

# Forces in Modern British Literature

1885—1946

WILLIAM YORK TINDALL



© 1947

ALFRED A. KNOPF NEW YORK

Forces in  
Modern British  
Literature

1885—1946

WILLIAM YORK TINDALL



© 1947

ALFRED A. KNOPF NEW YORK

9  
492

FORCES IN  
MODERN BRITISH  
LITERATURE  
1885-1946  
WILLIAM TORK TINDALL

---

THIS IS A BORZOI BOOK,  
PUBLISHED BY ALFRED A. KNOPF, INC.

---

*Copyright 1947 by William Tork Tindall. All rights reserved.  
No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without  
permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer  
who may quote brief passages in a review to be printed in a  
magazine or newspaper. Manufactured in the United States of  
America. Published simultaneously in Canada by The Ryerson  
Press.*

Published May 15, 1947  
Second printing, September 1947

To

ERNEST HUNTER WRIGHT

## PREFACE

CONTEMPORARY literature, says T. S. Eliot, "tends to be degrading." However this may be, contemporary British literature is important, better at its best than Victorian literature, which tends so little to be degrading. No Victorian novelist is as good as Joyce, and no Victorian poet as good as Yeats.

This book, an exploration of contemporary British literature, is intended for the reader who knows something about it and wants to know more. Selection was necessary, but I have included many minor writers who are interesting for one reason or another. The arrangement is planned to show the character of contemporary literature as a whole and to emphasize books rather than authors. The year 1885 seemed a good beginning because at that time naturalism and symbolism began to shape British literature; around that time Yeats, Shaw, and Moore commenced their work, and Hopkins was in full career; and shortly before that time Joyce and Virginia Woolf were born. Since almost everything in the literature of the 1940's is implicit in the literature of the 1880's, I have treated the intervening period as a unit. Developments within its complexity determine my chapters. Their patterns are various, at their simplest chronological, suggesting causes and effects; but such patterns are conveniences. My concern has been with meanings and values.

The labyrinth of contemporary British literature is part of a greater design that involves the literatures of America and the Continent. It is foolish to isolate part of this whole, yet impossible in a book of this size to do justice to the whole. By way of compromise I have tried, while considering the part, to preserve a sense of the whole by



## Preface

pointing to connections between British and other literatures, especially French, and between British literature and foreign ideas. Hence the brief accounts of Baudelaire, Zola, Henry James, Bergson, Freud, Kafka, the surrealists, and many others. The footnotes, chiefly bibliographical, will guide those who care to follow additional clues.

Although literature since 1885 constitutes a whole, there is little reason but convenience for separating it from earlier literature. The literature of our time belongs to the great romantic movement with which we associate Wordsworth and Rousseau. Labels like "romantic," at once tiresome and useful, help us to understand the character of a period and of its individual works. But when one says "romantic," one must define, for nothing is more confusing than romanticism and nothing more complex. Because of this complexity the many definers of romanticism, missing the whole, identify one or more of its parts. Like my predecessors, I shall content myself with isolating what I consider some of the principal qualities of romanticism: the transcendental, the exploratory, and the bourgeois.

Since the Renaissance, humanism and science have conspired to make received religion an unsatisfactory vehicle for man's constant aspiration. To satisfy that aspiration some tried to make religion suitable again. Wesleyanism, the Oxford Movement, and synthetic Orientalism are typical results. Others tried to find religious satisfaction in secular objects—in flowers, mountains, ruins, savages, heroes, and the past. Shelley, Thoreau, Carlyle, Rimbaud, Dostoyevsky, Shaw, and D. H. Lawrence come easily to mind. For the eighteenth-century conviction that churches were churches and flowers flowers, these transcendentalists substituted wonder.

Classicism is making the most of limitations. The eighteenth century, having fixed the limits of reality, achieved perfection within them. In poetry the couplet was the

## Preface

type and symbol of limitation and perfection. Jane Austen, perfect in her province, chose to ignore what lay beyond it. But some of her contemporaries, impatient with limits, began to explore regions above, behind, and below her reality. For later artists reality included all nature from the material to the immaterial, all kinds and classes of men, all levels of consciousness. With the aid of science, symbol, and myth these explorers continually penetrated new areas of experience and, at whatever cost to perfection, enriched the arts.

Such enrichment coincided with the emergence of the present ruling class. Limitation was aristocratic. As capital succeeded to land, the revolt against limits became bourgeois. Rapid technical change, so characteristic of bourgeois industry, became characteristic of bourgeois art. Romanticism, becoming an expression of the middle class, became the triumph of middle-class taste. That many romantic artists have been enemies of the middle class is unimportant; for, since a ruling class determines its enemies, our artists and their arts are unmistakably bourgeois. Whether or not we like romanticism and the middle class, we too are middle-class romantics. Contemporary literature excites us not only because it is important, wonderful, expansive, and degrading perhaps, but because it is our expression.

Parts of this book that appeared in *Accent* and the *American Scholar* are reprinted by kind permission of the editors. The librarians of the Columbia University Library were unfailingly helpful. To these, particularly Jean Macalister, Charles Claar, and Jane Davies, I give my warmest thanks. I am no less grateful to James Gilvarry, who lent me many books from his excellent library and shared with me his knowledge of the Irish and English literature in which he is curiously strong. For their learned contribu-

## *Preface*

tions I thank Edward LeComte, Jean Spaulding, and Ruth Temple. My students, who teach me more than I teach them, have been generous with their aid, especially Bosley Brotman, Edward Easton, Elizabeth Isaacs, Allen Mandelbaum, Irving Massey, Thomas Merton, Rosemary Neiswender, Julia Peebles, Morton Seiden, Grover Smith, Lavita Weissman, A. M. Williams, Arthur Zeiger, and all those who, sitting around tables, explicated texts. For reading what I wrote and for offering suggestions (which, I am glad to say, I took) I owe a great debt to William Bridgwater, Milton Rugoff, Herbert Weinstock, and Cecilia, my wife.

*Columbia University*  
*October 15, 1946*

W. Y. T.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am indebted to Dodd, Mead & Company for permission to quote from *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles* by Bernard Shaw, copyright, 1936, by Bernard Shaw; to Harcourt, Brace and Company, Inc., for permission to quote from *Mrs. Dallo-way*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Common Reader* by Virginia Woolf; to Henry Holt and Company, Inc., for a passage reprinted from "The Listeners" included in *Collected Poems* by Walter de la Mare, copyright, 1920, by Henry Holt and Company; to Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., for permission to quote from *Look at All Those Roses* by Elizabeth Bowen, from *The Plumed Serpent* by D. H. Lawrence, and from *Collected Poems* by Henry Treece; to Brandt & Brandt for permission to quote from Max Beerbohm's *Seven Men*, published by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., copyright, 1920, by Max Beerbohm; to The Macmillan Company for permission to quote from *The Dynasts* by Thomas Hardy and from *Autobiography, Essays*, and *Collected Poems* by W. B. Yeats; to New Directions for permission to quote from *The World I Breathe* by Dylan Thomas; to Charles Scribner's Sons for permission to quote from *Plays* by August Strindberg; to The Viking Press for permission to quote from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce; to the family of Gerard Manley Hopkins and to the Oxford University Press for permission to quote from *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*.

I am indebted to Dylan Thomas for permission to quote from a letter printed in *New Verse*.

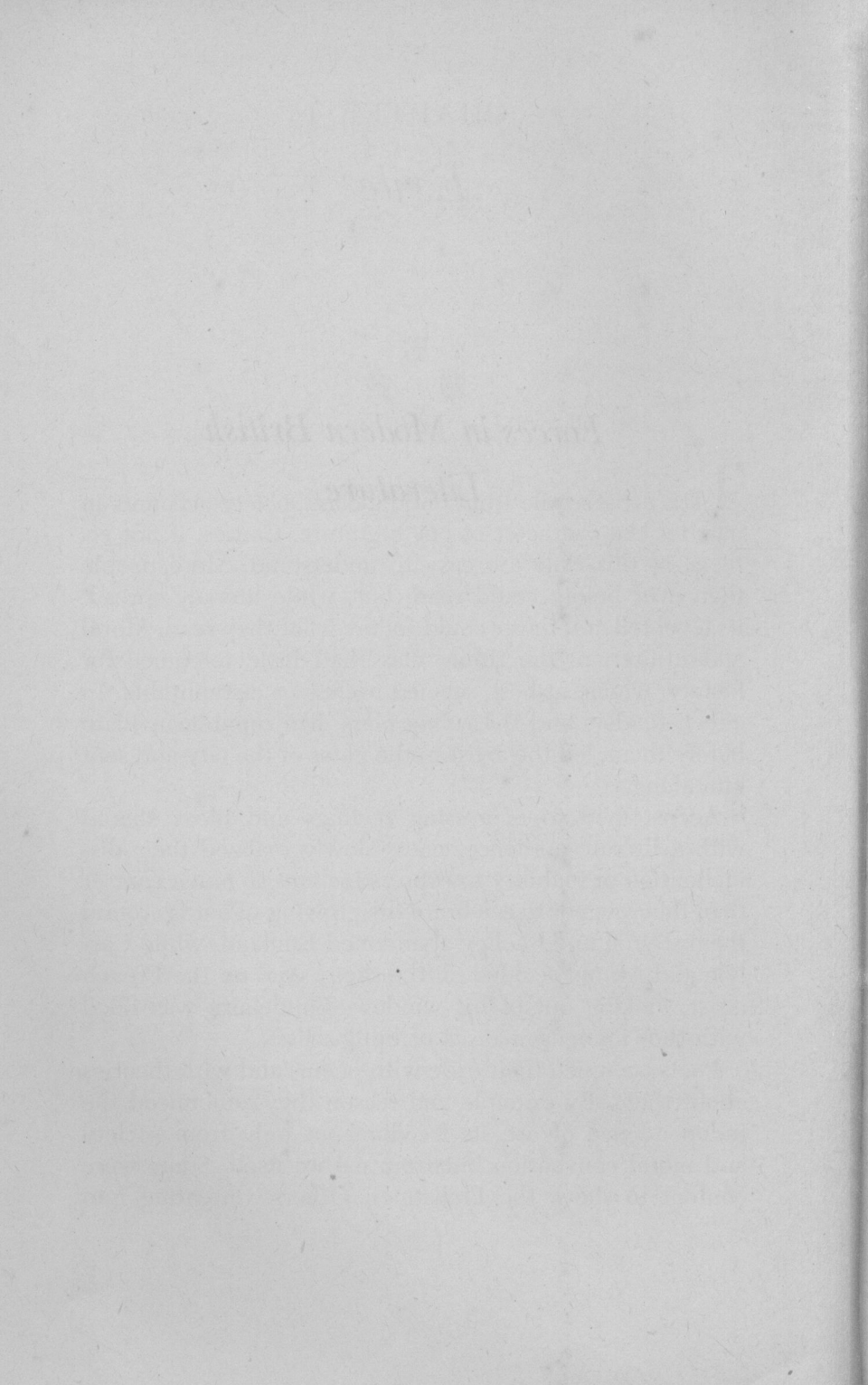
## CONTENTS

I.	<i>Exile</i>	PAGE 3
II.	<i>Left</i>	33
III.	<i>Right</i>	63
IV.	<i>Disenchantment and Fantasy</i>	112
V.	<i>The Troughs of Zolaism</i>	145
VI.	<i>The Hunt for a Father</i>	185
VII.	<i>The Forest of Symbols</i>	224
VIII.	<i>The Stream of Consciousness</i>	283
IX.	<i>The Unconscious</i>	318
X.	<i>Myth and the Natural Man</i>	360

*Index*

FOLLOWS PAGE 386

*Forces in Modern British  
Literature*



## CHAPTER I

### *Exile*



THE artist's exile from middle-class society accounts in part for the character of our literature. Causes, if not effects, of this exile are easy to understand. More people than ever before could read, but, while literacy spread, its level fell and fewer could follow what they read. Moral and utilitarian, the ruling class had little tolerance for beauty, which, at best, seemed useless or disreputable. In effect, readers and the ruling class, like republican Plato before them, led the artist to the gates of the city and sent him along.

Accustomed to expressing feelings and ideas shared with a literate audience, poets slowly realized their disinclination or inability to express feelings so much coarser than their own or to celebrate the growing ugliness around them. Byron and Shelley abandoned England, while Carlyle and Arnold scolded on the shore. And on the French coast, looking out of his window, Baudelaire was filled with the "immense nausea of billboards."

Poets occupied their exile with poems and with theories about them. By example and reason they announced the independence of art, its freedom not only from society and moral convention but from nature itself. Some were content to shock the Philistines. Others, retreating into



## *Forces in Modern British Literature*

ivory towers, privately pursued naked beauty up the stairs. Pure literature became impure and, after a while, difficult. The enemies of the people, satisfying themselves, left the satisfaction of common taste to journalists and commercial artists.

This situation is the subject of George Gissing's *New Grub Street* (1891). Edwin Reardon, the hero, and to some extent a self-portrait, is kept by refinement, neurosis, and poverty from supplying "good, coarse, marketable stuff for the world's vulgar." By temperament he is unable to curry favor with editors, reviewers, and the literary gang, who, praising friends, damning enemies, tell the ignorant what is what. Jasper Milvain, however, knowing literature a trade, reasonably maintains that "we people of brains are justified in supplying the mob with the food it likes." As his field he takes the "upper middle-class of intellect, the people who like to feel that what they are reading has some special cleverness, but who can't distinguish between stones and paste." Whelpdale descends further than this middle-brow, planning a paper for "the quarter-educated; that is to say, the great new generation that is being turned out by the Board Schools." Adapting themselves to reality, Milvain and Whelpdale are suitably rewarded, but Reardon miserably expires. This novel, Gissing's best, is the best picture of audience and writer in our time. It is bitter, moving, and filled with honest observation; but Gissing weakened the effect by taking extreme examples as types and by mixing self-pity with satire. Self-pity, however, is an emotion of exiles.

As if to prove the soundness of Gissing, Arnold Bennett confessed with disconcerting honesty in *The Truth about an Author* (1903) to sentiments identical with Milvain's; and in his *Journals* (1932) he called himself an artist "with strong mercantile interests." Seeing the nature of his audience, he indefatigably supplied it with trash:

## Exile

sensational novels, absurd plays, "pocket philosophies," books on how to do this or that. With consequent wealth he bought a yacht, supported a mistress, and expired amidst comforts. But Bennett was an artist as well as a commercial artist. To satisfy himself he sometimes wrote a "serious" work for which he expected no reward. That these works, surprisingly, were as acceptable as the trash he wrote is to be explained perhaps by his acceptance of the world. No artist of our time was less an exile.<sup>1</sup>

### I

About the middle of the last century the doctrine of art for art's sake began to encourage the exiled. Affirming the separation of art from middle-class society, art for art's sake implies the autonomy of art and artist, the rejection of didactic aim, and the refusal to subject art to moral or social judgments.<sup>2</sup> A work of art, the exiles said, must be judged by beauty alone. This doctrine, said Tennyson, is "the way to Hell."

An art remote from common life, intolerably pursuing ideals opposite to those of society, may seem evasive. But ivory towers in suburbs are commentaries upon them. Given ugliness and limited morality, and the pursuit of beauty becomes as inevitable and useful as the antimacassar. If this art is to be justified by beauty alone, its position becomes less sure. But many of the works produced in the name of beauty are equal in beauty to those of Tennyson.

Art for the sake of art, which flowered during the eighties and nineties in the work of Wilde, Moore, and

<sup>1</sup> *A Great Man* (1904), is a cynical picture of the popular novelist and his public. Cf. Virginia Woolf on the "Middlebrow," *The Death of the Moth* (1942).

<sup>2</sup> Albert J. Farmer: *Le Mouvement esthétique et "décadent" en Angleterre* (1931). Louise Rosenblatt: *L'Idée de l'art pour l'art dans la littérature anglaise pendant la période victorienne* (1931). William Gaunt: *The Aesthetic Adventure* (1945).

Symons and later in the work of Joyce, had many roots in the past. Its ultimate origins were in the German romantic philosophers and in Keats and Poe. Rossetti, isolated from society, revived Keats and offered an art without moral or social purpose. Morris, desolated by the ugliness around him, tried to restore beauty to useful things. Gautier in *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1834), Baudelaire in his poems and in his preface to Poe, and Flaubert in his novels illustrated or recommended art for art's sake. Getting the doctrine from them, Whistler brought it to Swinburne, whose essays pugnaciously defended *Poems and Ballads* (1866) from his middle-class critics. While Swinburne inflamed the young, Walter Pater seduced them. In the famous conclusion to his *Renaissance* (1873), where gem-like flames consumed them as they discriminated moments for the moments' sake, Pater summarized his German, French, and English predecessors in a prose that was itself the best argument for the cause of art. *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), tempered by Pater's almost religious asceticism, proved almost as seductive. Young men read these books, exaggerated what they read, and painted the nineties yellow.

Young Oscar Wilde discovered beauty at Oxford, where amid his fabulous blue china he read Swinburne, Rossetti, Baudelaire, and Pater, whose *Renaissance* became his "golden book."<sup>3</sup> Upon his graduation Wilde became apostle of beauty to the Philistines. Basing his conduct upon that of Swinburne and Baudelaire, his beautiful costume of velveteen shorts and silk stockings upon what he

<sup>3</sup> Hesketh Pearson: *The Life of Oscar Wilde* (1946). Arthur Ransome: *Oscar Wilde* (1912). André Gide: *Si le grain ne meurt* (1920). Vincent O'Sullivan: *Aspects of Wilde* (1936). Frank Harris: *Oscar Wilde* (1916). Robert Sherard: *Bernard Shaw, Frank Harris and Oscar Wilde* (1936).

In *De Profundis* Wilde refers to *The Renaissance* as "that book which has had such strange influence over my life." See T. S. Eliot's attack on Pater in *The Eighteen-eighties* (1930), edited by Walter de la Mare.

thought Rossetti meant, Wilde astounded Piccadilly. He was extravagant but shrewd. His shocking presence was designed not only to dramatize the ideas of the æsthetic philosophers but to make himself known. It did. Consequently his *Poems* (1881) went through five editions. In these mediocre verses, which, anticipating Eliot's, summarize the past by theft and allusion, Wilde urged the Spirit of Beauty to elevate the "cheating merchants." Seeing little harm as yet in this eccentric, they caricatured his poppy and his lily in *Punch*. In *Patience* (1881) W. S. Gilbert, cleverly reflecting popular judgment, presented Wilde as an æsthetic sham, whose anti-Philistine excesses might be attributed to Rossetti and Swinburne. But America had never heard of Wilde. That *Patience* might have point, D'Oyly Carte, the producer, hired Wilde in 1882 to make a lecture tour of the States. He consented to this Philistine plan because it gave him further publicity and the chance to spread his gospel. A cartoon by Max Beerbohm shows the apostle of beauty confronting bearded farmers. He exhorted them to abandon morality for beauty, to liberate art from didactic purpose, to beautify dress, furniture, and pots.<sup>4</sup> He told them of Rossetti, Swinburne, and Whistler. Of the sunflower and the lily he observed: "We love these flowers in spite of what Mr. Gilbert may tell you, not for any vegetable fashion at all, but because they are elegant in design."

Whistler, who had brought the word to Swinburne, now brought it in his Chelsea studio to Wilde and sharpened his wit. Annoyed with Wilde's vulgarization of beauty, Whistler said in *Ten O'clock* (1885) that art is so far beyond the understanding of the public, who judge it by its subject and its morality, that the attempt of ama-

<sup>4</sup> In America Wilde delivered lectures on "The English Renaissance" and "Decorative Art in America." Lloyd Lewis and Henry Smith: *Oscar Wilde Discovers America* (1936).