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Jed Esty: A Shrinking Island

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INTRODUCTION

LATE MODERNISM AND THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL TURN

BOTH professional and lay readers in America seem to share an intuitive belief that English literature has suffered a steady decline in the twentieth century and, moreover, that the decline can be correlated to and even explained by the contraction of British power. Yet few would argue that geopolitical power corresponds in a predictable way to literary creativity. If anything, the evidence from the past century points to an inverse relation. We find celebrated literary booms in Revivalist Ireland and in Cold-War Latin America, classic instances of aesthetic experimentation in the semi-peripheral avant-gardes of Russian and Italian futurism, a high index of formal invention in the “minor literature” of Kafka and Beckett, and linguistic exuberance flowing out of the relative backwaters of Joyce’s Liffey and Faulkner’s Mississippi.¹ And yet the idea persists that postimperial English writing, in becoming provincial and ex-centric, also became stale and wan. This view is not restricted to outsiders; consider a fairly typical 1966 statement from the novelist Anthony Burgess:

What subject-matter does England provide (or Wales or Scotland or Northern Ireland or the Channel Islands or the Isle of Man)? Not, I would say, the subject-matter of an expansive vision, which, whatever Americans may think, is there in America for the American writer’s taking. Some of us got in just in time to record a dying, or heroically relinquished, empire. The transition from free society to welfare state provided material for a few novels, but the theme has lost all its vitality.²

Burgess’s complaint reflects not, I think, a real relation between lost political and artistic power but the recurrent tendency of commentators on the English scene to metaphorize literary change as national decline. That metaphorical habit causes a great deal of critical haziness; it sustains myths of a fallen heritage in the land of Shakespeare, of an island’s poetic sourcewaters run dry, of the death of the English (but not anglophone) novel. If we cast these myths aside, what precisely is the relationship between British imperial contraction and the shape of English literary culture?

Since elegists of English literature tend to date its decline to the eclipse of high modernism, we can restate this question in terms of modernism’s original relationship to British hegemony: what accounts for the appar-

ently coterminous lifespans of high modernism and high imperialism in the British sphere? How, in other words, was English modernism shaped and inflected, not just by the accumulation and concentration of economic, social, and cultural power in metropolitan London from 1880 to 1930, but by the relative diffusion of that power during the period from 1930 to 1960? The most widely held views about the end of modernism have tended to concentrate on causal factors associated with European politics (the rise of fascism and the dampening effects of World War II), economics (the depression that ran through the thirties), and culture (the growing threat to high art from mass media in the age of radio, cinema, and television). This study aims to extend those explanatory models by giving sustained consideration to the relationship between a fading imperialism and the putative death of English modernism (understood as the last major phase of English literature). Rather than describe the collapse of British power and the diminishment of English literature in terms of direct causality or—equally implausibly—in terms of mere coincidence, the chapters that follow concentrate on late modernism’s indirect and mediated representations of imperial contraction in the form of an “anthropological turn” manifested in both cultural doctrine and literary style.

In this book, the anthropological turn names the discursive process by which English intellectuals translated the end of empire into a resurgent concept of national culture—one whose insular integrity seemed to mitigate some of modernism’s characteristic social agonies while rendering obsolete some of modernism’s defining aesthetic techniques. *A Shrinking Island* offers, in effect, a literary prehistory to the anthropological turn that Colin MacCabe, following a more conventional periodization, describes as having made postwar English culture into “an object of study like any other, privileged only by historical accident and not by some immanent qualities.”³ Defined against the assumptions of traditional English literary criticism, the anthropological turn more or less corresponds to the rise of “culturalism,” that is, to an ethnographic and anti-elitist approach to symbolic practices whose classic institutional form is Birmingham-school Cultural Studies. By tracing this turn back to the thirties, we can see how canonical English writing of the prewar period established key tropes and concepts for the postwar reclamation of England’s cultural integrity and authenticity.

From this perspective, it is possible to see that English modernists like T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, and E. M. Forster did not (as is often assumed) resist the anthropological turn in a rearguard defense of the literary, but actively participated in the rise of an Anglocentric culture paradigm.⁴ Taken together, their works of the thirties and forties begin to deemphasize the redemptive agency of *art*, which, because of its social autonomization, operates unmoored from any given national sphere, and to promote

instead the redemptive agency of *culture*, which is restricted by national or ethnolinguistic borders. By tracing the anthropological turn through Eliot's late poetry, Woolf's last novel, and Forster's minor drama, this study describes the end-stage of a London-based modernism. It also points to that modernism's influence on broader cultural formations that have come to define postwar, postempire England. The key figures in this version of late modernism are canonical English writers who measured the passing of British hegemony not solely in terms of a vitiated imperial humanism but also in terms of a recovered cultural particularity that is, at least potentially, the basis for both social and aesthetic renewal. This small but central constellation of modernists in England actively manages the cultural transition between empire and welfare state. Their works reveal the inner logic and stylistic contours of a major literary culture caught in the act of becoming minor.

Since Anglo-American modernism is so famously a movement of opening salvos, of bristling manifestoes and self-regarding innovations, it is now worthwhile to ask whether there are not also important closing statements that registered epochal change, just as the big blasts of 1914–22 had.⁵ To press the historical case for modernism's end-stage requires a formational rather than formal account of the movement, one that brings into view the following familiar touchstones of the period 1890–1940: the rise of new mass transportation and communication technologies; the scientific paradigm shift crystallized by the theory of general relativity, the antipositivist and antihumanist philosophical turns flowing from (and in a sense against) Marx and Nietzsche, Darwin, and Freud; the broadly anti-Victorian social ethos of intellectuals, the galvanizing events of World War I and the Russian Revolution; and the role of new structures of patronage and dissemination endemic to literary circles in the early twentieth century.⁶ In my view, the single term that best captures the multiple contextual dimensions needed to historicize modernist practice is Raymond Williams's "metropolitan perception," which has the additional virtue of situating modernism in the urban centers of Western power. Modernism, writes Williams, cannot properly be understood without an account of the metropolis as a place "beyond both city and nation in their older senses," which developed out of the "magnetic concentration of wealth and power in imperial capitals and the simultaneous cosmopolitan access to a wide variety of subordinate cultures."⁷ Because it draws together the urban-imperial base and rich cultural superstructure of modernism, "metropolitan perception" will be a central term in this study, especially when paired with the useful (though unmelodious) term "demetropolitanization," meaning the retrenchment, in the thirties and forties, of all that metropolitan perception implies.

While many of the stylistic hallmarks of high modernism continued to appear in various experimental and nonmimetic literatures well after World War II, the broader cultural conditions of metropolitan modernism eroded rather sharply during the midcentury. Many of the generic and stylistic changes that characterize late modernism in this study could be ascribed to a kind of generational fatigue, especially since the canonical group of anglophone modernists seemed to enter into dogmatic middle age (Eliot, Pound, Lewis) or to expire (Yeats, Joyce, Woolf) with remarkable consistency sometime around 1940. But if we think in terms of generational exhaustion, we presume late modernism to be an aftereffect rather than a new historical phase requiring its own formal innovations. Moreover, if we interpolate the motif of exhaustion into the larger narrative of British culture, we only confirm an unreflective intuition about national decline without actually analyzing the nature of cultural change attendant on demetropolitanization. In taking up the question of late modernism and imperial contraction between 1930 and 1960, then, this study aims to address the blank space or interregnum between modernism and post-modernism, between empire and welfare state.⁸

While a tight canonical focus on English modernists like Forster, Woolf, and Eliot leaves out important experimental writing in the period, it has the advantage of directing attention to an established literary elite identified with London, the preeminent imperial metropole. That elite's response to imperial contraction brings out a crucial historical relationship between two processes that have not been fully theorized in relation to each other: decolonization and the rise of culturalism. Before proceeding with the elaboration of that intertwined history, though, it is worth addressing a preliminary question: was there in fact an *English* modernism? Or was there instead, as Terry Eagleton's *Exiles and Émigrés* (among other studies) has suggested, an international modernism briefly housed in England? Eagleton, like many leftist critics, considers a bourgeoisified English culture to have been proof against the incursions of the radical European avant-gardes.⁹ Of course, the idea of English literature's resistance to aesthetic and political experimentation stems from the modernist period itself. Pound (no leftist!) offers a classic statement of the case in *How to Read* (1931):

the Irish took over the business for a few years; Henry James led, or rather preceded, the novelists, and then the Britons resigned *en bloc*; the language is now in the keeping of the Irish (Yeats and Joyce); apart from Yeats, since the death of Hardy, poetry is being written by Americans. All the developments in English verse since 1910 are due almost wholly to Americans. In fact, there is no longer any reason to call it English verse, and there is no present reason to think of England at all.¹⁰

As Pound suggests, few of the radical innovators in British modernism were English-born, and, conversely, many of the English-born figures of the period (Forster and Lawrence, for instance) kept alive residual elements of Victorian realism and Edwardian pastoralism in their work. Many avant-gardists (Pound, Wyndham Lewis, Mina Loy) gave up on England as a place for radical innovation. It is probably fair to describe English modernism as a compromise formation, a semimodernized modernism. Nonetheless, English intellectuals like T. E. Hulme, F. M. Ford, Virginia Woolf, and Roger Fry did inject some of the excitement of continental thought and art (psychoanalysis, postimpressionism, Bergsonism) into the bloodstream of an otherwise conventional literary scene. To the extent that a cosmopolitan and experimental modernism posed itself against insular traditionalism throughout the second and third decades of the century, it is possible to measure in relative terms a subsequent Anglocentric turn in the 1930s and 1940s. By that point, the surviving modernists still living and writing in England had winnowed down to a smallish band, whose most canonical representatives are Forster, Woolf, and Eliot.¹¹

It is precisely because of the politics of canonization and the institutionalized cultural power associated with, for example, *The Criterion* and the Bloomsbury group, that Eliot and Woolf (representing the established poetry and fiction of interwar English modernism) come to feature as the central figures in this book. Not only do Eliot and Woolf exemplify the last “major” generation of English writers but their late works offer some interesting and unexplored parallels, particularly insofar as both writers produce texts whose layered construction inscribes all the complexity of a massive historical transition in which metropolitan modernism gives way to the *petit recits* of national culture. In what follows, I read *Between the Acts* and *Four Quartets* as literary forms dedicated to accommodating the fading significance of English universalism to the emergent significance of English particularism. If these texts refer conspicuously to an English center of gravity, they do not simply reveal a latent, conservative, and artistically null nativism lurking underneath some liberatory and radical international modernism. By shifting the terms of debate from British decline to English revival, I do not propose to ignore the fact that English particularism has been the basis for a rearguard politics of ethnic identity in contemporary Britain and for an apparently provincial or insular literature. However, to grasp the late-imperial dialectic of lost universalism and restored particularity, we must be equally attentive to the ways in which nativism has been interwoven with the democratization of culture itself.

The first step in historicizing the Anglocentric turn as something other than a pretext for bad art (and bad politics) is to remember that, for some influential English writers, the end of empire entailed a metaphorical

repair of the social divides that had conditioned modernism's aesthetics of failure and fragmentation. Working backward, then, we can identify imperialism's place in the modernist imaginary as both a floating symbol and a material predicate of lost cultural wholeness. This approach allows us to begin to fill in some of the theoretical gaps left in the project of reading anglophone modernism in the context of British imperial power. Although both modernism and imperialism reached a peak in the period from 1880 to 1945, we have very few general accounts of the relationship between them (particularly by comparison to Victorian colonial discourse studies or post-1945 postcolonial studies). Most colonial-discourse work in the modernist period tends to be limited to individual figures (Conrad, Forster) or to texts with obvious imperial settings or thematic content.¹² Two of the best recent books in this field, Ian Baucom's *Out of Place* and Simon Gikandi's *Maps of Englishness*, overcome the longstanding divide between domestic and imperial cultures. Like Gauri Viswanathan's *Masks of Conquest*, these books reconceptualize Englishness—even in its apparently insular manifestations—as shaped and haunted by forms of imperial experience and knowledge.¹³ Their explorations across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries provide a critical backdrop for my own more period-intensive study of high and late modernism.

Baucom, Gikandi, and Viswanathan all affirm (implicitly or explicitly) Edward Said's foundational notion of the "cultural integrity of empire," reminding us that good theoretical or historical work cannot divorce the effects of imperialism in the colonies from its effects in the center, nor can it separate colonial power from European high culture. With this in mind, we must recognize imperialism as a significant context even for modernist works that seem insulated from imperial concerns. To do subtle justice to the cultural and literary aspects of metropolitan power in the English sphere, we must chart imperialism's presence not only as visible and narrative data but as unexpected formal encryptions and thematic outcroppings in ostensibly domestic texts. In *Howards End*, for example, Fredric Jameson has proposed that a figure of "placelessness" or spatial infinity marks the assimilation of the economic and political conditions of British imperialism into modernist narrative. In Jameson's view, the representation of the imperial-infinite remains politically unconscious, but emerges as an element of style. To make his case, Jameson argues that the modern colonial system created a meaning loss by relocating major elements of the British economy overseas. Once these aspects of production are beyond the view of those in the imperial center, they are no longer available for representation.¹⁴

Jameson's essay applies a Lukacsian notion of modernism as the literature par excellence of lost social totality to imperial England, described as a center that no longer possesses full knowledge of itself. I will return

to this provocative claim in chapter 1, but it is worth mentioning here that Jameson's model corroborates, in an indirect way, the intellectual history of modern England proposed by Perry Anderson. In Anderson's influential analysis, the anthropological visibility and wholeness of tribal societies in the colonial periphery drew attention away from comprehensive sociological knowledge of England itself. As Anderson's colleague Tom Nairn puts the point, "Historically, the inward lack corresponded to an outward presence."¹⁵ Thus, while the culture of imperial modernism represented itself as an expanding and synthesizing universalism *at the periphery* (where it encountered the putatively whole cultures of tribal premodernity), it registered an attenuated or absent totality *at the core*, where knowledge of the inside was mystified into the atomized but dazzling unreality of metropolitan perception.

If the metaphor of lost totality is one of the central deep structures of imperialism and modernism, it follows that the end of empire might be taken to augur a basic repair or reintegration of English culture itself. Such a turn of geopolitical events would therefore reflect those aspects of modernist style that were based on lost social totality with a new—or newly imagined—sense of spatial and cultural consolidation. By this logic, the restored knowability of the home culture would seem to mitigate both the inner lack of Anderson's English intelligentsia and the fractured geography of Jameson's modernist elite. As it happens, most of the writers under consideration here have careers in which self-consciously metropolitan themes and techniques give way to Anglocentric representations of meaningful time and bounded space. Virginia Woolf, for example, wrote her first novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915), about a colonial journey and her last, *Between the Acts* (1941), about a country ritual; Eliot's multicultural metropolis in *The Waste Land* gave way to the sacred national sites of "Little Gidding"; Forster moved from the hot states of Italian and Indian culture in his major fiction to the delibidinalized insularity of his midcentury pageants and country rambles; and even the economist J. M. Keynes, their contemporary, followed (as described in chapter 4) a path from an early career in the India Office to the invention of a systemic, holistic British macroeconomics in his *General Theory* of 1936.¹⁶

As the more detailed readings of these writers will indicate, there are two kinds of argument at work in this book: the more strictly materialist claim that imperial contraction changed English writing through a series of symbolic mediations between social conditions and artistic production; and the claim that certain English intellectuals interpreted contraction as an opportunity for cultural repair. To put this another way: the fact of contraction certainly altered some of the social and institutional predicates of metropolitan perception, but it is even more clear that contraction gave modernists a master trope for projecting the end of what Keynes

called the “international but individualistic” era of European culture.¹⁷ If the Anderson-Nairn notion of an inner lack/outer presence characterizes the high modernist era, with its primitivist art and colonial anthropology, then late modernist work replaces a deep form of metropolitan presbyopia with a new apprehension of a complete national life—an insular romance of wholeness, or at least of layered social knowability. The relativization of England as one culture among many in the face of imperial contraction seems to have entailed a relativization of literature as one aspect of culture; together these discursive events constitute the anthropological turn of late modernism in particular and English culture in general after 1930.

With this initial hypothesis in place, we can reread the history of twentieth-century English literature in ways that substantially diverge from the narrative proposed by Hugh Kenner in the book to which my title alludes, *A Sinking Island* (1987). To shift emphasis from *sinking* to *shrinking* implies reworking Kenner’s story of decline, posing a mixed history of contraction and consolidation against his one-directional humanist schema of the exalted devolving into the petty-banal. Kenner sees the fragmentation of reading publics as the decisive factor in the demise of great modernist literature; England was simply the first territory to see its high aesthetic comprehensively undermined by an insurgent mass culture.¹⁸ In Kenner’s narrative, as in many standard accounts of English modernism, imperial decline and provincialism hover in the background as vague signs of civilizational malaise or flaccidity. As I suggested at the start, this approach begs the question of how imperial decline does or does not relate to the status of literary value in English culture. For this reason alone, it is worth reconsidering the fact that the late modernist generation absorbed the potential energy of a contracting British state and converted it into the language not of aesthetic decline but of cultural revival.

As is no doubt apparent, I am not reading the entwined story of late modernism and late imperialism through texts, like Evelyn Waugh’s *Decline and Fall* or Graham Greene’s *Brighton Rock*, that are overtly based on the predicament of a provincial ex-empire. In contrast to literary histories of the thirties and forties centered on these “next generation” novelists or on the Auden circle of younger poets, this study addresses a residual or late modernism. This generational restriction represents a literary-historical claim: that the end of British hegemony was a *fait accompli* to the Auden-Greene generation and therefore not the occasion for searching attempts to manage the transition between imperial universalism and national particularism. That generation’s minor-chord lament stems in part from not having come of age artistically during the days of imperial centrality; they inherited the cultural detritus and political guilt of empire without the corresponding advantages of metropolitan perception. The

difference in historical experience between the modernist and Auden generations helps account for the former's interest in reviving English culture and the latter's interest in eulogizing it. Certainly, writers like Greene, Auden, and Larkin—whether they cultivated a satiric provincialism or an ironic cosmopolitanism—did not vest English culture itself with the kind of recuperative possibilities that one can see in the late modernist works analyzed in this study. Where Eliot and Woolf saw the end of British imperialism as an opportunity to forestall the depredations of modernity, the Auden generation interpreted it as yet another chapter in the unfolding of those same depredations.

Most of the writers conventionally taken to represent English literature in the midcentury—Greene, Waugh, Orwell, Auden, Larkin—remain committed to a literature of existential male antiheroism in a world of corrupt politics and culture. This constellation of writers became representative figures in part because their canonical-humanist conception of literary value, combined with their historical sense of pervasive national decline, seems to have accorded with the dominant assumptions of mid-century English criticism embodied in the figure of F. R. Leavis. By contrast to the aging modernists, their career trajectories tend to move further away from, not closer to, the ambiguous embrace of national identity or group politics. For this reason, I treat these writers only briefly and in the book's conclusion.

Modernism's nativist and culturalist turn represents the first part of a decolonizing dialectic in which the tropes and modes of colonial knowledge came home to roost at the end of empire. To capture the double movement of this dialectic, the book will trace a roughly chronological arc from the high modernism of the metropolitan era (summarized in chapter 1) to the late modernism and late imperialism of the thirties and forties (addressed with detailed critical readings in chapters 2 and 3), to postwar, postimperial English culture, particularly as it began to take shape in the 1950s (described in chapter 4). The imagined reintegration of a shrinking national culture connects late modernism to cultural formations in the fifties that projected England as the object of anthropological knowledge. The book follows its readings of modernist literature with close examinations of Keynesian economics, of English Cultural Studies, and of the first postwar generation of colonial migrant writing in England. It draws writers of the old liberal intelligentsia (Woolf, Keynes) and the modernist right (Eliot) into a single narrative with figures from the rise of cultural studies (Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart); moreover, it links the literature of the dying empire (Forster) to the new writing of the multicultural England of the 1950s (Doris Lessing, George Lamming). These readings are organized in terms of the problematic of the anthropological turn and not strictly by the conventions of literary period or genre. While

this may seem an eccentric trajectory, it has the specific virtue of accounting for changes in English culture that do not correspond to our unsatisfactory period markers—prewar/postwar and modernism/postmodernism—nor to the conventional story of imperial decline.

The redemptive discourse of Anglocentrism that I have begun to sketch may seem immediately explainable in terms of cultural responses to fascist aggression rather than to imperial contraction. But it is probably more accurate to place the rise of fascism and Hitler's war into the larger context of European political crisis that included the growing challenge to imperialism from within and without the metropolitan centers. War and imperial contraction were not just coincident in time but structurally interrelated, as most English intellectuals could see by the 1940s. If the familiar crises of the thirties and the coming war made national self-representation seem politically urgent, then it was in some sense the anthropological turn that made national self-representation seem conceptually *possible*. This was especially true for English intellectuals who were inclined to believe that an insular culture, but not a baggy multinational civilization, could unify its fragments. Imperial retrenchment thus yielded aesthetic solutions to the problem of England's social unknowability and its high/low cultural schism. The crisis of European cosmopolitanism did not simply force a retreat to insular culture; it also established the conditions for a potential transformation of that culture.¹⁹ James Buzard describes this process in terms of a "metropolitan autoethnography," a kind of domestic epistemological romance in which "modern Western societies seek to know themselves as 'cultures,' " that is, as "self-sufficient entities possessing their own indigenous systems of meaning, essentially independent of their increasingly undeniable dependence upon 'the rest.' "²⁰

Certainly the thirties witnessed a spike in autoethnographic discourses that projected England qua nation as newly representable in the holistic terms of anthropology. By transferring the holistic ethos (writing about "an entire way of life") from small-scale colonized societies to their own shrinking nation, English intellectuals found a distinctive way to respond to the imminent collapse of British hegemony. In the English midcentury and in some key late modernists texts, then, we find an overlooked chapter in the history of what George Marcus and Michael Fischer call the "repatriation" of anthropology. That repatriation is a crucial component in the midcentury reinvention of English culture. Where high modernism often emphasized the reification of social difference, the anthropologically inflected projects of the thirties afforded English intellectuals a new way to represent social difference within a dynamic, but knowable and bounded, social field, that is, within a totality corresponding to the idea of national culture.

The aging high modernists participated in the process of anthropological introversion by modifying some of their most distinctive stylistic and

generic choices in the late thirties. For example, both Woolf and Eliot (to different degrees) inflect their own techniques for registering ego consciousness with a more powerful and more binding model of national tradition. Their cultural turn thus sheds retrospective light on the original relation between modernism's languages of subjectivity and its metropolitan habitat. To press this point is to affirm David Lloyd's powerful argument about the place of the archetypal subject in imperial cultures: "A major literature is established as such precisely by virtue of its claims to representative status, of its claims to realize the autonomy of the individual subject to such a degree that this individual subject becomes universally valid and archetypal."²¹ In *Anomalous States*, Lloyd elaborates that argument into a cogent explanation of the relation between the end of empire, the challenge to high culture, and the critique of the sovereign subject. He points to an underlying link between "the erosion of the aesthetic domain and the demise of colonialism itself." Lloyd's narrative covers the general run of aesthetic culture from Goethe and Schiller through Arnold, culminating in an implicit account of the place of modernist aesthetics within the larger history of European humanism. The grand evolutionary culture-graph of modern Europe's anthropological imagination implies that metropolitan societies are closer to "normative humanity" than peripheral ones; moreover, it is the "ethical function" of aesthetics to "demonstrate the congruity of aesthetic works of increasing self-reflexive complexity with the preordained stages of humankind's development."²² Modernism's virtuosity, in this sense, corresponds to European humanism's apex. In its historical dimension, Lloyd's point reformulates Sartre's well-known claim that European humanism has always depended on imperial power—an argument memorably captured in the introduction to Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*.²³ Naturally then, as my readings of late Woolf and late Eliot will suggest, a crisis in imperialism provokes or exacerbates a crisis in humanism. In short, the political critique of colonialism and the philosophical critique of the subject—both gathering steam in the forties and fifties—can best be understood as coterminous in the history of ideas with the eclipse of historical or metropolitan modernism.

Lloyd's model of European imperial power and universal humanism reaching a kind of apotheosis in modernist complexity gives us a way to account for the actual historical relations—not just the intuitive affinities—between metropolitan perception and the literature of consciousness. Broadly speaking, high modernism, once understood as, among other things, an aesthetic devoted to or predicated on the autonomous value of "free-floating" subjects, has increasingly been rethought in terms of the social determinations that impinge on subjectivity. In my view, high modernism frames the conflict between the self-determining individual and the socially saturated individual as a polarizing opposition or inevitable double bind.²⁴ More specifically, the double bind of modernist subjec-

tivity conforms to Keynes's description of an "international but individualistic" era, when both art and the soul seemed more thrillingly free from traditional communities, but more harrowingly prey to the laws of the market. By contrast, the language of Anglocentric revival (including Keynes's own work in the thirties) projects a cultural arena more tethered to national tradition, but correspondingly less vulnerable to an atomizing and homogenizing global capitalism. The anthropological turn allows English modernists to imagine the rescue of socially marginalized art within a whole culture sponsored by the ascendant corporate nationalism of the welfare state.²⁵

The irony of late modernism in England is that the cultural turn tended to render obsolete certain aspects of modernist literary practice by fulfilling certain aspects of modernist social doctrine. Subsuming the twin crises of art's autonomization and lost organic community into the reactivated notion of cultural totality, modernists presided over a self-obsolencing aesthetic. As we will see, their work in the late thirties defines the dialectical switchpoint where English modernism, projecting the reintegration of art and culture, becomes something else altogether. These tectonic shifts confirm, by retrospect, the originally divided aesthetic ideology of high modernism, which was predicated on the nonfulfillment of its own ideals. It depended, for example, on the tension between a doctrine of impersonality and the development of highly idiosyncratic styles. Likewise, it tended to express nostalgia for organic communities while engaging in an aesthetic embrace of the fragmented metropolis. When, in the demetropolitizing phase, modernists begin to connect aesthetic impersonality less to ingenious stylistic invention (which could always be assimilated back to the notion of the idiosyncratic mind) and more directly to shared rituals and traditions, the equation shifts. Eliot and Woolf, for example, each mined their English heritage in the 1930s in order to modernize, yet again, their representation of transpersonal agency or communal voice, thereby generating new solutions to the old problem of literary impersonality.

Although I have suggested that the personal/impersonal antinomy of English high modernism reaches a new resolution via the supervening doctrine of anthropological holism, I do not read (as Lukács does) modernist representations of consciousness as a cosmopolitan indulgence subsequently corrected when the return to national concerns enforces a properly sociohistorical aesthetic. Modernist representations of the subject were always, as Adorno insisted, shaped by (not detached from) specific and objective social conditions. Indeed, a genuinely critical or negative art required (more than ever) the language of subjectivity in order to avoid simply reproducing the real world in a naive attempt at mimetic objectivity or social realism.²⁶ This Adornean model of "objective subjectivity" as the key to modernist technique seems to have come under pressure in

the midcentury, at least in practice, for English writers like Eliot and Woolf. The classic high modernist texts of the twenties (say *The Waste Land* or *Mrs. Dalloway*) sought to inscribe historical experience into virtuosic forms and to mediate between idealist patterns (myth) and materialist details (history) through a capacious, inventive new language of consciousness. By contrast, the texts of late modernism (say *Four Quartets* or *Between the Acts*) seem to posit an inherited cultural legacy as the agent required to mediate between totality and particularity, between unity and fragmentation, or between the collective and the individual. The anthropological turn refers to this *relative* shift away from the mediating symbolic and social power of artistic forms and individual minds.

If we recall Lloyd's point that the formation of archetypal ethical subjects and of formal complexity stems from the apex of a certain historical (and eventually imperial) European aesthetic culture, we can see that modernism represents in a sense both the high-water mark and the crumbling point of that formation. Its charged antinomy between formal and subjective virtuosity on the one hand and increasingly rationalized social conditions on the other reflects neither ideological escape from modernity (Lukács) nor its pure negation (Adorno), but precisely the impossible oscillation between the two. In a sense, the joint demise of aesthetic culture and colonial power makes space for a new dispensation, a new representation of the subject/object problem—one that is not necessarily better or worse, not necessarily more or less political or historical. Certainly the texts of late modernism in England suggest a linked erosion of modernist aesthetics and colonial power, displacing the humanist/antihumanist and liberal/antiliberal polarities of high modernism with emergent culturalisms of both the left and the right.

The cultural turn—with its integrative and tribal promises—had obvious appeal for modernists struggling to reconcile the heroic dissidence and social marginality of high art in the age of avant-gardism. But it also carried all the predictable burdens of any cultural particularism or restrictive nationalism: the danger of false unity, cloying nostalgia, creative claustrophobia, and narrowed horizons of meaning. Naturally, then, the surviving London modernists maintained several degrees of suspicion about the nativist premises entailed in the anthropologization of English writing. As a transitional generation, they cut their Anglocentrism with international ideas: Eliot's investment in the unity of European Christendom, Keynes's commitment to global monetary regulation, and Woolf's and Forster's persistent liberal cosmopolitanism (combined with sexual and gender dissidence from official forms of national culture). But what is perhaps even more historically important—and interpretively challenging—than these *explicit* disavowals of nationalism is the fact that

their late works *implicitly* reinscribe universalism into the language of English particularism.

Indeed the anthropological turn of 1930–60 consolidates a second-order universalism based on English cultural integrity. If the primary universalism of the metropolitan era turned on the sovereign subject of a border-crossing, myth-making imperial humanism, then this new secondary universalism turns on the representative status of a bounded culture. The afterlife of British hegemony is written into this new language of cultural exemplarity, so that Englishness represents not just a type, but the very archetype, of modern nationalism, of deep and integral shared traditions emanating from within the prototypical industrial class society. Within this trajectory, the late modernists of the contracting English center, with their self-conscious and balky reintegration into insular culture, stand as a kind of paradigm of the historical fate of European universalism in its classic form.

The anthropological turn describes the decisive assimilation of a restrictive cultural nationalism back into an English canon that had, during the Arnoldian phase of imperial humanism, projected both the blessings and the limitations of cultural nationalism onto its own provinces, fringes, and colonies. In a 1940 essay, Eliot notes that while the young symbolist W. B. Yeats had an expropriative, anglicized relationship to Irish culture, the later Yeats developed a more fully nativist mode of expression and that “in becoming more Irish . . . he became at the same time universal.”²⁷ Here Eliot emphasizes the roots of universalism in the collective life of a representative *people* rather than in the psychic contours of a representative *person*. Both the timing of the essay and the example of Yeats are historically apposite, since Eliot and his London contemporaries were beginning to borrow the logic of cultural nationalism back from the colonies, adapting it for a belated brand of Anglocentric revivalism. Such borrowings situate late modernism in England within a broader history of twentieth-century decolonization movements, in which the universalist forms of imperial nationalism were both exposed as, and transformed into, ethnolinguistic nationalism.

Modernist works like *Between the Act* and *Four Quartets* thus not only register the aesthetic changes of demetropolitanization but also offer valuable conceptual resources for coming to terms with the problem of universalism. From its banishment in the discourse of identity politics, universalism has recently resurfaced to trouble cultural theory—particularly studies of nationalism and the new cosmopolitanism. Insofar as the aesthetic formulations of late modernist Anglocentrism strike a separate and uneasy peace between universalist and particularist concepts of nationhood, they shed new light on the unresolved theoretical opposition between civic and ethnic nationalism.²⁸ The chapters that follow suggest

a specific literary-historical context for this basic divide, which has structured any number of major theoretical statements on the problem of national culture in recent years. Consider, for example, Homi Bhabha's exploration of the split subject of national discourse. In Bhabha's model, the nation, when it is no longer defined against its "Other or Outside," finds itself foundering on its own internal contradictions, since there can be no effective, positive, or final signification of the people. Bhabha's poststructuralist and psychoanalytic idiom recasts the Marxist problematic of structural antagonism into the crisis of the crumbling sign and the "narcissistic neuroses of the national discourse." At this point, the "nation reveals, in its ambivalent and vacillating representation, an ethnography of its own claim to being *the* norm of social contemporaneity."²⁹ If we set this model into the case of late modernism's anthropological turn—undertaken precisely at the point when Englishness can no longer be defined against its imperial Outside—we can see it gain historical flesh and dialectical motion. The attempt on the part of English writers to reinscribe universal status into the particularist language of home anthropology defines the transition from imperial to postimperial Englishness. It stands as a living version of Bhabha's ethnography of normative power that does not merely dissolve itself once it relativizes its own claims but continues to exert political influence and to take on new guises in contemporary U.K. culture. Of course, the fact that England is frequently the actual historical referent of Bhabha's general statements about colonial and postcolonial culture only underscores the point that the history of England's demetropolitanization continues to be taken as paradigmatic. This accords quite precisely with the logic of second-order universalism that I have described above as a "post-British" effect.

I BEGAN THIS introduction with skepticism about the entwined narrative of geopolitical and aesthetic decline that so often displaces analysis of English literature after 1930. By no means do I intend to pose a progressive narrative against that familiar logic of devolution, nor will I be offering a moral-political brief either for or against Anglocentrism. Instead, *A Shrinking Island* attempts two main analytical tasks: (1) to trace the relationship between shifting concepts of English culture and shifting aesthetic practices of canonical modernist writers; and (2) to describe the influential afterlife of late modernism's anthropological turn in the making of English identity after empire. Chapters 2 and 3 emphasize literary analysis of canonical figures whereas chapters 1 and 4 emphasize material causes, cultural movements, and intellectual formations. In this sense, the book's structure reflects its subject: the process by which the canonical authority of high modernism was first concentrated in a small band of heroic artists during the metropolitan era, then diffused and challenged

by the reorganization of national culture in the postmetropolitan era. The importance of national ritual and national allegory in texts that thematize imperial contraction occupies the center of attention in chapters 2 and 3, which are anchored respectively by readings of *Between the Act* and *Four Quartets*. These are modernist texts that reward rereading and fresh interpretation because they render an especially dense kind of artistic justice to their world; their language not only reflects and refracts events but has sporadic power to negate, to ignore, and even to change the course of events. To put it another way, I tack between context and text in order to tell a story about intellectuals and artists who both shape and are shaped by historical forces.

Chapter 1 addresses the preeminence and subsequent attenuation of metropolitan perception as a feature of English modernism. It begins by considering the early fiction of E. M. Forster in terms of a symbolic geography that reflects the tension between pastoral English values and the sprawling British economy. Forster's fiction repeatedly plots or maps the relation of anterior core and modern metropolis as overlapping in space but incommensurate in values, condensing any number of social contradictions (democracy and privilege, aesthetic culture and industrial materialism, personal liberty and sexual stricture) into his signature trope of a dwindling English essence suspended in a thrilling, but disorienting, metropolitan contact zone. The motor of Forsterian narrative in this way turns on the symbolic and reciprocal relationship between the privileged epistemology and threatened ontology of imperial Englishness. Williams's "metropolitan perception" identifies just this combination of cultural capital and social atomization as the basis of high modernism. Chapter 1 explores a specifically English model of metropolitan perception, providing the basis for subsequent analyses of demetropolitanization as a modernist end-stage that trades lost civilizational reach for restored cultural integrity.

To establish a convincing framework for the larger historical claim that English intellectuals began seriously to reckon with imperial contraction a generation before the decolonization movements of the 1960s, chapter 1 also surveys the legislative, diplomatic, and cultural markers of imperial contraction in the thirties and forties. Its final two sections explore intellectual and artistic responses to British retrenchment, tracking the homeward migration of a whole range of tropes, genres, and discursive forms previously associated with the colonies. With the engines of imperial (and industrial) expansion sputtering in the thirties, England was recoded, or seen to metamorphose, from a Hegelian subject of world-historical development to a Herderian object of its own insular history. One cultural index of this broader change is the boom in historical self-consumption in England, where the leisure classes turned to insular sources of rural mystique and chthonic myth. At the same time, English writing—ranging from Or-

well's urban fiction to the "home anthropology" of the Mass-Observation movement—increasingly made the nation into an object of documentary observation, a knowable unit of cultural and social relations rather than a fractured metropole. As the evidence will suggest, both of these strands of Anglocentrism borrowed cultural authenticity from the colonies and gained authority from the participation of canonical modernists.

In chapter 2, I trace the odd career of a neotraditional subgenre, the pageant-play, in English modernist writing of the thirties (including the "minor" modernism of writers like J. C. Powys and Charles Williams). Eliot and Forster experimented with the production of pageant-plays, while Woolf's final novel, *Between the Acts*, takes a village pageant as its central subject. Few critics have taken account of this antiquarian, distinctly unmodernist genre, but its sudden prominence points up key dimensions of English modernism's closing chapter. Modernist interest in folk-dramatic forms no doubt reflects at some level the need to establish alternative public ceremonies to the corporatist rituals of fascist Europe (and to mass cultural forms at home), but this renewed interest in native and Anglocentric rituals also takes shape within the broader logic of the anthropological turn. For the modernists in the 1930s, appropriation of the genre's tribal solidarity provides an occasion to explore English cultural integrity at the end of empire.

The modernist pageant texts confront a national history increasingly cut free from its moorings in colonial modernity. In these texts—which number among the least read of Forster's and Eliot's works, and the least understood of Woolf's—we can see the transition that directs emphasis away from the myths, symbols, and epiphanies of a universally significant but privately rendered mind and toward the public performance of civic rituals. Chapter 2 concludes with a sustained reinterpretation of Woolf's *Between the Acts* because that novel stages a fascinating contest between narration and performance and because it continues to be, in my view, too easily assimilated back to Woolf's famously resistant politics of privacy rather than read in light of a reluctant turn to cultural solidarity. For Woolf, the political crises of the time compelled intellectuals to think nationally, but also shifted the real terms of national identity away from aggressive Britishness, toward humane Englishness.

As I suggest in concluding chapter 2, *Between the Acts* offers a kind of valediction to both modernism and imperialism, confirming Jameson's reading of the relationship between the two. In the novel, the reorientation of the spatial referent from imperial-infinite to deep-insular coincides with the demystification of—or at least a notable revision of—Woolf's intrasubjective style. In other words, the political and imperial unconscious of English modernism breaks the crust of Woolf's last novel in a way that defines demetropolitanization's aesthetic effects. In a strikingly

similar fashion, T. S. Eliot's last major poem, *Four Quartets*, manages a kind of epic reevaluation of time and space in what seems an unavoidably Anglocentric—though not bluntly nationalist—way. The poem's invocation of the insular core culture anchors time to space in order to free it from history; it attracts the filaments and fragments of metropolitan consciousness, shaping them into an allegory that restores meaning reciprocally to the poet and his national culture.

In chapter 3, I read *Four Quartets* as a late modernist form that powerfully transvalues England itself, converting it into a significant cultural totality rather than a merely negative and even generic embodiment of European modernity (as in *The Waste Land*). Of course, as in Woolf, the formal shifts are relative, based on revisionary impulses and changing emphases, not on an outright revolution in either values or style. Despite the structural importance of demetropolitanization to their changing literary practice, Woolf and Eliot (and Forster) consciously moderate xenophobic nationalism: even in their later works, raw nativism is still etherialized into "the literary tradition," dissolved into "Christian community," or rendered as an intensely private, anticorporatist experience. More to the point, though, their late works revise or unsettle a modernist aesthetic predicated on social fragmentation; they recalibrate the modernist ratios, often subordinating the lament over a lost common culture to the imagined restoration of its conditions of possibility. Although Eliot's notion of cultural repair represents a fantasy projection of Englishness, the fantasy is both licensed and galvanized by a real history of imperial contraction and failed cosmopolitanism in the 1930s.

Eliot's centrality in chapter 3 stems from his culturally authoritative articulation of the possibility that an epochal change in European history might discredit the progressive time of secular modernity in a way that the eloquent protests of high modernism never could.³⁰ Eliot's *Quartets* makes a new attempt to pose meaningful, shaped, or eschatological time against mere chronology—an attempt that attaches timeless value not to an intercultural canon of great art but to a recrudescing concept of cultural unity. In this view, the end of empire "repairs" a fragmented English society, obviating the vocation of the heroic modernist in a broken culture. With the arrival of a limited kind of European apocalypse circa 1940, history itself begins to have an incarnate form, so there is no longer the pressing need to use form against a meaningless, merely chronological history. This proposition becomes, in a sense, the central hypothesis of my reading of Eliot. *Four Quartets*, with its prodigious complexity, both registers and enacts the turn from cosmopolitan aesthetics to national culture by which the high phase of English modernism came to its end. Chapter 3 thus takes Eliot to be the canonical instance of a broader culture of retrenchment featuring minor writers like Mary Butts, J.R.R. Tol-

kien, and Charles Williams. Butts's spiky pastoralism, Tolkien's archive fever, and Williams's pulp-fiction mythopoetics all represent a countermovement gaining visibility and currency in the thirties as the fate of metropolitan modernity itself—especially in England—seems to hang in the balance.

Although I read Woolf and Eliot as participants in the same Anglocentric turn, it is important not to blur distinctions between these two writers. Despite their sustained friendship, they represented opposing wings of the literary establishment. Eliot, for all his doctrinal changes in the interwar years, still cleaved to the Hulmean, classical, and antihumanist modernism that emerged in the ferment of the London avant-garde during World War I. Woolf, by contrast, represented the liberal-humanist values of Bloomsbury, with cultural and literary authority vested largely in the free-thinking and eccentric soul. The anthropological concept of a whole culture, galvanized by British contraction, seems to have appealed to Woolf and Eliot from almost opposite directions, closing the distance between their respectively affiliative and filiative notions of national belonging. The notion of tribal bonds lying underneath modernist anomie seems to have driven Eliot to embrace cultural rather than aesthetic authority while causing Woolf, the wary individualist, to confront her own organicist and Anglocentric premises. My readings therefore suggest, not ideological unity between Woolf and Eliot, but converging paths inflected by a similar sense of British crisis and English opportunity.

I take this limited model of convergence to exemplify the structural force of demetropolitanization in England of the thirties and forties, both in high and low cultural registers. Political differences (imperialism versus anti-imperialism, for example) and philosophical differences (humanism versus antihumanism, for example) among English intellectuals were substantially mitigated by the burgeoning power of the culture concept under the sign of the shrinking island. The anthropological turn identifies a deep historical effect, but not an utterly deterministic one. The end of empire cannot be neatly and discretely mapped onto the exact decades in question, nor can it be said to explain in any final way the shape of something so elusive and multiply determined as a poem or novel. When, for example, I argue that *Four Quartets* registers an epochal shift, I mean both that the poem uses a lapidary design to address England's changing status and that its form assimilates history in ways that outstrip Eliot's conscious intentions. For this reason, we can take Eliot's writing—despite its obvious political partiality—as significant in the broader cultural history of English modernism and not just within the restricted domain of the Tory dreamscape. With varying degrees of self-consciousness, English intellectuals of the thirties took the impress of national retrenchment both in their most delicate turns of phrase and in their most obdurate ideological principles.

In chapter 4, I turn to the economist J. M. Keynes precisely because he mediates between the high-cultural and deep-structural elements of demetropolitanization. Keynes's lifespan (1883–1946) covers the beginning, peak, and decline of both modernism and imperialism in Britain. He combines Bloomsbury liberalism with Burkean organicism, embodying the ideological blend that carried English destiny from imperial center to welfare state. As I argue in the first section of chapter 4, Keynesian thought allows us to see the modernist generation's crucial role in the dialectical motion of devolution. Despite their often conservative invocation of the folk against the masses—indeed, because of that invocation and its pastoralist and tribal dimensions—the modernists define the initial return of anthropological knowledge to England after empire. Seeking to avoid the twin dangers of the old Benthamite individualism and the new totalitarian conformism, Keynes found the necessary conceptual and rhetorical resources in the softer half of that political hybrid “the nation-state”; that is, he invoked the nation as defined by English cultural traditions rather than the state as defined by British imperial power.³¹ Just as English modernists shifted orientation from the free-flowing anomie of artistic coteries in European capitals to the everyday life of a more integrated insular culture, so too did Keynes shift orientation from a classical international capitalism to a restructured macroeconomy based on the formalization of collective interest in the state. Keynes's *General Theory*, published almost contemporaneously with *Between the Acts* and *Four Quartets*, thus replicates in economic terms the recuperation of social totality that his literary contemporaries began to imagine in cultural terms. Moreover, Keynes's ability to see the national economy at home in “total” or “macro” terms derives in part from his own transfer of a holistic sociocultural knowledge from the colonial periphery back to the atomized center.

When we read Keynes alongside his literary contemporaries, we can see late modernism as the dialectical precursor to Cultural Studies in England. If, in its late and Anglocentric phase, modernist writing tried to realign art and culture, then Cultural Studies, in its early and Anglocentric phase, tried to realign culture and society. Chapter 4 turns from Keynes to the pioneering work of E. P. Thompson, Richard Hoggart, and Raymond Williams, which attempted, in part, to displace rarefied (modernist) aesthetics with a more socially comprehensive and populist view of English culture. As many observers have noted, their innovative analyses of a total way of life relied on a latently organic notion of Englishness. But Cultural Studies nativism has not been fully contextualized as a postimperial effect, nor as the fulfillment of a latemodernist domestication of anthropology. As my readings will suggest, early Cultural Studies echoes the demetropolitanizing logic by which England becomes the archetype of cultural partic-

ularism. This second-order universalism surfaces in the recurrent claim that England bears an exemplary relation to modernity: the country where industrial, imperial capitalism hit first and hit hardest is also the country first out the other side; it is the very paradigm of demodernization. Even with (indeed, I suspect because of) its residual Anglocentrism, though, Cultural Studies managed to unsettle the canonical status of cosmopolitan modernism and to democratize culture in an anthropological frame.³²

The point in chapter 4, then, is not to flog the nationalist “flaw” of Cultural Studies, but to address the historical symmetry between high modernism’s presbyopic view of cultural totality (i.e., fuzzy at home, vivid overseas) and early Cultural Studies corresponding myopia when it came to matters of race, gender, and empire in its reconstruction of cultural totality at home. The Anglocentric logic of early Cultural Studies should, in other words, be read in terms of the limits imposed by postimperial conditions in England rather than in terms of humanist failings on the part of certain native intellectuals. Cultural Studies emerges in the fifties with a historical vocation to translate the language of British universalism into the language of English particularism. During the same period, postwar colonial-immigrant writing about England took up a similar task: not to hail multiculturalism, but to insist that the ethnolinguistic restrictiveness of English culture be seen for what it was, the parochial heart underneath the promises of universal British subjecthood. Chapter 4 juxtaposes the “home anthropology” of English cultural studies to the “reverse ethnography” of colonial writers like Doris Lessing, Sam Selvon, and George Lamming, arguing that both projects aim to objectify Englishness, to consolidate and identify its sources of integrity and rediscover its local color. Both projects redress an Arnoldian legacy in which England plays the role of secular modern center—a blank metaculture tethered by British power to an array of colorful subordinate cultural nationalisms. Like the Anglocentrism of the late modernists, then, these fifties representations of Englishness aim not so much to fetishize national tradition as to recognize and come to terms with its limitations. Of course, to insist on a particularist definition of Englishness after empire is to flirt with a romanticized and absolutist national identity (à la Enoch Powell). However, it is also to perform an ideological critique of universalist imperialism. This double effect challenges both English and postcolonial writing about England.

The narrative of reverse colonization and reverse ethnography attached to postcolonial immigration in the fifties brings forth the grand historical irony, always hovering at the edge of this study, that England seems finally to be both beneficiary of, *and subject to*, the knowledge/power structures of British imperialism. As Stuart Hall (among others) has pointed out,

English intellectuals, like their counterparts in ex-colonies, have been involved in an attempt to “recover an alternative set of cultural origins not contaminated by the colonising experience.”³³ Despite obvious distinctions between the history of the center and its colonies, it is worth noting how important the motif of reverse colonization has been—particularly in an era of U.S. cultural hegemony—to the reconstruction of England as a minor culture. This book reads reverse colonization back into the heart of high modernism, where writers like Woolf and Eliot had begun to absorb the decolonizing force of cultural nationalism at the center. Such an itinerary provides a genuine prehistory to contemporary English literature, now often read according to the paradigms of (postcolonial or multicultural) minority discourse, but also read as a minor culture in itself.³⁴ As Sean Golden puts the matter: “The term ‘native,’ once condescendingly assigned to the colonised, is now clung to and honoured by English writers in their steeply declining present circumstances.” Seamus Heaney makes a similar point in describing a process of contraction and decentering that “began to speed up in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s” and that removed England’s sense of “entitlement” to “world culture.”³⁵ In that process, the shrinking island becomes the governing figure for a paradigmatically English end to the triumph of European civilization. It stands not just for contracting spatial hegemony but for a faltering in the temporal concept of modernity itself—a faltering from which no modernism could emerge untransformed.