

# Englands of the Mind<sup>1</sup> and John Wain's Restrained Romanticism

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## **Abstract**

This paper aims, first, to crystallize the difference between English and American poetry in the post-World War II period, and, second, to investigate John Wain's formal roots in the English tradition, and especially in Wordsworthian Romantic realism.

The paper shows that in the modern period, though many writers were interested in thinking of literature in international terms, in the post-World War II period, this international perspective dissolved—at least in England. Post-War English poetry has been accused of Little Englandism, provincialism, regionalism, snobbery, and insularity. A fairly common view of the post-war period states that whereas American poets have built on the achievements of the modernists and moved into a postmodern period, the English have retreated into a pre-modernist position. Thus, American poetry, which continues to experiment, and which maintains an international perspective, has become vastly superior to English poetry. While American poetry praises the present and emphasizes originality, British poetry tends to be layered with the past and tradition. These fundamental differences between the two “poetries” have ultimately resulted in the neglect of the American readers to British poetry.

The paper then introduces John Wain (1925–1994) as one of the young English poets, whose poetry has been far too ignored over the decades in America to not only prove that he, like many poets of his generation, suffered from a “bad press” and academic snobbery which caused the gap between the “the two poetries” to widen and led to the American neglect of post-war British poetry but also to demonstrate that he was keen on restoring a temporarily lost native English tradition of poetry. It shows that Wain's poetic voice has its formal roots in the English tradition, and his restrained romanticism derives mainly from William Wordsworth's romantic realism in which the “materials” of poetry “are to be found in every subject which can interest the human mind” and in which the poet is regarded as “a man speaking to men” using and adapting their “ordinary language” to the “purposes of poetic pleasure”—the sort of pleasure which any poet may rationally endeavor to impart.

The paper indicates that Wain, like Wordsworth, believes that the language of poetry should be used to describe man's most delicate feelings without any irrational expression or wild vagueness. For both, the act of writing is not a deadening mechanical operation which copies nature in a literal way, but in a kind of an imaginative realism. Wain's consistent belief shows that any good poet writes the kind of poetry which indicates an obvious continuity with the “classical” tradition of English poetry without neglecting the true voice of his personality. A good imaginative work for Wain, though, should not be confined by the prison-house of personality, but should mix precision with feeling, and objectivity with subjectivity to convey a significant message to the people and catch their moods and thoughts.

The paper shows that the working out of this “romantic impulse” led Wain to move

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<sup>1</sup> The title is borrowed from Seamus Heaney's 1976 essay, “Englands of the Mind.”

away from the anti-Romanticism and anti-modernism of the Movement towards a more balanced way of writing which incorporates aspects of Romanticism into a tradition of realism. He writes with the aim not only of showing how the poet should write but of humanizing the society he happens to live in. The poet's ultimate aim is to tell his readers the truth about the dreams and aspirations of humanity rather than its objective circumstances. Thus, for Wain, the austerity of the modern poet is combined with the freedom and spontaneity of Wordsworth's poet to produce an art which moves humanity forward towards reality and truth.

**Key Words:** John Wain, William Wordsworth, Post-World War II period, Romanticism, Realism, English tradition