

A SINKING ISLAND

The Modern English Writers 

by H U G H K E N N E R



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Books, of any solidity, are almost gone by.

JOHN STUART MILL, 1836

You strange, astonished-looking, angle-faced
Dreary-mouthed, gaping wretches of the sea,
Gulping salt water everlastingly . . .

LEIGH HUNT, 1836

I feel like Robinson Crusoe in this dreadful London.

W. B. YEATS, 1888

I rose from humble origins to complete disaster.

SAUL BELLOW

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A Sinking Island

A F I R S T S C A N

"English," formerly "Anglisc," was the tongue of the Teuton "Angles" who invaded and then settled Northumbria and Mercia amid cries that the savages had come. Until recently it implied the culture of an island called England, a culture present or former colonies emulated. England was and is the nurturing-place of "English." From the seventh century clear to the twentieth—from the Venerable Bede to Basil Bunting—its idioms have been inextricable from the fortunes of men on that island: from their climate, their customs, their history, their shifting rituals of self-esteem. A word like "hearth" accretes warmth from the island's damp cold nights. Likewise, "oak" takes sanction from pride in England's history, "ale" from immemorial English custom, "lad" from peculiarly English imprecisions of fellow-feeling.

For centuries too, English literature was what some denizens of England wrote for others to read, the way Dutch literature is meant for reading in Holland. If some of it chanced to get written elsewhere—e.g., in America, a former possession—it was still made *literature* by English approbation; Walt Whitman was a real poet only after 1868, when William Michael Rossetti hailed his accord with Pre-Raphaelite revolutionary sentiment, and Americans felt duly flattered.*

That is no longer true. There is now a literature written out of English dictionaries that England either can't claim or doesn't know if it wants to. English by about 1930 had ceased to be simply the language they speak in England. It had been split four ways. It was (1) the language of International Modernism, having displaced French in that role. And it was (2) the literary language of Ireland, and

* The Rossettis, of course, were migrants, who'd (unlike Walt's Whitmans) had the sense to settle in England.

(3) of America, and yes, (4) of England, countries which International Modernism bids us think of as the Three Provinces.

International Modernism is a name for the durable writing no national tradition can plausibly claim. The prime example is *Ulysses*: part of no native Irish tradition but not part of England's Great Tradition either: about that F. R. Leavis was firm. Its text has lately been rectified on Munich computers by a German who learned his craft in Virginia. Doubtless in heaven Leavis, when that was announced, indulged an ironic sniff, though it typifies inevitabilities one could explain. Also James Joyce's life, and Irish politics, help explain how *Ulysses* came to be written in "English." That was really what needed explaining in its years of scandal. Allowances could have been made for the avant-garde had it only stayed continental. And anyone in 1895 who'd foreguessed a book so transcendently innovative would have expected its dictionary to be French.

Distressingly too, though a common auxiliary language is still called a *lingua franca*, the *lingua franca* of commerce is "English" now. "Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant," no longer makes his propositions in "demotic French." *Plakarten* in Frankfurt hawk "striptease"; Parisian *feuilletons* coo of "cover-girls." As a 747 gropes toward earth in Taipei, pilot and tower exchange a quasi-English jargon. (Why? Because the plane was manufactured in Seattle; because commercial aviation thrives on North American enterprise; because a war scattered American air bases worldwide.) Rock-and-roll worldwide mouths an English dialect too, something it's less plausible to blame on America, though in the homeland of the Beatles they try.

So it has been easy for tight little islanders to dismiss the new literatures as analogous barbarisms: as the Babu-work, often plausibly syntactic, of people who lack an organic feel for idiom. But that parallel is empty. A plurality of idioms, notably the synthetic idiom of high modernism, has been drawing on a common word-stock, the existence of each idiom modifying all the others.

Ulysses (1922), and its companions, *The Waste Land* and the early *Cantos*, helped establish a potential independence of literary "English" from any nation. Thereafter, in the Three Provinces, things could never go on as before. Writers went on supplying what they'd always supplied, psychic and cultural insight for local use. But they did it, if they were at all responsible, in awareness that the resources of "English" had been expanded forever.

So in the Three Provinces, though least so in England, the poetry

and prose they write for native consumption has been strongly marked by the International phenomenon. Mrs. Woolf, an English novelist doing the English novelist's traditional business—elucidating for her readers the manners and mores of England—knew about *Ulysses* and despised it, or said she did, but her *Mrs. Dalloway* is unthinkable without it. Faulkner wrote *The Sound and the Fury* on a tide of post-Ulyssean enthusiasm, dealing though he did with New York publishers and intending an American readership. As for William Carlos Williams, whose American readers were few, all his long life he hardly envisaged any other kind, and sixty years after *Spring and All*, few English ears detect any poetry in its verse.

Yet, if this late in the century it is in America that a great part of the tongue's vital writing gets done, America has its provinciality too. Linguistically or poetically considered, it is a very *large* province, where poets conduct conspiracies in public and nobody listens to anybody else. Coherence is perhaps for a critic to discern. And two of the best critics of William Carlos Williams, two sure guides to his saliences, are Mike Weaver and Charles Tomlinson, both Englishmen. Weaver's book (*William Carlos Williams: The American Background*) best explains the complex fate with which America confronted Williams; Tomlinson's choice of a *Selected Poems* has defined a Williams canon. That's different from the service Rossetti did for Whitman, entailing as it does a recognition of intractable otherness.

Not, though, that England has stayed a sure citadel of judgment. Tomlinson's own first major collection of poems, *Seeing Is Believing*, had to be published in New York: "a national disgrace," as his fellow Englishman Donald Davie said. Davie has also adduced "the silent conspiracy which now unites all the English poets from Robert Graves down to Philip Larkin, and all the critics, editors and publishers too, the conspiracy to pretend that Pound and Eliot never happened." Indeed, any reminder that they happened at all can suffice to touch off a tantrum. As late as 1986, in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Auberon Waugh spoke for an "intelligent reading public," consisting of people like himself, "fed to the teeth with the Modern Movement and everything it has produced." He attributed the repute of outrages like *Ulysses* to "fashionable fly-by-night magazines." Then in 1987, in the *New Republic*, there was Davie himself trashing Williams! It's fair to say, despite scintillant exceptions, that a half-century's literary goings-on in the Third Province have given new meaning to the word "provincial." How that came about—how the mother-country of

"English" became a headquarters for articulate Philistia—is one theme this book addresses.

International Modernism I've described in *The Pound Era*, the modern American adventure in *A Homemade World*, the Irish in *A Colder Eye*. This English case is altogether trickier. If England was the command post of the language, it was also, as the first to be industrialized, the country that, ahead of all the world, saw reading publics fragmented and reading become a drug. England has had long experience with the principle that whole classes can be marked by what they consume—sugar, tobacco, tea. Likewise, what did you read?—by that you were known; so whoever had the power to enforce a literary "value" defined major social norms. Such power is still the prize of relentless struggle. So *A Sinking Island* has more to say than did its sibling books about milieux and contexts.

Also, it has had to take note of personalities; nothing is more English than the English skill at exorcising danger by making it look like someone's eccentric behavior. When an age of sentiment felt threatened by Sam Johnson's shade, it got rid of him by dwelling on the queer man in the book by Boswell. Likewise, common sense dealt deftly with the challenge of Blake by bidding us imagine a mad poet and his wife sitting (as was said to be their custom) stark naked in their garden. Any such monster having been dismembered, editing, a gentleman's skill, could always reassemble the limbs if they were wanted; Sir Geoffrey Keynes performed that service for Blake, though Johnson has been left to the Americans at Yale.

To cope with the multiple shocks of modernism, this personalizing faculty had to be put into high gear, with such success that James, Ford, Yeats, Lawrence, Pound, Wells, Woolf—the list goes on—now hardly seem to be characters in the same story, but simply occupants of more or less adjacent cells in a well-regulated Bedlam. Ford was a bounder, a liar. Yeats conjured spooks. Mrs. Woolf was found in the Ouse, three weeks dead, and what about that? Poor Lawrence, he was sex-mad. Pound—so American he was ineducable ("hare-brained," says a recent book). And Eliot: was he not really, ah, hiding something? His sexual orientation, perhaps? That allegation won't be let die. On an occasion so deceptively neutral, not to say pedantic, as the appearance of the *Waste Land* drafts in expensive facsimile, it broke out anew in the *Times Literary Supplement* and raged on for weeks.

More recently, he has been gayed in a play about his first marriage. It was called *Tom and Viv*, and to gauge how odd that is we have only to weigh the unlikelihood of a play about the estranged Shakespeares, *Bill and Anne*. Yes, Eliot lives as a danger to be regulated. But Will of Stratford, Sweet Will, it's rightly judged, has no longer a presence sufficient to threaten anything.

Nor do well-credentialed masterpieces threaten either: the leaden *Music of Time*, the dim *Forsyte Saga*. For nobody reads them. Have no fear, they will not detain us. So intricate is our story that narration must be highly selective, enough so sometimes to produce what Leavis once called "effects that might be found ironical." Many good writers who simply did their job—Ivy Compton-Burnett comes to mind—are left unmentioned. Nor need mention imply what I'd deem a balanced treatment; if it's only as critics that Davie and Empson appear, that is not because I think their poetry unrewarding. And if Bunting is quoted copiously, that's to throw light on mid-century norms that couldn't accommodate him. I'd have copied out less of *Villon* and *Briggflatts* if I could assume readers familiar with them; but the dearth of such readers is precisely my point.

Be assured that the book contains no ironies where none are intended. It commences with the view from 1895, a year distinguished by nothing in particular except its plenitude of happenings.

1 : THE BEST OF TIMES

It was the best of times, the best of times. In 1895 the atlas colors that mattered were blue and red. Red, British red, asserted one island's suzerainty over more than a full quarter of Earth's land, and the blue seas were British too *de facto*. On them the fleet plied, and the merchantmen, coasters, lighters, colliers, tramp steamers. At any moment, day or night on every ocean, proud British flags were defying the salt spray. Waves plunged and broke, masts hummed and engines shuddered. Knitted together by the shipping lanes, an empire beyond the dreams of Alexander or Augustus was about its patient business.

One by one, all over the world, for two centuries and more, lands with exotic and barbaric names had been coming (never mind how) beneath the flag: . . . Sarawak, 1842; Saskatchewan, 1876; Savo Island, 1893; Selangor, 1874; the Seychelles, 1794; Sierra Leone, 1788; Sikkim, 1816; Sind, 1843; Singapore, 1819. . . Whole peoples came with these places, and though many were of the higher races some were not. Sinhalese and Tamils; Malays, Bushmen, Hottentots; Bantus and pre-Dravidian aborigines; Fijians and cannibal Papuans; the Canadian Indians whose forefathers had tortured French Jesuits; the French-Canadians even: all these were British. So too were Irishmen, many of whom now spoke English of a sort.

God Save the Queen!—76 now, a little dumpy Queen in perpetual mourning. Her memorial to the prince she mourned was a large eclectic masterpiece, guarded by stone lions and bedecked with proud standing-marble denizens of Empire, the whole especially intimidating when it loomed through a morning fog. The book its stone prince held was not the Bible casual viewers took it for, but the Catalogue of the Exhibition of 1851.

Her cousins occupied the thrones of Europe. Her subjects ruled

Commerce, Manufacture, and The Arts. They were respecters of the Bible, an English book that dated from 1611. Moreover, they heeded what it was said to say, and it was not true either that they ignored its Word whenever money jingled. Otherwise would they have put Mr. Wilde in gaol, who'd had three plays running all at one time in London? But that was what they had resolutely done, though his crime was so much subtler than honest theft as not to be describable.

Since 1215, Magna Carta, a date every child had by heart, they had been, as everyone knew, the people who most of all people in the world respected individual liberties. Contrary to foreign usage, criminals were innocent until proved guilty. Fugitives from the political police of every country in Europe consequently settled in England. That made London picturesque, though many Londoners would rather read about Soho than walk in it. In particular, the city was full of Russian anarchists. Everyone who could read knew that.

Britons, co-linguists of Shakespeare, had long been a literate people. In 1895 they read newspapers. They read *Tit-Bits* and *The Strand Magazine*. They read romances and histories. They read Dickens, and thruppenny pamphlets of excerpts from Dickens: "Joe the Fat Boy"; "The Artful Dodger." They read themselves to sleep. Never in human history had there been so much to read. The *British Museum Catalogue* alone listed unthinkably many items, and there were more, it seemed, every time you opened your eyes.

"Penny Stories for the People" were read. *Through Weal and Woe*, *The Rightful Heir*, *Thrown to the Lions*, *The Smuggler's Doom*—these and their like got gobbled up (18,250,000 copies in five years! Had Horace known such a readership? Goethe? Even Wordsworth?). As for quarter-million-word novels, you could get thirty-thousand-word versions for just a penny; and who would pretend that every little word a novelist might have set down deserved attention? (Every other word? Every eighth word? One-in-eight was a commercial abridger's frequent ratio.)

Yes, there were commercial abridgers; there had to be, if you thought of it. Labor divided itself, to a point of minimal but finite returns. There were also commercial copiers, proofreaders, indexers, scribblers. Scribblers worked into the night by candlelight, in gloves and overcoat if it was winter. This most advanced of civilizations was built upon coal, the cost of which per peck (and of paper per quire, ink per ounce, soup per bowl) found equilibrium with the selling price of words per thousand in equations balanced by the Invisible Hand.

Despite marginal attrition (consumption, suicide) the great web of interdependency hung together, that men and women might eat and be clothed, and read.

Dead writers simplified this algebra by not exacting fees; hence, for instance, Dent's Temple Shakespeare, a shilling a play. People bought a quarter-million of them a year: over £12,000 per annum, willingly parted with. And for Shakespeare! That proved—did it not?—that literacy need not debauch.

As late as mid-century, nervousness about literacy had kept a penny tax on the daily papers. The tax would have doubled the cost of a penny sheet, a good thing if it was true that cheaper papers than the fivepenny *Times* were sure to be "radical." One argument against the tax had been that if a worker could read in the cheap local paper about somebody's rick burning down, he'd not visit the public house for that intelligence, and might thus stay sober. Keeping workers off the drink was a public duty. There had been other powerful arguments, and now the tax was forty years gone. Penny dailies proliferated, and *The Times* itself was down to thruppence. In twenty years more it would be a penny and well worth it.

Nothing else, probably not even the pin, was being mass-produced on such a scale as reading-matter. That was because readers needed something *new* to read, every week, every day even. "Literature" had nothing to do with this. The concept of Literature rests on the assumption that canonical texts exist to be read and read again. In the ages before printing, what was prized was copied by hand. Conversely, it was copied because it was prized. All that we have from the ancients is the little that copyists salvaged. Aeschylus wrote some eighty-three plays they didn't salvage, besides the seven they did. And copies perished as surely as May blossoms. What was not recopied before fire or thumbing claimed papyrus was gone forever, and parchment, though it might last a thousand years, was expensive and apt to be scraped clean for reuse. Homer and Virgil abide, but Sappho crumbled or got scraped.

An unbroken chain of generations having been wise enough to recopy Homer and Virgil, Literature became, in T. S. Eliot's famous metaphor, the "ideal order" of prizeworthy "monuments," an order that can be altered only rarely, when "the really new" makes good its claim to inclusion. The printing-press did not invalidate that metaphor

at first, and Eliot in 1919 could talk as though printing had changed nothing fundamental. But that was never true.

Gutenberg may have supposed that his invention would simply mechanize the scribal process, but the very first printers soon found out differently. They were *in business* as scribes had never been: vulnerable to strikes, a-worry about idle machinery, forever anxious to "recoup initial investments, pay off creditors, use up reams of paper, and keep pressmen employed." They needed a steady flow of new stuff to print, and books were soon getting written that, save for the press, would not have been written at all. So when by 1704 the industry we call Publishing is fully established, lo, Swift in *A Tale of a Tub* is railing against Grub Street garrets, whence there poured down upon London a noxious verbal deluge, contracted for by the page from hacks with nothing to say but great skill at saying it verbosely. The new economics of scale was conjuring up copious nullity. Its pressure was, as we say now, "supply-side."

Supply-side pressure, as it proved, blew off much vapor to scant effect. Despite Swift's apprehension and Pope's, the hacks did no appreciable harm. The sheets of unbought hackwork were twisted to light ale-house fires, and the writers who were valued then are the ones we value now. Dr. Johnson had no qualms in concurring with the common reader, and it remains commonplace that Shakespeare was popular in his day, Dickens in his. We've heard it argued on that dangerous analogy that the Beatles were our time's collective Mozart, and forgotten that the analogy wasn't always dangerous. "Down to and including George Eliot," the social historian R. C. K. Ensor reminds us, "all the great English novelists had been best-sellers." That means the common reader had spotted them quickly.

But by about 1870 something had changed: major novelists—Meredithe, James, Hardy—were coming onto the scene and enjoying some vogue but by no means best-sellerdom; meanwhile best-seller after best-seller was bursting and sparkling through the gray British sky en route not to classic status but to a graveyard. Who hears of Mrs. Henry Wood now? She wrote *East Lynne*, which sold half a million copies; her twenty-odd books had a total sale five times that.

And it's perfectly clear that by 1895 such bilge as Swift had excoriated was being pumped forth solely *because millions wanted it*. Publishing's new economics was demand-side.

Or, rather, not such bilge as Swift had excoriated: a new class of bilge, of which he could have formed no conception. Marie Corelli (1854–1924) was the 1895 best-seller (*The Sorrows of Satan*), and other books in other years kept her a best-seller for two decades. No novel had ever sold like *The Sorrows of Satan*: thirty-two printings in its first twelve months. True, few novels before it had cost a mere 6s. The long day of the three-decker—10s. 6d. per volume, a guinea and a half per novel, mostly not bought therefore but rented from libraries—had only just ended. But Marie Corelli! You have to sample her prose to believe a pen could have written it:

. . . and then, with an indescribable slide forward and an impudent bracing of the arms, they started the “can-can”—which though immodest, vile, vulgar and licentious, has perhaps more power to inflame the passions of a Paris mob than the chanting of the “Marseillaise.” . . . Danced by women with lithe, strong, sinuous limbs—with arms that twist like the bodies of snakes,—with bosoms that seem to heave with suppressed rage and ferocity,—with eyes that flash hell-fire through the black eye-holes of a conspirator-like mask,—and with utter, reckless, audacious disregard of all pretence at modesty,—its effect is terrible, enraging!—inciting to deeds of rapine, pillage and slaughter! . . . With all our culture we are removed only half a step away from absolute barbarism! . . . and I howled, stamped, shrieked and applauded as furiously as the rest of the onlookers.*

This told an English reader something she was always happy to believe, what awful people the French were, and it let her indulge the can-can in delicious revulsion with no risk of having her bottom pinched at a *café chantant*. As to what awful people the French were, Marie Corelli is explicit in an Introductory Note: “If a crime of more than usual cold-blooded atrocity is committed, it generally dates from Paris or near it;—if a book or a picture is produced that is confessedly obscene, the author or artist is, in nine cases out of ten, discovered to be a Frenchman.” And as to indulging the can-can, what you’ve just read was cut by more than half. Marie Corelli’s way was the pornographer’s: spin out, spin out, find empty emphatic words, but keep it up. Her predilection for the dash may signal that there’s no particular

* Whatever the last sentence seems to say, Marie Corelli never saw a can-can—gracious, no. Nor, she assures us, did she ever wish to. But on the steamer from Thun to Interlaken she overheard an Englishman’s eulogy of it, “and I took calm note thereof, for literary use hereafter.”