The End of English?

Terry Eagleton*

Foreword by Mounira Soliman**

Terry Eagleton's keynote address to the first International Symposium on Comparative Literature at the Department of English Language and Literature at Cairo University in 1991, was a variation on an article published in 1986 where he had debated the decline of English studies in the context of post-imperialism and postmodernism. In his keynote address, Eagleton continues the discussion, this time from a different entry point that intentionally focuses on the birth of the academic discipline of English literature in late 19th century England as an ideological project that aimed at establishing a national identity that would in turn create social and political harmony at home. This national heritage project also had an international edge whereby English literature was deployed as a form of cultural hegemony in the Empire's attempt to subdue national cultures. The beginning of the 20th century, however, as Eagleton explains, brought on four detrimental challenges to the thriving discipline then: the First World War, the emergence of modernism, the end of the empire, and the birth of postmodernism.

These four challenges, according to Eagleton, resulted in disrupting the centrality of the discipline, shaking the foundations of the literary tradition, and internationalizing it. In short, the discipline lost its status as the focus shifted from the Empire to the margin. This critical context is very relevant when we consider that the Department of English at Cairo University was established as part of the British colonial project. In fact, from its inception in 1925 until the early 1950s, most of its faculty were British scholars, writers, and expats. They charted genre-based curricula that promoted English literature, language, civilization, and culture. When the British faculty left n 1951, they were substituted with Egyptian faculty who were mostly educated in the UK. The new faculty were required to fill in the vacuum created by the departure of the English teachers and deliver all the course modules already in place. They were faced with the predicament of the institutionalization of a discipline by a colonial power, a predicament expounded in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's 1968 article "On the Abolition of the English Department" in which he questions the role played by the academic discipline of English literature in an African country. Eventually, the teaching and courses in the department went through several

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modifications and readjustments, with more attention to comparative literature, translation studies and postcolonial theories.

The debate over the decline of English studies continues to be relevant today as it was in 1991 when Terry Eagleton posed the question "The End of English?" to the faculty and students of the Department. On the one hand, it is part of the ongoing discussion on the devaluation of humanity programs worldwide, and on the other hand, it ties in with the revival of the decolonization project.

The End of English?
Terry Eagleton (1991)

English literature was born as an academic discipline in late 19th century England, as part of a very conscious ideological project. At the heart of the project was the felt need to construct a corporate national identity one that would blend antagonistic social classes into spiritual harmony, defuse political conflict, and incorporate the working class into the so-called national heritage. But this new discipline of English literature had its uses abroad as well as at home for the period of the early consolidation of the subject is the epoch of high imperialism, when the need for a well-established British cultural hegemony, in the interests of subduing and destroying the culture of client nations, was strongly felt. English literature, in the late 19th century, enters as a subject into the British civil service examinations, as a way of equipping the servants of empire with a conveniently packaged version of their own national cultural heritage. One might say, indeed, that it's one of the contradictions of imperialism that it requires of the imperial nation an absolute confidence in its own culture at just the moment when that confidence is jeopardized by a potentially disorienting encounter with cultures which are alien to it. Imperialism, in other words, tends to breed a disabling cultural relativism and scepticism on the part of the dominant nation - think of Joseph Conrad - at exactly the moment when this is politically most disastrous. English literature, then, would act as one way of negotiating this contradiction, reminding the imperial power of the wealth and superiority of its own history.

No sooner had this new discipline been established, however, than it found itself faced, in the 20th century, with four major, potentially crippling challenges. These were: the First World War, the emergence of modernism; the end of empire; and the rise of what for a better word we now have to call postmodernism. It's at these grievous rebuffs to the new subject that I want to look at in this paper.

Of all of these challenges, the first world war was the most deeply ambiguous. On the one hand, that traumatic experience shook certain traditional English pieties to their roots, and drastically transformed the sensibility, so to speak, which English literature had expressed and

encapsulated. The chauvinist, self-satisfied, parochial character of that culture was now notably harder to sustain, as a number of high Victorian and Edwardian – fetishes, progress, reason, stability and assumed social consensus – toppled one by one into the dust. On the other hand, that whole shattering experience lent English literature a new kind of impetus, as a sort of spiritual balm for the wounds inflicted on the society by international imperialist conflict. It is no accident in this respect that the years following the First World War are the years of the highpoint of English literary criticism in the 20th century, in the Cambridge of Leavis, I. A. Richards and William Empson. English, so the fond hope went, might provide a whole alternative, moral and spiritual identity for an exhausted imperial nation in accelerated declined – a ground on which the ruling order could regroup and rediscover its own spiritual roots and allegiances. Hence the invention, with Leavis and others, of a new parochialism, different in sensibility from the strident chauvinism of the high, imperialist period, centred now on nations of essential Englishness, of which English literature was felt to be the supreme expression.

At exactly the historical point when this was occurring, however, another phenomenon was blasting this ideology of essential Englishness to bits, and this was the outbreak of international modernism. Now in one sense, you might say, English culture proved peculiarly resistant to this disturbing new phenomenon, and that for a number of interesting reasons. Britain was the oldest industrial capitalist nation in the world; and it had therefore enjoyed an unusually lengthy period in which the ideologies organic to the industrial bourgeoisie - let's say, empiricism in philosophy and realism in culture - could be nurtured and entrenched. When the modernist revolution broke over Europe, then, this long established realist and empiricist hegemony proved somewhat more impermeable to anti-realist experiment of a modernist kind than did societies with a less deeply-settled lineage of common sense and instantly recognisable representations.

This particular reason for the English resistance to modernism is closely linked to another. The long sway of industrial capital in Britain, along with the traditionally conservative, hierarchical, deferential nature of the society, swaddled Britain to a large extent from the political turmoil and insurrectionism which rocked much of the rest of Europe in the early decades of this century. And since the explosive outbreak of artistic modernism and the avant garde in Europe as a whole had complex relations to this deeper political disturbance, the greater tranquillity of traditionalist Britain inoculated it to some extent against the modernist virus.

This isn't to say, of course, that there wasn't an English modernism; but it was very largely an imported affair. From James and Conrad to Pound, Eliot and Wyndham Lewis, the so-called 'English' modernist writers are of course nothing of the kind: they are exiles and expatriates, men who transplant a

certain modernism into a traditionally realist culture at a point where indigenous English writers could achieve little more daringly experimental than A Passage to India.. Who are the major writers of 20th century English literature? A Pole, two or three Americans and a handful of Irishmen. But of course, since what they write is rather distinguished, we've hi-jacked them for the English literary canon. If it's good, it must be English. There's surely a close relation between the achievement of these writers and their exilic or expatriate status. These men could carry through their audacious feat of inverted imperialism precisely because they lacked those vested emotional interests in a realist and empiricist English tradition which hamstrung the natives. (As far as the natives go, we mustn't forget about Virginia Woolf and D. H. Lawrence, but look at their status as, if you like, internal emigrés in the dominant culture: an oppressed woman and the son of a provincial miner). The exiles and emigrés were able to approach indigenous English traditions from the outside, objectify and appropriate them for their own devious ends, estrange and inhabit English culture in a single act, as those reared within its settled pieties could not. They settled in England but looked ambitiously over its head to Europe, Asia, Africa, Latin America, (think again of Conrad) bringing those unsettling, alienating perspectives to bear on the inbred parochialism of the metropolitan establishment. Positioned as they were within essentially peripheral histories, such artists could view the native English forms and lineages less as a heritage to be protected than as an object to be problematised. A Joyce or an Eliot could ramble across the whole span of European and other cultures, shameless bricoleurs liberated from the Oedipal constraints of a motherland.

There is, however, another side to this story. If Britain imported its artistic modernism, it could do so, in a notable paradox, precisely because of its settled, traditionalist, conservative milieu. It was that milieu which attracted writers like Conrad, James and Eliot to its shores writers fleeing from more turbulent political conditions abroad, or from societies like the United States which they felt to be somehow philistine, inorganic, askew the cultural mainstream. The irony, then, is that if Britain got its modernist experiment, it did so precisely because of its socially backward-looking character. And the emigrés who turned themselves into Little Englanders (James, Conrad, Eliot) did so with all the studied self-consciousness of the parvenu anxiously seeking paternal approval, scrupulously anglicised outsiders who became, self-parodically, more English than the English, in a phenomenon we've seen a good deal of since. This imported modernism, then, in one sense acted to buttress rather than challenge traditional English hegemony, as James dined for thirty years in English country houses, Conrad celebrated the Merchant Marine and Eliot made the English themselves look like uncouth outsiders.

Even so, this literary cosmopolitanism struck a damaging blow at that whole ideology of Englishness of which English literature was supposedly the finest flower. For modernism, for both good and ill, was international to its core, with as little respect for national frontiers as it had for the traditional boundaries between different modes of artistic production. The typical modernist artist is in ceaseless transition from one European capital to another, from one art-form, journal, cafe, group, coterie to the next. Moving on a newly cosmopolitan network which indifferently traversed the old nation-states and old-style cultural formations, clustered as aliens in some polyglot metropolis far from home, the European modernists turn their backs on the familiar, settled national cultures, cast a coldly estranging eye back on those rooted heritages in order to discern, from this Olympian vantage-point, somewhere on the *rive gauche* the deep, abstract, enduring structures which supposedly underlie them all. (For this, let's not forget, is also the epoch of Saussure and Jakobson, of the germination of what will later become known as structuralism). Disinherited from their own national tongues, they speak instead the new global semiotic idioms. the new non-speak or meta-speak which will provide the lingua franca for artists whose so-called mother tongues are widely divergent.

And all this, on the one hand, as I'm arguing, constitutes a revolutionary challenge with which the ideology known as English to critical reactions to it: enthusiastic about Eliot, dismissive of the later James, distinctly grudging about Pound, implacably hostile to a Joyce or a Beckett. On the other hand, this new internationalism brings along with it distinct losses, which need to be reckoned into the dialectical equation. For if such cosmopolitanism bracingly estranges and demystifies received national pieties, it's at the same time damagingly alienated from what indeed, socially and politically speaking, might still be fruitful and fertile in those passed-over national formations. If one side of the modernist sensibility is exhilarated, euphoric, with all the exuberance and bravura of making it new, the other side is anguished, rootless, disorientated, forced to discover in art itself the kinds of value it can no longer locate in any available style of social life.

English literature, as a discipline, emerges at the heart of the classical mode of capitalist production. The birth of modernism, by contrast, is contemporaneous with the dramatic transformation of that classical phase of capitalism, around the turn of the 20th century, into its 'higher', international monopoly forms. (It might be worth adding, to that modernism is born at a stroke with mass commercialised culture with the final decisive penetration of capital into cultural production itself and that the strategy of the modernist work of art, with t extreme resistance to easy consumability, can be seen as among other things a last-ditch holding out against that degraded popular culture modernism can be read on the one hand as a sort of mute, negative,

anguished protest against the reified world of international monopoly capitalism, there's no doubt on the other hand that its own cosmopolitanism paradoxically imitates these new global structures. The Waste Land and the Cantoes are quite as nation-blind, quite as aloofly indifferent to specific national traditions and identities, as the movement of capital itself, which now traverses national frontiers with all the insouciance of the modernist artist.

I've argued, not very originally, that Britain imported its modernism; but you might also claim that, at the same stroke, it exported it too. Where it exported it to was the so-called Third World - or at least, in the main, to that particularly troublesome bit of the Third World which lay right on its own doorstep, and which is known as Ireland. The extraordinary flourishing of an Irish modernism, from Yeats and Synge to Joyce and Beckett and Flann O'Brien, reveals the existence of a peculiar pact or collusion between modernism and the experience of colonialisation a pact, of course, once more very much in evidence in the literature of the so-called Third World today. (I'm taking it, incidentally, that Ireland qualified as a Third World society until about the 1950s, and still manifests many of the dominant features of that condition, now overlaid by first-world industrialisation). Why this curious collusion between modernism and colonialism? Well, for one thing, within the new global networks of international monopoly capitalism, all times and places, are becoming randomly interchangeable and if, like James Joyce, you inhabit a kind of non-place anyway a stagnant colonial enclave on the margins of the metropolis - you can suddenly find yourself representative in your dispossession of the fate which is now befalling all apparently more central places and histories, and so catapulted at a stroke from the geographical margin to the spiritual centre. If anywhere, then Joyce can scribble away in Trieste without ever having left Dublin, which is among other things fit compensation for the pains of exile. If the new condition of all European humanity is one of homelessness and uprootedness, the superseding of the old capitalist national formations in the name of a truly global system, then who better to exemplify this deracination than those whose home was always in the first place somewhere to get out of as quickly as possible? Britain, Ireland, Italy, the Caribbean these are now no more than random regional instantiations of an autonomous international network, whose economic operations cut across particular cultures as indifferently as 'deep structures' cut across distinct languages, literary texts or individual egos. If like a Joyce or a Beckett you had little enough rich national heritage in the first place, having been systematically deprived of it by British rule, then this very chronic backwardness thrust you, paradoxically, to the cutting edge of the avant garde, Bereft of a stable, continuous cultural tradition, the colonised were forced, so to speak, to make it up as they went along, just like the endless gratuitous tales

of a Samuel Beckett; and it's exactly this condition of political dispossession which they turn, in a triumphant tour de force, to artistic advantage.

If modernism is the point where painting comes to be about painting. music about music and writing about writing, then who better placed to exploit this new obsession of language with itself than those who, deprived of their own mother tongue over the centuries, could never look upon language as anything but profoundly problematical? It's because the modernist colonials are disinherited in their own speech, in the tongue of the oppressor, that they can never achieve a relation to discourse which is anything but unsettled and richly ambivalent. Half in and half out of the English tongue, able by some feat of dialectic to it from the fascinatingly alien object, the Irish modernists were those who might as well be homeless in all languages as dispossessed in their own. Thus it is that John Synge appeared to pull of the improbable trick of writing in English and Gaelic simultaneously and hence of course, that great tangled polyphony of bastardised idioms which is the writing of a Joyce.

But there are other reasons, too, for the pact between modernism and colonialism. Modernism experiences a notorious difficulty over knowing how to narrate and this is because the world itself no longer appears to be story-shaped. For classical bourgeois society, reality itself displayed the shape of an immanent narrative, which art had simply to represent. For modernism, linear causality, teleology will no longer let you in on the secret of things, will no longer yield the essence of the real. Such a crisis of narrativity is at one with the consciousness of the colonial dispossessed, for whom linear time, with its smoothly unbroken continuities, is always, so to speak, on the side of Caesar. Such triumphalist historicism says little to a people whose history seems merely a function of the narratives of their rulers. Time as shattered, recursive, cyclical, untotalisable, is thus an appropriate medium for the modernist colonial for whom all battles are the same battle, all victors the same victor, all defeats the same defeat. Hence Yeats's spinning gyres, Joyce's Viconian cycles and the listless repetitions of a Samuel Beckett, in whose Godot, as someone remarked, nothing happens-twice.

If modernism shatters what Walter Benjamin termed the "empty homogeneous time" of historicism, it also fragments the human subject into a range of discontinuous idioms and experiences; and this, once more, is an entirely appropriate literary mode for a colonised society which has never been allowed to experience itself as autonomous, self-directing, self-determining. The Western myth of the autonomous humanist subject, strenuous source and agent of its own historical destiny, is likely to have something of a hollow ring in such historical conditions, in which the human subject will always appear less as masterfully self-generative than as empty, powerless, without a name. And if the subject thus lapses into subversive negativity, much the same can be said of its loyal partner in Western epistemology, the object. For classical

realism, the object let's say, history society is at root readable and intelligible; but no such lucid availability is likely to characterise the object when your history isn't your own, when your history appears as an opaque and inscrutable given wholly beyond your control. For both modernist and colonial subject, then, the object appears simply as a blank, bit of materiality, just as the subject appears as a more listless reflex of its circumstances. Meanwhile, altogether elsewhere, a classical imperial narrative of unified subjects, total history and instantly intelligible objects conducts its stately existence, as the metropolitan fullness which drains the colonies dry.

It's surely for this reason that we witness, with modernism, a remarkable resurgence of mythological thought. From Conrad and Eliot to Yeats and Beckett, what returns is a closed, cyclical world, in which the human subject is the mere function of much deeper, determining forces invisible to the naked eye. And this corresponds well enough to the experience of the subject of a higher stage of industrial capitalism, of a considerably more planned, systematised, administered regime, in which the eternal recurrence which counts is the eternal recurrence of the commodity. What we have, then, is a curious convergence of the modern subject and the mythological one, a bizarre conjuncture of the industrial and the pre-industrial, in which the objective social world of modern bourgeois society seems to have taken on all the impenetrable, self-determining character of the world of nature in which the subject is lived by forces it does not understand, just as much as in any so-called primitive mythology. So it is that modernism, from Baudelaire to Freud and to Eliot, revolves on a shocking conjuncture of the archeological and the contemporary, the archaic and the avant-garde-a situation in which, in the very act of making it new, of shaking off the dead hand of history, you find yourself condemned to reexcavating the primeval depths of a much older form of consciousness.

Let me just add two more relations between modernism and the experience of the colonised, that's the centrality of fantasy. If, as in Ireland, your actual social conditions are starved, barren, intolerable -those bleak, withered landscapes of a Beckett - then you'll find yourself forced, compensatorily, into forms of fantasy, of baroque unconscious imaginings, which are the very stuff of an anti-realist aesthetic. The Irish comic imagination from Sterne to Beckett is deeply bathetic, obsessed with playing off some drearily constrained material reality against the unrestrained flights of the imagination. And this incongruous yoking of the real and the richly imagined repeats itself in so-called Third World modernism today, in the phenomenon we know as magic realism.

The final connection I want to touch on concerns the question of representation. Classical realism is secure in its belief that reality is, so to speak, intrinsically representable – that it's indeed part of the definition of the

real, constitutive of its very essence that it can be accurately reflected or imitated. The existence of colonial subjects, however, marks one absolute limit of such spontaneous representability. For the colonial subject is, from the viewpoint of the metropolis, alarmingly opaque, bafflingly elusive, impenetrably other, and so threatens to slip through the net of realist representation altogether. One has only to think of a *Passage to India*, which has at least the liberal honesty to recognise just where, as a text, it has to stop, just what indigenous Indian realities fall outside its mimetic powers. The very fact of the Empire, then, draws a circle around the representational capacities of old-style realism; and this also means, more subtly, that the metropolitan system will no longer even be able accurately to represent itself to itself, to represent its own experience. For that experience is now structurally connected by a myriad invisible threads, to the experience of the colonial other, which provides, indeed, the very material basis of life in the metropolis; and this outer limit on representation thus becomes a kind of inner limit too, as the imperial nation is forced to mirror itself to itself in the structural absence of a key determinant of its existence. The crisis of representation is thus imperial and modernist at a stroke, as we can see in the troubled texts of a Conrad (whose representations always seem just about to be insidiously eroded by some unmasterable otherness).

I've been arguing that the ideology of English Literature suffers a severe rebuff at the hands of modernist cosmopolitanism; but the truth is that England always had another, alternative internationalism to hand, known as Empire. If empire provided a breeding ground for modernism, as in the case of Ireland, it could also act as a bulwark against it. English was a language in which one could be internationally at home, from Kerry to Kuala Lumpur, subsuming all regional particularities at a stroke. What happens then, with the steady loss of empire in the middle decades of the century, is particularly ironic. For if, with modernism, an essential Englishness was threatened by a new form of internationalism, it now appears that a spurious form of internationalism - the empire - is threatened by new kinds of national identity, which detach previous client society from the motherland one by one. English, of course, retains as a language its global scope; but much that is now being written in that language is now quite alien to the sensibility of English Literature. For an F. R. Leavis, the English language was quite inseparable from certain kinds of native English value; in a post-imperial situation, the gap between that language and those indigenous values bulks alarmingly large, (from the metropolis standpoint).

English literature was constructed, I've said, within the classical phase of the capitalist mode of production. Modernism, I've claimed, was coupled with an historic mutation of that classical phase, into its international monopoly form. But a further mutation was to occur still, in the post - 2nd world war

years, and that is multinational capitalism, of which so-called postmodernism is the appropriate cultural expression. And this is the final, latest challenge to that autonomous discipline known as English literature. A challenge, indeed, on two fronts. First, because postmodernism represents among other things the final erosion of any autonomous space of cultural production within the structures of late capitalism as a whole. With postmodernism, cultural production becomes entirely penetrated by the commodity form, harnessed in the form of media advertising, packaging, collective fantasies, to the sway of the commodity. Second, because postmodernist culture foregrounds the audio-visual at the expense of the written, which is then a severe blow to the supposed integrity of English literature.

But there's a deeper development than all that. For as capitalism evolves beyond its great liberal-progressive epoch, its classical phase, it will come to seem as though the literature of modernism colonialism all along acted as the secret truth of the hegemony which produced it, prefiguring the final destiny of metropolitan society itself. I mean, there used to be a time, in the good old days, when metropolitan subjects were full and colonial subjects empty when the former enjoyed a triumphalist history, while the latter were relegated to the margins. This, however, is no longer the case. For on the one hand, with the end of empire, the previously client societies have made their strike for self-affirmation and identity; and on the other hand, in a curious reversal, the metropolitan societies of postmodernism are now crammed with dwindled, empty, decentred subjects, the mere reflex of this or that desire, the hollowed-out subjects of consumerism. The margin has indeed shifted to the centre - a development prefigured by the Dublin of Ulysses, in which this stale, enclosed, sealed static society (Dublin) was becoming increasingly typical of the global village developed capitalism as a whole. A peculiar inversion, indeed – a situation in which, more dramatically than anyone could have ever foreseen – one where, in the phrase of a Hollywood movie, the Empire strikes back.