers including Edward Thomas, Forster and Lawrence, Leavis and George Sturt, Orwell and Evelyn Waugh, Betjeman, Larkin and Geoffrey Hill. Through close engagement with the language and thought of these writers David Gervais shows the extent to which they have been influenced by the consciousness of working within a long-established, complex and sophisticated literary tradition. In the process he elucidates a nostalgia which lies at the heart of our culture.
LITERARY ENGLANDS
VERSIONS OF 'ENGLISHNESS' IN MODERN WRITING
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Versions of ‘Englishness’ in Modern Writing

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For Damien and Tristan
So everything, in its ruin, seems in England to live a new life; and it is only this second life, this cottage built in the fallen stronghold, that is English.

George Santayana, Soliloquies in England
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Preface

It is a long time since we thought of England as a ‘precious stone set in the silver sea’ or even since we extolled its good fortunes in the manner of Mr Podsnap. We are more likely nowadays to find ourselves performing an autopsy on it. Since the Great War at least it has become a theme for nostalgia, a good belonging to the past like half-heard music that just carries from some distant room. England is too problematic now to inspire simple patriotism.

A full treatment of ‘Englishness’ would involve many different Englands. Instead, I have chosen to leave some gaps in the story, some of which may cause surprise and require explanation. John Cowper Powys might seem made for my theme and my only excuse for leaving him out is lack of space and my own unfitness to do him justice. I did intend to write more on T. F. Powys, still a too little-known writer, but I found that his way of imagining England, sub specie aeternitatis, fitted in with no one else’s. Some readers will miss a fuller account of ‘thirties’ poetry but I preferred to keep my space for less studied writers. Besides, I have to confess that even when I enjoy Auden I have little wish to write about him and critics should keep silent when they can. Other lacunae loom even larger but I had no wish to seem to be writing a literary history of the period. With more space I would have included Angus Wilson and David Storey (both of whom have been acute monitors of how England has changed). The same goes for drama, particularly the recent ‘political’ playwrights whose own obsession with England has played a considerable part in prompting academic interest in the subject. There is also much to be said about the place of England in Ted Hughes’s Poetry.

Bigger than any of these omissions, I have not discussed any English women writers. When I thought of doing so I began to wonder if their concern with ‘Englishness’ were not of a different
Preface

order, perhaps less public and less geared to nationalistic attitudes. The subject remains to be attempted. There is also scope for a book, along the lines of John Lucas’s study from Dryden to Browning, of nineteenth-century versions of England. Another rich field would be the way English painters, particularly in the ‘thirties’, have responded to the theme.

But now it is too late to be listing either intentional or involuntary omissions. All I can do is to hope that they will at least provide a cue from which my reader will be able to refute or modify some of the arguments I derive from those writers I do discuss.
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Abbreviations