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978-0-521-82077-6 - The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century English Literature

Edited by Laura Marcus and Peter Nicholls

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## Introduction

LAURA MARCUS AND PETER NICHOLLS

As the first *Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century English Literature*, this volume has a difficult brief. The last century has yet to compose itself definitively as a 'period', and our volume has to reckon with the fact that the concluding phases of the century will often prompt provisional comment rather than a sense of summative closure. The volume also covers a period in which questions of history and nation are particularly volatile, and while taking its place in an extended series of literary histories, recognises that for its precursors 'English' has generally been a less contentious term than it is now. In this *History*, 'Englishness' is not merely a given attribute of the literature under discussion, but a cultural condition in which complex questions of identity and location are constantly at stake.

It is also important to note here that the volume is intended as a history rather than as a Companion or as an anthology of essays on the period. In that sense it reflects a particular self-consciousness in the period itself about historical change and the changing relation of cultural forms. The *History* thus recognises the claims for cultural innovation and modernisation that characterise the beginning of the period at the same time as it attends analytically to the more profound patterns of continuity and development which avant-garde tendencies characteristically underplay. Along with this tension between change and continuity – and perhaps another version of it – is the troubled relation of internationalist perspectives to nationalist ones. British Modernism was an exilic phenomenon (hardly 'English' at all) and at its height mounted a radical attack on British society and government in their most settled and conservative forms. England and Englishness were criticised from the outside as avant-gardism was increasingly equated with cosmopolitanism. This particular tension is one that informs the *History* as a whole; indeed, it provides one of its principal armatures. After the High Modernist phase of the twenties, we find an increasing attraction to forms of localism and regionalism, and consequently a redefined sense of what constitutes 'Englishness'

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and 'Britishness'. While a strand of Modernist cosmopolitanism outlived the Modernist moment itself, it frequently existed alongside a literature concerned more directly with local specificities of class and place. We may detect, in fact, an increasing and related concern with national identities, as a coherent idea(l) of 'Englishness' fragmented under pressure from the devolved communities of Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland. The process of dispersal gained further momentum from emerging concepts of postcolonial identity and from a renewed 'cosmopolitanisation' of British literature by writers with roots in the Commonwealth nations and the Caribbean.

As this example suggests, the tendency in the cultural scene that this volume explores is towards a greater complexity that resists easy categorisation and clear-cut chronological phases. The volume provides an extended history of the literature of the twentieth century, but one whose linear structure is complicated by cross-connecting themes and topics, different viewpoints and often overlapping chronologies. The *History* is also attentive to the fact that the chronologies of literary production and reception have their own distinctive forms, and that the impact of historical events on creative activities is often indirect and inflected by the imaginative processes of reconstruction. The volume is, of course, itself one such process, marked in particular by the continuing sense of the twentieth century's proximity to our own present, and this in turn is complicated by the fact that the century's temporal boundaries may be at odds with its defining cultural moments. So while the volume is broadly concerned to situate the works it discusses in a familiar unfolding history, cultural periodisation often cuts against that grain. We begin not in 1900 but with a section on 'Writing Modernity', which traces responses to modern life through late nineteenth-century Decadence and explores the generation of writers whose work crosses the century divide. The closing chapters of the volume are for their part necessarily provisional in their presentation of a cultural scene whose contours are yet to acquire full definition.

Movements, phases, influences – these are the usual currency of cultural histories and they are much in evidence in this volume. At the same time, though, our narrative acknowledges the increasingly multifaceted nature of the literary scene as it reveals tensions between high and low culture, between avant-gardism and tradition, between the national and the international and so on. The volume is inevitably much preoccupied with the question of what constitutes the 'literary' and is for that reason increasingly attuned to the ambiguous borders between genres. This is a period, of course, that saw the rise of new technologies of representation and communication. Cinema, along with other new and emergent media, provided crucial contexts for understanding

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developments in literary Modernism and, more broadly, the cultural debates of the period – debates, for example, over mass and minority culture and the reception of culture. The volume also examines the construction and representation of literary culture by the new media and the ways in which forms of voice and vision shaped literary expression. Radio produced a new kind of drama, while television film led to the return of a theatrical naturalism which also strongly influenced developments in the novels of the 1950s and 60s. In the last decades of the century the Postmodern work often borrowed from film, television, video, music and performance, media which interacted with and newly shaped the possibilities of textual representation.

Popular fictions have an important place in this literary history, and several chapters investigate the phenomenon of the bestseller and twentieth-century developments in genre or niche publishing, demonstrating an increasing interchangeability between journalism, consumer culture and popular fiction. The volume explores the cultural and historical determinants of the ‘anti-Modernisms’ of the middle decades of the century, considering the part played by the media – in particular, literary journalism and radio – in shaping the dominant image of ‘literary culture’, and the extent to which the new class fraction of literary producers reacted against an ‘elitist’ avant-gardism. There was a perception, too, of a widening split between the professional critic and the common reader. The 1930s saw the emergence of a vociferous, non-belletristic, literary criticism that propelled the academic study of literature in significant new directions and claimed a renewed Arnoldian centrality for literary texts. In the post-war period, this redefinition of the role of writers and intellectuals continued but with a new consciousness of working-class cultures. These years also witnessed a resurgence of national self-consciousness which was simultaneously contested by a new cosmopolitanism, fuelled in its turn by resurgent continental philosophies of existence. That philosophy should thus consort with imaginative writing indicates the growing proximity of ‘theory’ to the creative arts. In the period after 1970, the influence of European thought reached increasingly beyond the academy. Ideas drawn from Post-Structuralism, Deconstruction and psychoanalysis were absorbed by writers and artists, and led to radical reappraisals of concepts of language, subjectivity and ideology. The impact of theory on literary criticism instigated controversies over the canon, the ‘death of the author’, and other anti-metaphysical conceptions of the literary work. The legacy of these controversies continues to be felt in criticism and in academic study, notably in recent discussions of Postmodernism. The volume presents no singular and conclusive account of these developments, seeking rather to register their complexity and to understand

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them as part of an ongoing and unresolved critical debate. At the same time, it does now seem clear that Modernism must be seen not simply as a movement belonging to the early decades of the century, but as a tendency that lives a rich and discontinuous life across the period as a whole. The notion of the Postmodern, in apparent violation of its own terms, has not proven to be an efficient periodising concept that clearly situates us in a context distinct from modernity; rather, it affirms a continuing and troubled relation to a modernity that we cannot evade. A number of our contributors, writing on the last decades of the century, have found Postmodernism to be a useful, if not unavoidable concept, while others have attended to the persistence of Modernist strands late into the century. Others have sought different categories altogether, particularly in writing of postcolonial literatures and the literatures of diaspora.

We begin with Part I, 'Writing Modernity', which discerns traces of Modernism's pre-history in *fin-de-siècle* Decadence, presenting this older generation as to some degree preparing the way for the more self-consciously experimental work of the Modernist writers. This first section of the *History* explores a number of major themes whose subsequent manifestations will be traced in later chapters: concepts of identity, private and public; the changing relation of literature to nationalism; the redefinition of style and its opposition to 'rhetoric' in *fin-de-siècle* writing; the characterisation of the aesthetic as a kind of autonomous realm; empire fictions and their interactions with Modernist writing; the cultural interchange between Britain and France; the post-Romantic response to scientific developments; the impact of anthropology at the turn of the century; the response to commodification and the developing literary marketplace; the significance of a gendered aesthetic and of a modernity whose newness was encapsulated in models of an evolving and progressive femininity.

Part 2, 'The Emerging Avant-garde', considers what is arguably the second phase of Modernism's pre-history, exploring the ambiguous positioning of Edwardian and Georgian writers on the divide between realism and Modernism. The *History* begins a multifaceted examination of the century's new aesthetic, tracing its formation as an avant-garde tendency and examining the political and economic conditions which gave it its definitive character. Here contributors reconstruct the London of the period, analysing the different forms of interaction that sustained an avant-garde grouping of writers and artists, deriving from very different social and national backgrounds. The question of class and 'classlessness' is important here, for it is arguably the case that

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in the rigidly defined pre-1914 class system foreign intellectuals had a particular kind of class mobility that allowed them to move relatively easily between, for example, the Lyons Corner House and the literary salon. Separate chapters are devoted to an account of 'the arts of publicity' in the period before the war, exploring the vital role played in the dissemination of the new Modernism by little magazines, some of which (like *The New Freewoman*) had clearly marked political agendas that did not necessarily accord with the primarily aesthetic aims of this phase of avant-garde activity. Exploration of 'the political scene' further opens this set of questions, especially with regard to suffragism and its contradictory relations to a predominantly male avant-garde. The section closes with a historical account of the Great War, gauging its impact on cultural activity in Britain, and opening up the category of war-writing beyond combatant literature in order to examine the ubiquity of war-consciousness in the texts of the period.

The *History* then moves in Part 3, 'Modernism and its Aftermath, 1918–1945', to an exploration of developments in prose writing after the cessation of hostilities, deploying the concept of 'trauma' to trace the movements of remembering and repetition that characterise so much post-war writing. It examines the ways in which the literature of this period was shaped by acts of confrontation with and evasion of the immediate past, focusing on narrative and psychological experiments with time. This concern with temporality informed the major work of such Modernists as Joyce, Woolf, Ford, Conrad, Lawrence and Lewis, issuing in an increasing preoccupation with the phenomenology of consciousness. This is in many ways the best-known aspect of the period's writing, at least insofar as that is represented by the products of High Modernism. At the same time, the volume recognises the achievement of novelists situated outside and, at times, in opposition to Modernist aesthetics and is alert to connections between different groupings. The medium of satire offers perhaps the most powerful example of such permeability between categories of writer that are normally held to be exclusive, bringing into conjunction such different novelists of modern life as Wyndham Lewis and Evelyn Waugh.

The section moves to a more extended consideration of the new poetics and its engagement with modernity on the one hand, and with myth and tradition on the other. This double temporality was at the heart of psychoanalytic thinking, the emergence of which variously affected writing in this period, opening possibilities of a new language for the unconscious. Biography and autobiography had a particular significance in the first decades of the century as conduits through which psychoanalysis entered cultural life, bringing into

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being the concept of a distinctively modern subjectivity. At the same time, the 'New Biography' was an aspect of the burgeoning cultures of publicity and public life in the 1920s. Developments in popular fiction, theatre and cinema were indissolubly linked with the articulation of a newly politicised culture during the 1930s, as writers and intellectuals sought to negotiate aesthetic questions in relation to the contesting ideologies of the time. Thirties writing here connected briefly and problematically with European avant-gardism in the work of the English Surrealists. The section closes with World War II, considered from two angles and from a number of locations. Travel writings of the immediate pre-war period portrayed a world of contested and closed borders, making familiar maps opaque and uncertain. The writing of World War II emerged not only from the experiences of international theatres of war, but from London as a city under siege, its ruins opening it up to a buried past and an uncertain future.

Writing the history of the second half of the twentieth century raises central questions about continuity and change. To answer these, Part 4 of the *History*, 'Post-war Cultures, 1945–1970', investigates the role of writers and intellectuals in the project of cultural reconstruction. Questions of class and education assumed a new importance as traditional images came under pressure from movements of devolution and migration that reassigned relations between centre and so-called peripheries. A further tension in the period was once again between the demands of nationalism and internationalism, played out in the cultural sphere as a new set of arguments for and against Modernism. With questions of national and regional identity high on the agenda, the varied responses to these frequently determined writers' handling of the Modernist legacy.

Part 5, 'Towards the Millennium', explores the literature and culture of the last thirty years of the century. 'Culture' becomes all-pervasive, appearing in one guise as the pernicious vehicle of capitalist ideology, and in another as the utopian expression of an alternative society. The example of American society, with its ostentatious commitment to newness and opportunity, offered a powerful alternative to what was frequently thought of in the period as British provincialism and laid the foundations for what would soon be much talked about as Postmodernism. The period saw at once the rapid expansion of genre fiction and the rise of new publishing initiatives, particularly through feminist presses. New spaces also opened in the sphere of theatrical performance, with the resurgence of a 'theatre of cruelty', the celebration of the weakening of censorship and the relaxing of laws against homosexuality in the late 1960s.

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This sense of a culture poised for radical change was fuelled by a growing awareness of thriving cultures outside a narrowly conceived English tradition, with writing from Ireland, Scotland and Wales articulating at once their relations to the 'centre', and their own particular internal divisions of language and literature. These increasingly prominent literatures were notable for their combination of experiment with a renewed sense of national history. If this seems at odds with the dominant paradigm of Postmodernism, it is nonetheless the case that in many exemplary instances of 'depthless' Postmodern style, writers have still shown a consistent investment in questions of history, memory and ethics. This highly charged relation to the past has also been expressed in the literatures of confession, witness and testimony that contribute to the expanding field of life-writing.

Much Postmodern literature and theory exploits a generic hybridity that takes on a sharper cultural and political edge in the literatures and theories of postcolonialism. Part 5 of the *History* addresses not only the very wide range of literatures that has recently been gathered under the postcolonial umbrella, but the significance, and the limitations, of the term itself. The section explores the ways in which contemporary postcolonial writing inscribes the clash of cultures alongside the representation and testing of 'multiculturalism'. In this field, the pressures of cultural, ethnic and national diversity render suspect the very category of 'English literature'. Yet as the volume shows, while 'English' has obviously lost its neutrality as a descriptive term, it still provides a sensitive register of the fictions and fantasies of national identity which literature continues to articulate. The screw tightens, of course, when 'literature' itself is called in question, though the challenge to the primacy of literature from media and the new technologies has proven a spur rather than a curb to innovation. The resulting literary scene is one that escapes neat summation; this *History* comes to its close, recognising that it must be complexity rather than completion that has the final word.

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WRITING MODERNITY

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