Review Essay

Milk and Honey, Hope and Glory: Anti-Modernism, Nostalgia, and Englishness in Twentieth-Century Britain

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Four new biographical portraits—one of a man, one of a family, one of an age, and one of a nation—provide the opportunity to consider the twentieth century from perspectives antithetical and even hostile to the monolith of Modernism. The devastations of the Great War surely gave license in part to the philosophical underpinnings of the Modernist movement. However, nostalgia for the world lost in the trenches between 1914 and 1918 was no less prominent, a yearning that sent many writers scurrying away from literary experimentation. While such an impulse may be
conservative, it is not necessarily retrograde. As these four new books reveal, nostalgia crosses political and social boundaries, characterizing two poets laureate and two scions of major literary families. This suspicion of the Modern can be found not only in the writings of a beloved icon of Englishness but even in the poetry of a communist Anglo-Irishman; not only in a family of middle-class Tory Wits but also that of uninhibited and free-thinking intellectual aristocrats.

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C. Day-Lewis is, on the surface, a surprising figure to encounter in a study of this sort. He has unfortunately been best known for being a communist during the 1930s, or for his association with the politically active group of poets known jocularly as “MacSpaunday” (MacNeice, Spender, Auden, and Day-Lewis), or for fathering the actor Daniel Day-Lewis. Unlike his fellow poets of the 1930s, Day-Lewis has not, until now, been the subject of a full-length scholarly biography, and thus Peter Stanford’s new life of him is a welcome addition. Born in Ireland in 1904 into a middle-class Anglo-Irish family, C. Day-Lewis (he did not care for his Christian name, Cecil, and always used his initial in his publications) moved with his family permanently to England before his second birthday. Educated at Sherborne and Wadham College, Oxford, Day-Lewis always intended to make a career out of poetry. Success came quickly, and in addition to more than twenty poetry collections he published novels, classical translations, and an autobiography, and he wrote crime fiction (under the pen-name of Nicholas Blake).

Yet for all Day-Lewis’ political activism in the 1930s and his lifelong commitment to leftist causes, his poetry is overwhelmingly nostalgic for an imagined golden age. At the height of his communist phase, Day-Lewis wrote *Noah and the Waters* (1936), a morality play in verse that overtly politicized the Old Testament story and that served as a response to T. S. Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral*, staged the previous year. Having already rejected Christianity, Day-Lewis replaced Eliot’s Christian morality with Marxist tenets, yet the play was attacked by leftist reviewers for its nostalgic

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1) By “Tory Wit” I do not intend to suggest a political alignment with the Conservative Party but instead one whose social and literary sensibilities are affiliated with a tradition that hearkens back to Jonathan Swift and the Augustan satirists.