

LITERATURES OF THE WORLD IN ENGLISH

Australia Brian Elliott

Canada Peter Stevens

England William Walsh

India B. Rajan

Ireland A. Norman Jeffares

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Nigeria D.S. Izevbaye

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United States Bruce King

West Indies Kenneth Ramchand

Edited by Bruce King

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PREFACE

Our idea of English literature has changed radically in recent years. A surprising quantity of good writing has come from the newly independent English-speaking countries. As we have become conscious that there are emerging literary traditions with characteristics of their own in the new nations, we have also become aware that the literatures and cultures of the older nations are distinctive and need to be freshly examined for their particular qualities. The new literatures of Africa and the West Indies have helped place in perspective Australian, Irish and Canadian authors as belonging to their own national traditions, in contrast to American or British ones.

With this in mind, it seemed useful to bring together a collection of introductory essays on the more important English literatures. Most of the contributors have had the experience of living and teaching in various English-speaking nations. They have been asked to write on whatever seems helpful towards aiding the reader's response to a particular national literature. The approach adopted by the contributors varies; there are critical discussions of individual works, historical surveys tracing the development of a literary tradition, and studies which show the influence of the cultural situation on a writer. Some of the contributors feel that cultural nationalism is an important issue of our age; other contributors are sceptical of its importance. The essays, while introductory, might be said to examine, if not always define, the particular characteristics of a specific literature. I have written my introduction largely without reference to the essays which follow, in the hope that the reader may find another perspective more useful than consistency of opinion. Since my introduction is personal, and not a summary of what will be said by others, it only touches on writers with whose work I am familiar. I am conscious of having often rushed in with generalizations about the characteristics of a national literature where others have, with more wisdom, preferred not to tread.

While the following essays can be used by students needing a short introduction to a particular national literature, the book

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should be read as a whole. It is interesting to see the similarities and differences between the various national traditions of English literature. Often the differences make us aware of the cultural, political and social characteristics of a nation. Perhaps the main interest of this collection is in the range of literatures presented and the many books and authors one would like to read.

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INTRODUCTION

Bruce King

Until recently, English literature meant the literature of the British Isles. The major writers who lived outside England either were not studied or could apparently be assimilated within the British tradition. The United States was an exception in having a long literary history of its own, and writers of world class; however, American literature was usually not studied outside North America, there was no consensus as to who were the important authors, and many of the better American writers preferred to live in England or Europe. Sometime during the 1950s our perspective on English literature changed. It was now recognized that the United States had a literary tradition of its own; Australian writing gained general attention; next, the West Indies and the newly independent nations of Africa, led by Nigeria, seemed to be areas where the most interesting contemporary literature was being written. Almost contemporaneous with the emergence of new national literatures, universities began to offer courses in Commonwealth, African, Irish and Canadian writing. As a result, our idea of English literature has changed and is likely to remain changed. The best books of the year are as likely to be written by Ghanaians, West Indians or Australians as by Americans or Englishmen, and their subject matter, themes and style will often include characteristics that are puzzling to foreigners. Since such characteristics may add to, or detract from, the qualities of a book, they are likely to become an increasingly important concern to readers, students and critics. A reader is now likely to be confronted with English social awareness, American individualism, Nigerian tribalism, Indian mysticism, and the West Indian search for identity. We may need to adjust to English irony, American exaggeration, or that peculiar inwardness common to Canadian writing. Since authors, consciously or not, tend to work within their national literary traditions, it seems likely, at least for the immediate future, that an awareness of the

characteristics of other English literatures may become part of our reading habits.

Colonialism is as responsible in North America and Australia as in Africa and Asia for the development of national English literatures around the world. Colonialism, whether as indirect rule or the exploration and settlement of continents, brought with it the English language, English literary forms, and English cultural assumptions. Colonization also brought the possibility of a new literature emerging once English becomes a vehicle for the expression of local culture. A new English literature may express a culture which has grown up with the settler communities, it may be a continuation of indigenous cultural traditions, or it may be some mixture of the effects of colonization, including the bringing together of various races into one nation. While the use of English as a means of literary expression in other nations might be said to have begun among the settlers in seventeenth-century Ireland and America, it has only been since the Second World War that the varieties of English literature have had international recognition. The recent importance of various national English literatures is a reflection of such cultural and political developments as: the dissolution of the British Empire, the emergence of new nations, the weakening of Commonwealth ties, the increased awareness of independence in former colonies, the importance of the United States, and a general, if vaguely defined, feeling that the English cultural tradition is no longer relevant outside the British Isles or that it supports the dominance of a British-influenced élite. The break-up of our older concept of English literature, into national literatures, thus reflects the growing cultural fragmentation of the English-speaking world. We no longer share the same models of language, manners, morals or beliefs. It is possible to regret the passing of a single literary culture which provided a frame of moral and social reference for the educated of a large section of the world, while also recognizing that an awareness of the distinctive qualities of various national literary traditions has become a contemporary necessity.

It should be remembered that the study of 'English' literature is itself fairly new, and largely a product of this century. 'English studies' came about when the classical languages, Greek and Latin, were no longer felt to be necessary for the education of a gentleman. With the European classical tradition no longer providing

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our central source of moral education and superior entertainment, Shakespeare, Donne, Pope and Keats replaced Homer, Virgil and Cicero as required reading. There was a diminution of historical vision, which was made up for by a greater immediacy and sense of familiarity in the authors who were studied. That there was something lost in the process – a sense of the past, the feeling of an education shared by most of Europe – is, I think, reflected in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which, among its themes, sees the descent into the emotional limbo of the modern world as a fragmentation and break-up of older, more valid cultures, in which our own feelings and beliefs were rooted. The modern literature of the early part of this century can be seen as perhaps the last expression of the classical tradition which formed our cultural inheritance of the past. The cosmopolitanism of Eliot, Pound and Joyce was part of an international modern style, but the writers held a fixed, timeless, permanent view of man in which the past defined the present.

It is somewhat ironic that the very critical movement in England which did most to defend such writers as Eliot and Pound was also the first to attempt seriously to define the qualities of British literature. English academic criticism, as it had to come to grips with and explain to students the distinctive qualities of their national literature, defined what we have come to think of as English literature: a stylistic balance between the formal and colloquial, a preference for quiet irony, understatement, realistic subject matter, and a concern with man in relation to society. To this list one might add moral seriousness, a distrust of ideas and ideologies, and distrust of cosmopolitan and fashionable values. In the British tradition, roots, fixed values, a sense of place are seen as desirable and to be preserved. British literature is filled with poems and novels celebrating a country home or a family estate as a source of the good life in contrast to the various corruptions offered by the city. Often, as in *Mansfield Park* and *Howards End*, British novels treat the question of who will inherit the estate as representative of who will inherit the best of the nation's culture.

Just as the assumptions and themes of English literature reflect British culture, so the qualities of the writing are an expression of the language itself. The English language, as Professor Walsh shows, can create in its texture, movement and imagery a feeling of actual experience and a sense of life. It is this rather than

critical theories or formal literary conventions that is the shared basis of English writing and criticism. English is capable of great variety of movement and texture within a paragraph, sentence, or phrase; sound often appears to imitate meaning. We might contrast this with a language such as French, in which local effects are harder to achieve, and which lends itself to more sustained rhetorical patterns.

As I understand it, our present view of the major English writers grew out of T. S. Eliot's literary criticism and was given its current shape by F. R. Leavis and the critics who wrote for *Scrutiny*. In setting the now accepted canon of English literature in order, Leavis was making both literary and cultural choices. While these choices now seem correct to us, it would be possible to select other characteristics as representative of the great tradition of English literature. A preference for realism instead of fantasy, moral earnestness in place of gaiety of spirit, or the wish for an harmonious society rather than individuals pursuing their own interests, involved discriminations between various attitudes towards life and art which have often competed in England. When Leavis criticized Eliot's magazine, the *Criterion*, as another international cultural review, he was in a sense rejecting the older view of English literature as part of a European heritage, and demanding for it an independent tradition of its own in which national, rather than classical or international values would have the cultural ascendancy. In saying this, I am not attacking Leavis or the writers connected with *Scrutiny*; they created the standards of English literary criticism during a time when it was necessary to make choices. However, one result of treating English as a national literature separate from European or classical literature (a distinction still not made so sharply in European countries) was to bring into currency values which might not be appropriate to English literature outside the British Isles. Leavis, I imagine, was aware of this, since he and such *Scrutiny* critics as Marius Bewley were among the first in England to treat American literature as a distinct and separate tradition having qualities of its own. And it was only after the English tradition had been defined that it was possible for American critics to see clearly, by contrast, the characteristics of their own national literature. An example of this is Richard Chase's *The American Novel and Its Tradition*. A similar process of defining one's national literature by contrast to that of England or the

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United States has become common in other English-speaking countries.

It can be said that until recently British English had a position similar to that of Latin during the Roman Empire, and that the growth of national literatures written in English somewhat parallels the development of vernacular writing during the late Middle Ages. A central tradition has lost its unifying force and various regional developments seem likely to gain equal status, while still retaining their roots in the original culture. As with many analogies, this one is perhaps more useful as a starting place for further thought than as an exact parallel. Logically, the analogy would demand that each national English become a separate and distinct language, such as French, Spanish and Italian. While this is unlikely to happen, we are aware that English is used differently throughout the world. Not only do words carry different implications and meanings in, say, London, New York and Lagos, but the structure and rhythm of sentences are likely to be different. Prose cadences in the writing of Mark Twain or Norman Mailer are significantly unlike those we find in the novels of Jane Austen or E. M. Forster; in poetry we are often aware that British and American verse seems based upon different feelings for the movement of speech. While poets in both countries may revert to the iambic norm and common syntactic patterns when consciously aiming at a formal style, their natural cadences are usually dissimilar.

If such a difference has developed between American and British style, greater differences can be found in Africa, India and the West Indies, where other languages influence the use of English. In reading African English poetry, for instance, one is often conscious of the influence of tribal languages upon stress and rhythmic patterns, the influence of traditional oral literature on poetic form, organization, and the way meaning is communicated. In the West Indies there is the importance of Creolization, and the sophisticated playing-off of various registers of English against each other; in a novel we might notice an interplay of standard British English, educated West Indian English, and various popular West Indian forms of speech. A similar significant counterpoint of registers of English can be found in Nigerian novels. The presence of tribal proverbs, pidgins, regionalism, and other forms of non-standard English in literature may be an example of a writer's naïve nationalism or his wish to be exotic; but it can also be essential to

the imaginative coherence with which society and its values are depicted in serious writing. Often deviations from standard usage carry cultural assumptions. The following passage from Achebe's *A Man of the People* shows the variations an author can perform on our associations of speech with levels of sophistication:¹

'Look, Agnes, why don't you use my wife's bedroom instead of wasting money,' said Chief Nanga getting back to his seat. 'She travelled home today.' His phonetics had already moved up two rungs to get closer to hers. It would have been pathetic if you didn't know that he was having fun.

If various English literatures reflect national characteristics of speech, they often show unique thematic and formal qualities. The English novel tends towards realistic descriptions of society, an awareness of the different values held by various classes, and is concerned with the morality of human relations. Even when a story is told through the eyes of a central character, the emphasis is on the relationship between the self and society. In the novels of Fielding, Jane Austen, Dickens, George Eliot or John Wain, we see man acting out his destiny in society and we are often aware that conflicting moral attitudes and beliefs are expressed by contrasts of manners and behaviour. In the American novel, the focus is more on character than society and more on the character's consciousness and inner world. Huckleberry Finn, Isabel Archer and Herzog attempt to define their reality through themselves; society, as far as it is important, is a stage upon which the moral sensibility can act. I often have the impression when reading American novels that I am inside the main character and that the story is about that person's experience in a hostile world. The major American writers seem concerned with experience for its own sake, or as part of a pilgrim's progress towards an unobtainable new Jerusalem where the soul could lay down its burden. Many American authors have seen opportunity for personal spiritual development in the newness of their country and in the vast open spaces of the West; other writers have treated with irony such themes as the American as an innocent new Adam in an unfallen Eden, or the idea that the continent made possible the quest for an individual's personal destiny without the inhibitions imposed by European civilization. Melville, Henry James and Nathaniel West are among those who treat the American dream with shades of irony. In

American writing, we are often aware of an attack on literary form and formal style, which are regarded as limiting, Europeanized and somehow against the articulation of the individual identity. There is a tendency towards an elaborate style in which the conscious self can realize itself, a tendency towards concrete, particularized descriptions, and a tendency towards highly charged symbolism.

In the process of formulating a national tradition, the literary critics of most English-speaking countries have adopted the concepts which influenced British criticism, especially the criticism of Leavis and *Scrutiny*. We think of a national literature written in English as having distinguishing characteristics in the use of language, as revealing distinct cultural preferences, and as representative of, or having its roots in, influential sections of the community. A national literature also requires a canon of major or significant authors forming a main tradition around which one can place minor or supposedly less relevant writing. In recent decades American critics have no longer inflated every literary reputation, as they so often did in the past; there is a recognition that the country has produced six or seven major writers, and that other authors will need to be judged within this perspective. There is a growing awareness that there are common themes and certain qualities of style and literary form which define at least part of the American tradition. It is realized that the literary tradition has reflected such major cultural influences as Puritanism and the later loss of faith. It is accepted that Rousseau and European Romanticism have been as lasting an influence on the literary imagination as the growth of the country through settling the virgin lands of the West.

If we look at Australian literary criticism, we notice similar tendencies. Where it was once said that Australian literature reflected national vitality, the exploration and conquest of virgin lands, or described the country's non-European landscape, more recent criticism has tried to establish a canon of important authors of enduring literary value and has tried to analyse what the major authors have done with the nationalistic themes of the past. Writers are often aware of the themes of their national literature and use them consciously in their novels. Many contemporary Australian writers, such as Patrick White, contrast the conformity and materialism which prevails in the urban suburbs with the

spiritual challenge offered by the open spaces of the interior of the country. The deserts thus become a metaphor of the soul. Perhaps the best example of a modern writer treating commonplace themes paradoxically is A. D. Hope's 'Australia':²

They call her a young country, but they lie:
She is the last of lands, the emptiest,
A woman beyond her change of life, a breast
Still tender but within the womb is dry.

Without songs, architecture, history:

.

Yet there are some like me turn gladly home
From the lush jungle of modern thought, to find
The Arabian desert of the human mind,
Hoping, if still from the deserts the prophets come

Such savage and scarlet as no green hills dare
Springs in that waste, some spirit which escapes
The learned doubt, the chatter of cultured apes
Which is called civilization over there.

I realize that it is controversial to suggest that the acceptance of a critical tradition distinguishing between major and minor writers is a sign that a country has cultural assurance. It could be said that newly independent countries do not have enough shared history or enough writers worthy of foreign attention to claim a tradition. I do not think this is true. English-speaking Canada has had a history of solid, good writers; and yet an outsider cannot help but notice how uncertain Canadians are as to what constitutes their literary tradition, who their best writers are, and, indeed, which of the foreigners who have lived in Canada and which of the Canadians who live abroad are part of their national literature. I think this confusion is itself part of the larger question: what is the Canadian identity? If you assume, rightly or wrongly, that literature is a reflection of society, or of a significant class, or of shared national values, then your important writers will be seen in terms of cultural history. English-speaking Canada lacks confidence in these matters, and it is significant that critics have attempted to define the

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national literary tradition through such themes as solitude and survival. A recent example is Margaret Atwood's *Survival: a thematic guide to Canadian literature* (which might usefully be read in connection with her novel *Surfacing*). French-speaking Canada, perhaps because it feels itself a citadel surrounded by enemies, seems to have a clearer sense both of its cultural identity and of its literary tradition. I think English Canada has in some ways been unlucky in not having an author of international reputation. Moreover, some of the best known Canadian writers seem Canadian only by chance: Malcolm Lowry, for example, was an Englishman who spent his last years in Vancouver, while Brian Moore, from Northern Ireland, took out Canadian citizenship before moving to New York. Mordecai Richler lived in England for so long that many Canadians stopped thinking of him as part of their culture, although his novels, along with Moore's *The Luck of Ginger Coffey*, give the fullest representation of what it means to be part of the various immigrant and ethnic groups which make up large sections of Canadian society.

Most critics agree that solitude is a basic theme and mood of Canadian literature. This is sometimes accounted for by the vast unpopulated lands to the north and west; it has been said that Canadian novelists fill their work with descriptions and detail to counterbalance their anxiety towards empty spaces. It is sometimes said that Calvinism in English-speaking Canada and a Jansenite Catholicism in Quebec explain the feeling of isolation and joylessness. More recently, critics have tried to explain the greyness of Canadian literature as the result of the colonial experience and the growing fear of American cultural and economic domination. In a cold, harsh, insecure country the literary imagination tends towards portraying failure. Another explanation of this greyness might be the fragmentation of the national community into different regional, cultural and ethnic groups. It is difficult to read Canadian novels without being aware that they often treat of local experiences: the Maritimes, small town Ontario, the Jewish community in Montreal, the older Presbyterian élite of Toronto, the Irish Catholics. Each novel or story seems to depict a small, self-enclosed world, untouched by the outside, or only in contact with other communities through being menaced by them.

Canadians often claim that unlike the Americans they have not historically pursued a national policy of cultural assimilation and