

TERRY EAGLETON

## *The end of English*

'It is my revolt against the English conventions, literary and otherwise, that is the main source of my talent,' James Joyce once told a friend.<sup>1</sup> In an old familiar paradox of English modernism, it is the colonized and dispossessed who shall inherit the literary earth. Sean Golden, in a brilliantly suggestive essay on this subject, sees the Irish and Americans who seized the commanding heights of 'English' literature earlier in the century as able to carry through this audacious feat of inverted imperialism precisely because they lacked those vested emotional interests in an English literary tradition which hamstrung the natives.<sup>2</sup> James, Conrad, Eliot, Pound, Yeats, Joyce and Beckett could 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. Positioned as they were within essentially peripheral histories, such artists could view native English lineages less as a heritage to be protected than as an object to be problematized. A Joyce or an Eliot could ramble across the whole span of European literature, shameless *bricoleurs* liberated from the Oedipal constraints of a motherland.

When John Synge pulled off the improbable trick of seeming to write in English and Gaelic simultaneously, he was revealing the profoundly dialogical nature of all such modernism, which inflects its own interests in the tongue of another, inside and outside a hegemonic discourse at the same moment, the parasite which – as with the poker-faced conventionalism of Wilde and Shaw – merges into the very image of the host. The émigrés who turned themselves into Little Englanders (James, Conrad, Eliot) did so with all the studied self-consciousness of the *parvenu* anxiously seeking paternal approval, flamboyantly anglicized outsiders who became, self-parodically, more English than the English, hijacking their cultural baggage with all the insouciance of the circus clown who nips off with the suitcase the strong man has been struggling to lift. It was never easy to know whether Oscar Wilde, son (so they said) of the dirtiest man in Dublin, was flattering English high society with his effortless imitations or impudently sending them up.

The pact between modernism and colonialism in early twentieth-century

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