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## Review of Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England.*

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**Jed Esty, A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England.** Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004. 285 pp. ISBN 0691115494 (paper).

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Modernist studies have undergone a bit of a revival over the last few years: the first New Modernisms conference, held at Penn State in 1999, inaugurated a new Modernist Studies Association and quite self-consciously announced an emergent stage in the study of international modernism, seeking perhaps the kind of reenergizing that the New Historicism had brought to Early Modern studies in the 1980s. The question of how modernism is chronologically defined, of course, hovers over this kind of academic undertaking: generally speaking, the tendency of the new modernist studies has been to shift the emphasis of modernism to the early side of Michael North's *annus mirabilis* of 1922. Conrad looms large, as do reconsiderations of the canonical authors writing within a decade of the Versailles Treaty. Jed Esty's *A Shrinking Island* counters this trend by taking up, not so much later modernism as the later, less often read works of canonical modernists, and places them within an intriguing set of new contexts: the end of empire, the rise of anthropology, and the beginnings of British cultural studies. Such wide-ranging concerns mark his book as one of great potential interest for comparatists.

As Esty points out, high modernism and high imperialism are roughly coterminous, and the cessation of empire creates either the possibility or necessity of a national rebirth. More specifically, the end of the British empire allows for a reemphasis on the locality of England, a potential triumph of the local. Thus England becomes, after the passing of High Modernism, a shrinking island, a place and culture readjusting to its new sense of diminished presence in the world. Yet, in Esty's view, a shrinking island is not a sinking island, and the allusion to Hugh Kenner's 1987 work on English modernism constitutes more than a mere pun. England in late modernism is in the process of reinventing itself as a folk culture, of discovering in itself what it had previously found only in its colonies: an essential national identity. The movement, then, is one from modernist internationalism, in which Britishness is not so much a national identity as a lack of one, a cosmopolitanism easily exported to the far corners of the globe, to an Anglocentrism in which Englishness becomes one culture among others, to be valued precisely because of its specificity and peculiarity. Consequently, as England becomes just one culture rather than the possibility of Culture itself, literature becomes just one aspect of culture. Culture, in the meantime, gradually changes its definition from the

possession of an elite to a whole way of life. Esty calls this the anthropological turn, and it marks and enables a change from British universalism to English particularism.

Esty begins the main argument with a glance at Matthew Arnold's "On the Celtic Element in Literature," which Esty reads as an analysis of the hollowing out of English identity as a result of being metropolitan. When a latent English nationalism emerges as the empire declines, however, it is the modernists who take up the call of the local. Specifically, E. M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, and T. S. Eliot develop a concern for cultivating Englishness. Esty sets up their later work by stressing that High Modernist nostalgia for organic culture, in which all three of these canonical figures indulged to a certain extent, saw unified culture as something irretrievably lost to the modern world. D. H. Lawrence, for instance, lamented holistic culture's absence in England, but sought its presence in America. In the nineteen-thirties and after (which Lawrence, of course, did not live to see), the moderns gradually became able to see their own culture in local terms: even if not yet truly whole or organic, glimpses of the possibility of such a state could perhaps begin to be seen. This hope for the local also forms the ground on which Bloomsbury liberals such as Forster and Woolf and Anglican Tories such as Eliot could meet. This is not to say that Esty paints over the political differences of his subjects; rather, he carefully portrays the anthropological turn as something approachable from either the right or the liberal-left (and, with the later coming of cultural studies, from the Marxian left as well). For both conservative and humanist, then, English pastoralism becomes an act of salvage rather than an elegy.

In his second chapter, Esty provides an overview of the interwar pageant-play tradition, a now mostly forgotten cultural movement that sought to revitalize traditional visions of English rural history by literally enacting them. The modern pageant-play began in 1905 through the efforts of Louis Napoleon Parker in Sherbourne. The Edwardian pageant-play was a large-scale, usually outdoor affair, in which a large portion of a community enacted an allegory of rural English history, culminating in a swift motion from the English pastoral to imperial triumphalism. When revived in the nineteen-thirties, however, at least partially as a response to the spectacle of the Nazi rallies, the note of imperial celebration is muted; a renewed sense of the glories of English provincialism replaces it. More an antidote to history than an exploration of it, the pageant-play uses chronology in an attempt to establish the unchanging essence of English rural culture. It becomes, as Esty calls it, "an insular rite," and Eliot, Forster, and Woolf all participate in it. Before exploring their work, however, Esty turns to John Cowper Powys's *A Glastonbury Romance* (1932). Esty characterizes this immense novel as "one of the most underrated major books of the era" (62) and carefully traces its local obsessions and use of a pageant-play as the central and unifying plot

device. He turns then to Eliot's *The Rock*, only the choral parts of which Eliot chose to place in his *Collected Poems*. *The Rock* is a pageant-play, actually performed in 1934, and constitutes Eliot's bid for reaching the English populace by preaching the virtues of Anglo-Christianity in the face of imperial decline. Esty also places the Oxford Christians, C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, and the now less popular Charles Williams, as a part of this neotraditionalist movement. Esty then explores Forster's "Abinger Pageant," performed the same summer as *The Rock*, and his later *England's Pleasant Land*. These pageant-plays were written after Forster turned his back on the novel: Esty sees Forster's novels as having explored the tension between pastoral England and metropolitan modernity, while the pageant-plays seek to abnegate that dichotomy and revel in English nativism. The chapter ends with a reading of Woolf's final novel, *Between the Acts* (1941), which incorporates a pageant-play as its primary structure. Woolf's relationship to the pageant and its implied collectivity is ambiguous in this reading: the performance of the pageant in the novel is uncertain and plagued with difficulties, but it remains an attempt to connect artist and community in a shared experience (as opposed to the isolated virtuoso indulging in the private vision of Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*). From the audience's side, the novel demonstrates a collective that collectively refuses a group identity, and that tacitly rejected the specter of European fascism.

Esty dedicates the third chapter more or less exclusively to Eliot. Esty reads Eliot's canonical poetry of the nineteen-twenties as the frustration of a classicist who finds his ideals unattainable in the fragmented modern world. By the nineteen-thirties, however, English organic culture becomes foreseeable, resulting in a drastically different poetic tone. Esty delves deeply into Eliot's social and aesthetic commentary from the period, producing for us an Eliot who, if not a committed critic of empire, at least sees the waning of Britain as a world power as an opportunity to rediscover a national culture. Again, the Oxford Christians, Tolkien especially, are used as a comparison, and Esty does an excellent job of demonstrating the aptness of the connection, both in their shared attitude toward culture and religion, and in their attempts to reach out of the aesthetic elitism of High Modernism and affect popular English culture. The chapter concludes with a close reading of each of the *Four Quartets*, and it is here that the book lets us down a bit, if only compared to the high standard it has already set for itself. The readings, after all the preparation made for them, seem a bit rushed. They are excellent as far as they go, but the true insights have already been found in the prose: *Four Quartets* makes sense in this context, but the *Four Quartets* we are offered is pretty much the same poem we already knew.

The final chapter contains Esty's boldest and most original connections. First, Esty turns from canonical modernist literature to economics. (Ezra Pound, of course, made a similar move in the thirties, and it did not end well

for him.) John Maynard Keynes's *General Theory* of 1936, Esty contends, is the product of seeing "society as a layered and knowable totality" (174), i.e., seeing it through the lens of a cultural anthropology developed for observing the colonized world. Esty carefully traces changes in Keynes's prose style and approach to economics from his Bloomsbury days to the *General Theory*, drawing a parallel between Keynes's immensely influential theories and the literary reaction to the fall of high aesthetic modernism outlined in the first three chapters. Esty then turns to the birth of British cultural studies as domestic anthropology. As in his work with Woolf and Eliot, Esty does not try to cover up the profound political differences between the work of Raymond Williams and E. P. Thompson (as well as F. R. Leavis, here considered for his similarity to the cultural studies pioneers) as compared to the literary modernists; rather, Esty emphasizes the continuity of cultural background, their shared attempt to locate an Englishness as an identifiable culture during the "thirty-year interregnum between Empire and welfare state" (187). The search for English particularism forms a large part of cultural studies in Esty's view, and Williams and Thompson strive to eschew both imperialism and modernism in their construction of a post-war English anthropological nativism.

This nativism, however, remains a construction, a myth of English cohesiveness that is quickly counterbalanced by some nicely achieved readings of nineteen-fifties' novels of emigration. Specifically, Esty looks carefully at Samuel Selvon's *Lonely Londoners* (1956), George Lamming's *The Emigrants* (1954), and Doris Lessing's *In Pursuit of the English* (1960), finding in them evidence of a creative ethnographic self-fashioning among people dealing with both England's newfound ethnocentrism and its tendency to cling to the shreds of empire. Finally, Esty gives an excellent broadly based tour of canonical British literature of imperial decline, quickly but insightfully covering Graham Greene, W. H. Auden, George Orwell, and Evelyn Waugh. Rejecting the anthropological model of culture, these writers were left only with the metaphorical relationship between the marginalization of Britain on the world stage and the marginalization of literature in the cultural scene.

Overall, Esty's book is a solid step forward in new modernist studies. It manages to read the British empire as a problematic for the British without downplaying its cost to the colonized. In this, it represents a continued negotiation with the concept of the postcolonial and a reaction against the occasionally imprecise appropriations and expansions the idea has suffered in recent years. And it brings some focus back to a widely neglected area of modernist writing, prompting us to make further connections in postwar culture between apparent political opposites: that Eliot's *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* shares a common (English) ground with Williams's *Culture and Society*, for instance, represents an intriguing and

novel genealogy. This is a compelling book in both its emphasis and insights, and it offers a fascinating reappraisal of a neglected stage of modernism.