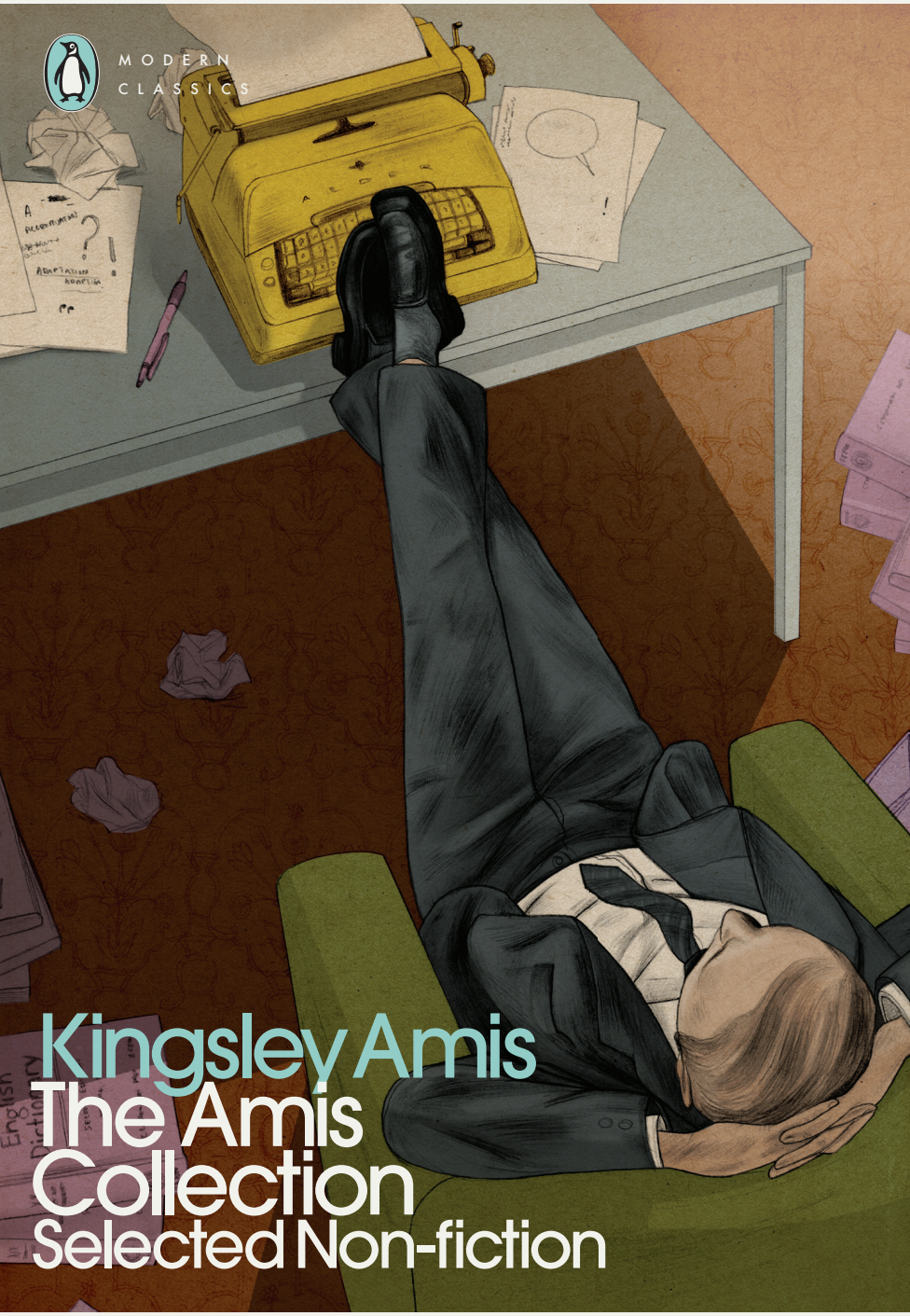
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Penguin Random House UK

First published by Hutchinson 1990
First published in Penguin Classics 2022
001

Set in 10.5/13pt Dante MT Std
Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–0–141–19530–8

www.greenpenguin.co.uk

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Preface

Some of the pieces reprinted here have been shortened, to avoid where possible going over the same ground twice or otherwise trying the reader's patience. A few have been lengthened, to incorporate later information. But, much as I should have liked to here and there, I have nowhere materially altered what I first wrote, though I have corrected a few stylistic errors.

Kingsley Amis
London
May 1990

PART ONE

Writing

Real and Made-up People

All fiction is autobiographical in the sense that its writer cannot truly invent anyone or anything, can only edit his experience, and cannot, poor fellow, represent ideas that have never entered his head. Let us at once discard this trifling and tautological sense, and notice the plain distinction between action based on what the writer has made up and that based on what has actually happened to him. The distinction is not always sharp, but in practice we usually know where we are. Treatment of character is the surest guide.

The second kind of writer only arrived on the scene about 1900. We are told that Dickens put something of his father into Mr Micawber, but he is not writing about his father. Maggie Tulliver is rather the same sort of person as George Eliot, but the latter is not writing about herself in *The Mill on the Floss*, nor about what actually happened to her, and Dorothea Brooke is not to any interesting extent the same sort of person as she. (Mr Casaubon may look like a different case, one I will return to.) Then D. H. Lawrence started writing about himself, people he knew and what there was of what had actually happened to him, and his knowing or unknowing heirs are all around us today. They have raised the ghosts of long-dead Philistines who thought the poet a liar and history the only truth, and Katherine Mansfield is called 'the most autobiographical of writers' in unadorned commendation (admittedly on television).

This is not a polemical piece; we have plenty of room for two, or two dozen, kinds of novelist. But the autobiographical kind works under severe limitations. The writer whose direct experience gives him one satisfactory novel (as opposed to a short or a very short story) in fifty years is very lucky. The rest of the time, thinness,

repetitiousness, poverty of incident, scarcity of character supervene. If, in life, his marriage breaks down, he takes off with somebody else, has difficulties with her and with his children and finally returns home, or stays away, he has little hope, even with the aid of a fictitious charwoman or taxi-driver here and there, of writing about that experience and those people and coming through with a novel. As my friend George MacBeth put it to me the other day, such a novelist is simply not doing enough.

The writer who makes things up is on the face of it much freer. I make things up, make my characters up, not out of superior virtue but through something deeper than conscious choice. I did once, out of laziness or sagging imagination, try to put real people on paper and produced what is by common consent my worst novel, *I Like It Here.* There were fictitious characters and incidents in it too, and it is only those that I dare to allow to cross my conscious mind nowadays. Real people are interesting enough, but everybody is what he does, and to portray a man doing what he actually did do means holding up the whole show while he does it. By what is either a paradox or a truism, the closer the likeness of the real interesting person, the less interesting he will be in the novel.

I learnt my lesson in the course of setting out to repeat my mistake. Old Jock MacDonald, I thought (the name and all details are changed) – here is somebody so unconsciously funny that I must 'put him into a book'. But I liked Jock and could not offend him; so he became Welsh instead of Scotch, an architect instead of a stockbroker, a bachelor instead of a married man. And then, as the plot took shape, I needed Jock to do things he not only had not actually done, but never would have done, so there was very little left of him in the result. Later Jock told me he had particularly enjoyed the portrayal of that Welsh architect fellow. Had he seen? Had he not seen? Most likely he had seen without knowing he had seen.

So where, since those days, do those characters come from? Me, in the first instance. All my heroes, and other principal figures, have a great deal of me in them. No doubt the heroes, at least, show some family likeness, but I am not writing about different, or similar, bits of me. Nor, incidentally, am I writing about me mixed up, as camouflage

or for fun, with some real person. 'Who were you getting at in that television chap in your last one? Robin Frost? David Day?' Nobody; I made him up.

But to resume: even intelligent readers, even those who might consciously reject the concept of fiction as experience with style sauce, much overestimate the degree of identification between author and central character. I treasure the memory of being introduced to the amiable Marghanita Laski not long after the publication of my first novel, *Lucky Jim*. On hearing my name, she looked at me and about her in something not far from panic. She was wondering which I would do first: pour my pint of bitter over her or assault her sexually. To this day, on hearing that I was born in South London, people will murmur that they always thought I was a Yorkshireman; Jim in fact came from Lancashire, but only a close reading shows that.

Either origin would have done to produce the distancing that, through that deep instinct, I felt I needed: he must not come from anywhere near London, teach English, be married, admire Mozart, be much too law-abiding – or cowardly – to appear drunk on the lecture platform or hijack a professor's taxi, as in my own case. And, again incidentally, to polish up my non-autobiographical claims, the whole basic situation of that novel was clear in my mind before I ever thought of teaching at a university, let alone had started to do so.

Yes, but there is still some sort of identification: all my heroes start from me and in a sense stay with me, even when there are half a dozen of them occupying the same book, as in *The Anti-Death League*. This bond is at least as strong when the protagonist is unpleasant. Roger Micheldene of *One Fat Englishman* is, at least in intention, unlike me in various radical ways, starting with his gluttony about food, a substance my own gluttonies do not touch (curries excepted). I strongly disapprove of nearly everything Roger is and does, and yet the critic who wrote, 'I can't help feeling that the author likes the character', had seen the truth, not that it is a very surprising one. We all like people we disapprove of: one of the injustices of life that at the same time help to make it bearable. And it is doubly hard to

dislike one's child. That worn and sentimentalising metaphor does still give a hint of the strength of the attachment in question.

The novelist's heroes, or central characters, are clearly meant to do more than just go round being close or distant relatives of him. As between him and them in the first place, they are vehicles of his self-criticism – an important function of poetry too. By that very act of distancing, by projecting himself into an entity that is part of himself and yet not himself, he may be able to see more clearly, and judge more harshly, his own weaknesses and follies; and, since he must know that no failings are unique, he may be helped to acquire tolerance for them in others. In the second place, if the novel comes off at all, the reader will perhaps accompany the writer in some parallel process of self-discovery.

But that is still not enough; in an age that increasingly likes to view art as occupational therapy for the artist, it may even be too much. What about the character working in the novel? For me, the novel works on the character, at any rate rough-hews the character. It is not the case that a fully-formed hero goes stalking about in search of situations in which he can be effectively arrogant or incompetent or spiteful or pathetic or even decent, though he may very likely fall as if by chance into a couple of such in the course of being written about. The central situation comes first in every sense.

Here I must be unabashedly personal to show what I mean. *Lucky Jim* originally quickened in the womb of time when I spent a few minutes in the senior common-room of a provincial university (not Swansea). I thought at once, 'Christ, somebody ought to do something about *this*'. What followed can most easily, and accurately, be put in note form. University shags. Provincial. Probably keen on culture. Crappy culture. Fellow who doesn't fit in. Seems anti-culture. Non-U. Non-Oxbridge. Beer. Girls. Can't say what he really thinks. Boss trouble. Given chores. Disasters. Boring boss (a) so boring girl (b). Nice girl comes but someone else's property. Whose? etc.

This may be too articulate or logical and in the wrong order here and there, but not in the wrong order overall. Those who remember the novel will see that a large amount of Jim's character is already there, stated or implied, and reflection may suggest that even what

could seem quite accidental quirks of behaviour are logical extensions of that same character. The various faces Jim makes to himself, for instance, are the covert protests and tension-reducers of a man in enemy territory without effective allies. Not that I saw them as that when I first thought of them; it took a critic to point the connection out to me. So much of all this takes place at some non-conscious level that almost any account of it must be riddled with unintended rationalisations and false links.

Jim, and *Jim*, took literally years to emerge even half-formed from those depths. Not practice but good fortune saw to it that, on one later occasion, the situation-cum-character complex appeared in a twinkling. I was in search of a taxi in Tottenham Court Road, saw one with its light on, hailed it, saw that a small brown man nearer it had done the same, cursed, was astonished when it passed the brown man and stopped at my side. I got in without demur, but a voice not my own was saying at top volume in my head, 'Turn round and go back and pick up that other chap, you racialist!' So was born Sir Roy Vandervane of *Girl, 20*, and his randy girlfriend who would have to be there to give the incident an edge, and his views, and the fix he would be in and what he would do, and, somehow or other, the knowledge that he would be hero but not narrator.

I suspect that the 'creation' of minor characters is subject to the same kind of process, though with them there is often a sense of wider choice, or the illusion of it. Here, the novelist may well start from a real person, as George Eliot may have started Mr Casaubon from Mark Pattison. But then he became Mr Casaubon, because he had to do things Mark Pattison did not do. I read (parts of) the recent long correspondence in the *Times Literary Supplement* about whether or not Pattison 'was meant to be' – or even 'was' Casaubon – or the other way round – with incredulity. Even if it were a real question, any answer could have been of no more literary interest than some supposed identification of Shakespeare's Dark Lady. George Eliot *made up* Casaubon, and Pattison, to compare great things with small, went the way of Jock MacDonald.

One last run of personal examples: about halfway through writing *I Want It Now*, I found I needed a character who was rich, boring,

revolting, rude, egotistical, stupid and a figure of fun, needed him for a vital turn in the plot: to compete almost successfully with the hero as a suitor of the heroine. He (Student Mansfield by name) was already there, had been hanging about the place for dozens of pages, passing himself off as a mere illustration of the awful kind of people who surrounded the heroine. A little later, I found I needed another character for another vital turn in the plot: to assist in the public humiliation of the heroine's mother. He (Bill Hamer by name) had been about the place even longer, pretending to be no more than an illustration of the awful kind of people who surrounded the hero. In each case, nothing had to be trimmed from the figure as he had already taken shape, and very little added.

A third character in that novel, an even more minor character, on the scene for a mere ten pages altogether, is my favourite in anything I have written, George Parrot by name. Trying to regard each as a real person, I am fonder of James Churchill in *The Anti-Death League*, see Brian Leonard in that same book as a much more decent man, would far rather have a drink (no more, thank you) with Patrick Standish of *Take a Girl Like You*. But George, who is as unreal a person as any of the others is or started as, remains my favourite because, in making him up, I thought I was for once cutting quite free of the demands of the plot. All he had to do, I thought, was be rich, disclose some information and make his car available at a crucial point.

So it seemed I tried to make George, got to the end of making George, a fool at first sight but formidable very soon thereafter, chivalrous, vengeful, sensitive, cynical, hot-tempered, snobbish, naïve, distrustful, intelligent, lazy and acutely aware of linguistic niceties. Not, of course, that I had compiled any sort of list of traits and ticked them off as each was supposedly realised; George simply turned out to be such a person. But did he? After I had quite done with him, I saw that he had to be everything he was, except perhaps linguistically aware; at that point, ordinary, authorial fears of being unentertaining may have taken over, though I doubt it. I probably value George because, longer than anyone else, he kept me in the dark about what he was doing in my book.

It does rather look as though the freedom I attributed to the

non-autobiographical novelist is indeed illusory. But, if he is confined, he is at least confined by something outside the narrow twists and turns of his own real existence. How that something comes into being I have very little idea. The process may be neither grand nor significant but it is rather mysterious.

Times Literary Supplement, 27 July 1973

How to Get Your Novel Published

No writer can be altogether whole-hearted in resenting unsolicited mail. However boring, however outrageous the demands made on him by strangers or (worse, because harder to resist) acquaintances, at least it is him they are bothering; it is his philosophy of life, his favourable response to some merit-free forthcoming volume, his signed photograph, his money that is being requisitioned and not, or not only, Margaret Drabble's. But this consideration vanishes into thin air when it comes to the postal item most likely to get our man running amuck with an axe or blinding himself: another uninvited unpublished typescript. Before we go any further, do not, reader, send me your novel (especially that), your poems, your essays for my comments and assistance. For one thing, it will do you no good.

Let me explain why. The warmth of my emotion at being saddled with the rubbish might surprise some people but, I think, few writers. They (writers as a class) guard their free time as jealously as their working-time, and if free time is to be invaded by work of any sort there must be no sense of obligation about it. On top of that, the unhappy recipient may think he sees a cheerful implication that he sits about the place week after week waiting for something to turn up, like a one-parent-family saga dropped out of the blue. More plausibly he will sense utter indifference to his own concerns, and inexorable self-promotion. That sort of single-mindedness is a most useful, perhaps even necessary, quality in a young aspirant, but it lacks charm at the receiving end.

One notes also the important principle that there must be something a bit funny about a fellow who sends his creations to be read and criticised by a complete stranger. To my knowledge, no writer I respect has ever done it. The practice ceases to be objectionable if the thing arrives naked, without any pleas or queries attached, and I tolerate those persons who doggedly go on just sending me their publications year after year, though they would do at least as well to send them straight to my second-hand bookseller.

Anyway, in the normal course of events the man with the manuscript is likely to be in about the worst frame of mind possible when, if ever, he glances through what he has been sent. In fact he probably will do this sooner or later, not quite having the heart to send it back unread, unwilling to destroy it not through any scruple but for fear of some gruesome revenge – anyone mad enough to have sent it in the first place must be generally unsafe. And then . . . Suppose, against all the odds, just suppose there actually seems to be something to be said for it, what happens after that?

At this point I will unveil my latest case, the one that finally supplied the adrenalin to launch this article. Somebody I will call Arbuckle writes from SW7 enclosing three chapters of a novel, the remainder to follow if I ask for them. Now most petitioners of this type kick off in panegyrical style, more or less thanking me for having given them a reason to go on living, the idea presumably being to get me so fuddled with flattery that I will do anything they ask. Nothing so crude for Arbuckle. He merely and baldly states that he and I have the same birthday and went to the same college, then wonders if he might trespass on this coincidence (eh?) to ask if I would be kind enough to, etc. The punch comes at the end of the second paragraph. Perhaps I would advise him how best to go about getting his novel published. Others have put it a little differently but what they all mean is, *fucking* get it published. (And needless to say without the offer of a commission or any anti-life notions of that kind. And usually, as in Arbuckle's case, without return postage either.)

A great many people outside the literary world or on its fringes imagine that the whole thing is run on patronage, on old-boy

networks and words dropped in the right quarter. I thought that myself once. Some bits actually are rather like that, bits of the little-magazine scene, for instance. But commercial publishing is not, could not be. The only way of getting a novel (say) published is to have written one that a publisher likes because he reckons he will do well with it. To identify novels in that category he looks with sufficient care at each one sent to him. The idea that he would somehow look harder or more benevolently in response to a nod from me, or anyone else, is moonshine. I think I can tell good novels from bad. He thinks he can tell profitable novels from flops. What he thinks goes.

Not that he will ignore my nod altogether. There are various degrees of nod. In the Arbuckle case I could send him (Arbuckle) an enthusiastic letter which he would then physically or metaphorically attach to his typescript on its questing journey round the various publishers. If more strongly moved I could send my own publisher an enthusiastic letter or even pay him an enthusiastic personal visit. None of this would make any difference to the novel's chances of acceptance. This is rather obviously not quite accurate. In some ways a publisher works like a committee, and clearly, in the event of a split about the publishableness of Arbuckle, any intervention, even a word in the club, on Arbuckle's side by an author of any standing would strengthen the pro-Arbuckle faction in the firm. The effect of such intervention would depend on the standing of the author, his closeness to the publisher, etc, but I cannot think it would ever be large. However much he might respect my opinion, any publisher would have to make up his own mind on his own principles. All he might do is move the thing up the queue, read it not more carefully but sooner. Some of the chronically unpublished will find this a hard lesson to learn. Obviously lack of influence is more dignified than lack of talent.

So you see, sending me your novel will do you no good, no decisive good anyway. But of course you, the kind of person who without turning a hair sends his novel to a private individual he has never met, will never read these lines, selectively blinded by the same mysterious power that protects trendies and illiterates from

seeing articles about 'hopefully' and 'disinterested'. I will therefore address myself to another you, the kind of person who can face trying to get his novel published under his own steam. I have already told you that there is only one method – writing a publishable novel. But there is an accelerator, a way of speeding the progress of that publishable novel to a publisher who will publish it.

Realise that not all publishers publish all kinds of books or even all kinds of novels. They have their specialities and preferences. So avoid things like approaching in the first place the Oxford University Press with your piece of hardish porn. More specifically, go to the public library and look through the contemporary novels until you find one or more that seem to you to be of the same general kind as your novel, note the publisher(s) and proceed from there. (I owe this suggestion to the incomparable Pat Kavanagh.) Type page i afresh for each submission, keep your covering letter as brief as possible and trust in God.

I suppose you might find no novels that you think resemble yours. In that case you might be a genius. And in *that* case you might well run into difficulty getting published. But if you are merely bloody good you will have no trouble. And thereafter (Christ) you will have the world at your feet.

Times Literary Supplement, 2 October 1981

Hints for Scribblers

The Writer's Handbook 1988, edited by
Barry Turner, Macmillan

This impressively-sized book is presumably meant not for any or every writer but for the beginner. 'So You Want to be an Author?' says or asks the heading of the first section, and in a bright sub-literate style it offers general and particular advice on how to get published, most of it unfortunately superfluous or insufficient or both at once.

Rather in the spirit of those educationists who encourage you by relating how badly Sir Winston Churchill did at Harrow, the compilers begin with stories of early difficulties famously overcome. If Frederick Forsyth, for instance, had lost heart after four (four!) rejection slips, we should never have had *The Day of the Jackal*, so *keep trying*, everybody. It might have been more useful all round to state that no one without enough self-will and resilience for ten has any business even to contemplate a literary career.

So how do you find a publisher? Well, first of all you ask chaps who already have one. Or you seek out publishers who are growing and looking for new blood. 'Admittedly, these characters are not always easy to spot' – certainly not from the list in this handbook. But you will broadly be able to find out which firms publish which sorts of book, and can save time by not sending your monograph on cattle-feed to people who are interested only in fiction, maps and DIY. If you happen to have written something on tatting or acid rain, go to Dryad Books (an imprint of B. T. Batsford Ltd).

Further guidance is patchy in the extreme. The entry on Jonathan Cape lists twenty of their recent titles, very helpful if they mean anything to you; that on Century Hutchinson has none, though it supplies a detailed breakdown by category; that on Cassell has neither. The compilers have depended throughout on what they were told in response to their inquiries, not on their own observations or conclusions, except for some gossip on the doings of trendy figures in the publishing world. This is like putting a Good Food manual together from information supplied by restaurateurs and head waiters.

Patchiness runs riot in the long sections (120 pages in all) on newspapers and magazines, aimed rather shakily at the budding freelance. Dates of founding are often given; not always. A journal's politics are usually given; not always – not, for example, those of the *Daily Mirror*, though I can see a special reason for that. On the *Sunday Post* of Glasgow, with a circulation that beats the London *Sunday Times*, there is virtually nothing bar a couple of editorial names – far less than could be gleaned by looking through an edition for five minutes. But it may be useful to learn that the *News of the World*

(circulation 4,954,416) 'thrives on the public's insatiable demand for scandal, tragedy and sex'.

A point of some general interest surfaces in that part of the preamble optimistically headed 'And so to the contract'. An account is given here of the Minimum Terms Agreement (MTA) under which a publisher promises to pay an author a certain level of advance and royalties and offers other guarantees. The favourable view of MTA taken in *The Writer's Handbook* is the standard one, and it certainly sounds a good idea. The trouble is that, like any other minimum wage deal, it creates unemployment, or at least makes it more difficult for the unemployed to find work.

Many writers when they start off (I was one) are much less interested in money than in being known. Rightly or wrongly, they think that something may happen when they achieve print, nothing can until they do. They want publication at any price, or none, and they used to be able to get it. In effect, a publisher with £500 to spend could give £100 each to five new writers and take them all on. But under MTA he must give the whole £500 to one of them and let the other four go. By protecting that one from 'exploitation', the agreement keeps the other four out of work (and also out of readers' hands). This is particularly injurious at a time when other pressures are already making it hard for untried writers to start their careers.

Like all trade-union arrangements, then, and the Writers' Guild, its chief sponsor, is a trade union, MTA favours those already in work at the expense of the unemployed. Just as typically, it favours the established employer at the expense of the struggling newcomer, whom it forces to move in large costly steps instead of small cheap ones. It amazes me that some eminent publishers are still putting off joining the scheme and bleating about fair play and special relationships with authors. They should be falling over themselves to sign.

This book also includes a discussion of the Public Lending Right whereby authors are paid a small amount, something over 1p, for every time a book of theirs is borrowed from a public library. This is an unequivocally good idea from which authors can only benefit, despite objections that the present flat-rate arrangement mostly profits those already doing well from sales. The point is fairly argued

here. But nobody ever says that, however the money may be distributed, it is at present inequitably provided, by a block grant from the taxpayer instead of payments by the customer, the borrower.

The free library is a cherished national institution, but a Conservative government should be questioning its sacrosanctity. Philip Larkin, for years a public librarian, once remarked that defenders-to-the-death of free loans should take note of all the current-year registrations in library car-parks on a Saturday morning, and think again.

To refer even in passing to unpublished or struggling authors and their problems is to put oneself at some risk, so I will say here and now that any unsolicited manuscripts or typescripts sent to me will be destroyed unread. You must make your way yourself. Why you should be so set on the nearly always disappointing profession is a puzzling question.

Sunday Telegraph 1987

Report on a Fiction Prize

What a lot of novels, I thought to myself when the entries arrived, and what a lot of novelists I'd never heard of, having years ago given up reading reviews of new fiction, let alone new fiction itself, except when friends or jeer-figures were involved. Reading and assessing the books and writing about them at the offered fee has not exactly been sweated labour, but to be brutally frank I have subsidised the Arts Council a bit in so doing. I told myself it was worth it to be forced to do some catching up. (My real reason for taking on the job was that nothing beats sitting around in the daytime with a novel on your lap and – truthfully – telling yourself you're working.)

Not quite all novels, my notes say, but only two volumes of shorts – a sad reflection of mounting commercial difficulties. Further noted: some sagas or slices of working-class life – why is this theme so hard to handle, if not impossible? Not much science fiction and, of

that not-much, almost none that showed the requisite familiarity with the genre. Some limp fantasy. Some historical novels replete with anachronistic idioms. Not much how-it-is stuff, reports on now London or now San Francisco. 'Straight' fiction predominated.

The honest-bore novelist writes in plain English, believing that the material on offer is interesting enough in itself; it's his (or her) bad luck to have been mistaken in this belief. The dishonest bore is afraid, perhaps even intermittently aware, of having too little to serve up to the reader as it stands, so he (or she) falls back on verbal shock tactics, dislocated syntax, unnatural epithets and other affectations of singularity. There was just as much of this sort of thing as I'd found when I first read novels in bulk, reviewing in the Fifties. I see less excuse for it now, all those years further away from the origins of shock tactics in the period of *Ulysses*. Decadence has been a long time decaying. But this is a large subject.

I exaggerated rather at the start when I professed to have abandoned new fiction; in fact I had looked at enough of it over the years to expect nothing very much from a general batch of it (as opposed to a batch of crime or espionage, where, everybody knows, some formidable talents are to be found). As it turned out I had no difficulty in putting together a short list of five, though a less short list of ten might have taxed me a little. At this point I might offer a not excessively heartfelt apology to some of the writers who failed to get a place. Judging novels is very different from reviewing them, as I've tried to show in this article. The reviewer must strive for a measure of objectivity, awarding marks for effort, finding grounds for praise in books that in the end leave him cold, telling his readers he didn't much care for this or that but they might. The judge has his responsibilities too, but he must back his taste; he can't be expected to let a valuable prize, or even a packet of toothpicks, go to something he doesn't really like.

It should also be said, of course, that what appears uncongenial must not be too readily excluded, nor the inviting too warmly embraced. I fell like a ton of bricks for a book I finally excluded from my short list, instead bestowing an honourable mention: *The Moscow Option*, by David Downing. Its main attraction for me began in

its subtitle, *An Alternative Second World War*. Everything is as it was until the afternoon of 4 August 1941, when Hitler, flying west from Novy Borrisov, meets with an accident that puts him into a coma for an unpredictable time. The generals take over the direction of the war and by November, with Moscow already fallen, special units are charging across the ice to Kronstadt. But . . . Mr Downing is writing history that never happened rather than historical fiction, but within the consequent limits this is a most readable and clever tale, full of striking inventions.

Negatives are very important in estimating novels, even more so to the judge than to the reviewer. One of the best things about Muriel Spark's *Territorial Rights* is that, although set in Venice, it doesn't go on about Venice. Nothing wrong with the place, but going on about places in novels is nearly always a self-indulgence, tempting because you have the material waiting to be used up, you're eking out the narrative with it and you may impress the reader with your sensitivity. Mrs Spark doesn't care what the reader thinks of her, another good thing. And – more negatives – there's no uplift or edification here. What's offered is pure entertainment of a high order.

The characters I like best are Robert, who graduates from living off rich elderly men to blackmailing one of them and at the end is sent to train in a terrorist camp; Lina, a frightful freeloading Bulgarian girl who looks after Number One with a kind of romantic intensity; and an interfering old bag called Grace who used to be a school matron, travels 'looking lefty' in the hope of getting young people to hump her cases and says she must be off to have her lodger's supper ready and so prevent him sitting around 'like a spray of deadly nightshade waiting for someone to pick it'. The author manages to be spiteful both through and about Grace. The plot, lightly involving revelations of wartime skulduggery, is just the right size to hang the characters on.

29, Herriot Street, by John Hutton (by the way, these four are just in the order I happened to read them in), is a first novel by a writer born in 1928. That interested me, as did the absence of the smallest sign of inexperience. I was attracted too by the idea, a criminologist

in about 1970 out to interview the two surviving witnesses in a murder case of 1931. (The fictional case is founded on, without closely following, the Wallace case of that year, one I've always found fascinating.) Mr Hutton shows great skill in handling the transitions between various points in the period 1913–31 and the continuing investigation in 1970. I admire that; I find that sort of work very testing.

With so much to recommend it to me, this book had clearly got to be subjected to stringent examination. This it more than survived. The four main characters are developed with constant creativeness and truth. None of them can be reduced to any short description; they just go on revealing more of themselves and one another in some surprising and some less surprising ways. The subject, a huge one rarely attempted, is how ordinary, unexciting men and women lead their lives. (It's true that one of them is a murderer and another the victim, but I imagine most of those are pretty ordinary until the last minute, a point Mr Hutton persuasively makes.) A thoroughly satisfactory job.

The inclusion here of *Winter Doves*, by David Cook, testifies to the wonderful breadth of my sympathy. If there's anything that isn't my sort of thing I should have thought it would be a story about a love affair between a middle-aged, feeble-minded man and an embittered, suicidal, not-so-young woman, set first in a mental hospital and then among London down-and-outs. But actually I was caught from the start; interested at once, soon deeply engaged. There's an earlyish episode in which the couple meet daily in the grounds in order to stand holding hands for a time, she talking, he silent because he knows he has a voice people hate. I thought that bit was touching and awful. If he doesn't let it slip, I thought to myself, he's in.

And he doesn't. Mr Cook is absorbed in his subject matter; he finds what he has to tell so absorbing and important that, to him, it has only to be set down on paper for the reader to feel the same pity and outrage as himself. This gives him an invigorating confidence; no advertisements of the author's originality or imaginativeness are needed here. It also imparts a sense of pressure, a feeling that the book had to be written, rather than that it was about time to be turning

out the next one. And yet the result is a thousand miles away from any crude outpouring, everything under control, transitions deft, style neat and free of inadvertences. It demands to be read. I was very impressed.

The Other Side of the Mountain, by Christopher Hood, is set in South Wales and thereby raises an immediate difficulty. The South Welsh (never mind the North) are hard to write about. Outsiders notice noticeable externals and produce a caricature; natives turn romantic (or Gothic) and produce a fantasy. Mr Hood's narrator had an English father, lives in London, but knew the valleys as a child, Mr Hood's own position in effect if not in fact. From it he paints a picture that seems quite undistorted (which is as much as is needed) and is sparkingly clear and detailed: a village in the coal-belt, or rather a tiny industrial town that has lost its industry and less tangible things besides, though the author doesn't go on about that.

What most interests him (or what to me was his most interesting interest) is character, not quite in itself, partly as seen or heard in dialogue: how we reveal ourselves by what we say, the words we use. I noticed particularly Glanfawr Price Evans the television Welshman, Horace the perpetually overreacting Englishman, poor schizophrenic Kate (there are dark passages in what sets off as a bright story) and whining, ruthless, monstrous Uncle Dai. I also took to the narrator's running commentary, much more someone talking to you than what we normally understand by narrative. Mr Hood knows a lot and has thought about things; I don't know why this should make such a difference in fiction, but it does. I enjoyed every bit of it.

And now the winning entry, which emerged after much cogitation. Penelope Lively's *Treasures of Time* is one of those novels whose distinction lies all in the writing, which means that if summarised in a couple of hundred words they would sound very undistinguished, in this case like what used to be (and for all I know still is) called a women's-magazine story – not that real women's-magazine stories are anywhere near the worst kind of story. Well, the present book resembles those of the late Elizabeth Taylor in this respect, and in others too. By mentioning those others I mean a high compliment,

and I fancy from internal evidence that Mrs Lively would take it for that.

Within the chapters the novel is divided into sections of varying lengths, corresponding to changes from one character's point of view to another's or a shift backwards or forwards in time; a sure instinct governs these switches. Excellent descriptions of towns, countryside and journeys between them give a strong sense that this is England as it now looks. Strongly-drawn characters: a sad girl, another Kate, one who always puts herself in the worst possible light, knows it, and can't change; Tony, a possibly-pansy TV producer not connected to much bar TV – his film about Kate's dead father, a famous archaeologist, provides the centre of the story; fearful Laura, Kate's mother, getting everything possible out of being a famous archaeologist's widow in the intervals of effortlessly and instantly putting everyone else at a disadvantage. But the most important is Tom Rider, historian, and Kate's boyfriend.

Portraying the opposite sex brings any novelist notorious problems. Experience, flair or effrontery will solve most of them, but something more than an average portion of these qualities is needed for scenes where there's nobody of one's own sex around to act as mediator, if that daring step is to be taken at all. Mrs Lively tackles Tom head on, entering and staying in his thoughts as he goes about his business, holds his own against his elders, even Laura (a surprise there), dashes up the M1 with Tony, tries to handle Kate. It's not so much that the author gets everything right as that she moves with entire freedom; in every line you can sense her restrained enjoyment of the task. An episode in which Tom shows a party of bewildered Japanese round Oxford and Oxfordshire, apart from being marvellously funny, is significantly irrelevant to the main business. (The unity of action doesn't apply to full-length novels.)

What more can I say than that I believed, I was moved, I laughed, I was interested in it all? That last is really the most important. Oh, and the characters' names are just the names they would have had if they were real people. Not a guarantee of merit, but awkwardness in naming always means awkwardness elsewhere. No generalisations force themselves on me after my reading stint, just satisfaction

at seeing that very difficult feat, telling an entertaining story in attractive language about characters whom one can see some way into and who talk in a believable and vivid way, is still occasionally being brought off.

Observer, 1979

Sacred Cows

An early Congress of the United States debated what language the new nation was to speak. English symbolised the vanquished colonial oppressor, its sole virtue being that everyone used it. As so many of us know, it won the contest, narrowly beating German. There were also votes – not many – for Ancient Greek, as the language of the first democracy, and for a Red Indian language, perhaps Massachusetts or Cree, because it was *American*.

The second of these, even more than the first, was impracticable. Indian languages are full of horrible words like *ninitutamawahw* (Cree for 'I ask him for it') and unsuited to the expression of civilised concepts. But just suppose: *if* the first Americans had gritted their teeth and decided to speak and write Cree, one of the more probable results would be that they would now have what at present, after a great deal of conscious effort, they show no signs of ever producing – a distinctively American literature. Instead, they offer a vast number of books in English that in some ways resemble what I shall have to call British literature and in other ways don't. Those other ways are likewise non-American, whether they spring from other European cultures like German or French (the latter by direct borrowing) or from non-national cultures: Jewish, Negro. No coherent tradition could emerge from all that, and without a tradition any writer is adrift, nervously self-assertive, an individualist lost in a crowd of individualists.

The earlier American writers, living in what was culturally still a British province, were the most successful, both from the artistic point of view and in producing work that differed from that of their British

contemporaries without, it seems, conscious effort to that end. I am thinking of novelists like Cooper and Hawthorne and, among poets, Emily Dickinson, Longfellow and one who approached greatness, Walt Whitman. None of these sounded actually American – unless Whitman's Americanisms count as that – just, as I have said, non-British, which proved to be as far as it was safe to go.

Even at this stage, all was not well. The mock-Gothic initiative of Edgar Allan Poe luckily failed; not so Melville's *Moby Dick*. This enormous novel shows the author's will at work in places where it has no business to be: the style *shall* be individual, the scope *shall* be universal, the whole thing *shall* be profound, a masterpiece. The pursuit of the masterpiece has bedevilled American writers ever since, both 'creative' and critical. To be dead is no protection; so, for instance, Mark Twain, that innocuous romancer, has been made to ascend into profundity with *Huckleberry Finn*.

In the later Nineteenth Century and long after, Americans turned to the Old World to redress the balance of the New. Henry James de-Americanised himself by taking on those very traits – fuss about social position, art-snobbery, high-flown circuitous talk – that ordinary Americans most dislike about 'Europe'. To judge by results, Ezra Pound acquired global culture from a one-volume encyclopedia, cribs of certain foreign books and a few Latin texts with eccentric vocabularies. As Melville had done, he got himself accepted as 'great' (at any rate among people with rather novelettish ideas about greatness) by so obviously striving to be called so. Hemingway treated outdoor matters in an indoor – salon or café – style. Only Eliot had the talent, the intelligence and the nerve to transplant altogether and successfully.

Other writers (Sinclair Lewis, Steinbeck, Faulkner) portrayed America – the land and the people – as if this were an untouched subject. In practice the result was provincialism, ruralism, regionalism (Southernism), difficult positions to maintain in an advanced country except at a murderous price in self-consciousness. Like the move away from America, the move into it was a resort of writers who were forced to work out from scratch where to go, instead of having their path roughly indicated for them by their predecessors, as in Europe.

All the names I have mentioned are attached to bodies of work of some quantity and on a fairly consistent level, however low, perhaps as a result of the still-surviving British connection. By 1945 that was quite gone. 'American literature' began to be taught in universities there, the writers took on an even more embattled cultural nationalism, and the day of the temporary genius, helped on by Scott Fitzgerald, had arrived. When *The Naked and the Dead* appeared, I thought someone the size of Dickens was among us; I had not allowed for the fact that Mailer was an American. So with J. D. Salinger, who did struggle on for one more decent effort after the marvellous *Catcher in the Rye*. So with Gore Vidal, whose talent has declined precisely as his fame has grown. And so, at various points on the scale, with Irwin Shaw, Herman Wouk, Peter Matthiessen, Warren Eisler.

America takes her writers too seriously. (In New York, book *reviewers* get recognised in restaurants.) She regards them as key operators in the national heritage business and gives them too much too soon, thus magnifying their innate instability, making them both restless and complacent. The same desire to find and reward the 'great', and that characteristically innocent readiness to take the will for the deed if the will is signalled boldly enough, have elevated Nabokov and Bellow, neither of whom writes English. Nabokov, in a way peculiar to foreigners, never stops showing off his mastery of the language; his books are jewels a hundred thousand words long. Bellow is a Ukrainian-Canadian, I believe. It is painful to watch him trying to pick his way between the unidiomatic on the one hand and the affected on the other.

Common humanity precludes mention of any poets born after 1925 or so. Every nation is entitled to a few sacred domestic cows, and 'American literature' no doubt helps to boost morale on the home front. When it goes for export, when the fashionable view here is that people write better over there, rude noises are in order. Our own lot are bad enough; *they* are a bloody sight worse.

There are exceptions.

Undated

Art and Craft

The Craft of Letters in England, a symposium edited by John Lehmann, Cresset Press

The dilemma of the novel, the predicament of modern poetry, the quandary of the artist, the crisis of our culture – these topics have become as much a part of our daily reading as undersea fishing or vice in our capital city. But as long as a few people find time to turn out the necessary creative material for all these assessments and appraisals and evaluations and surveys, we cannot really complain. And the latest addition to the literature of summation is both judicious and readable, a rare combination of qualities in this field. *The Craft of Letters in England* is designed to mark the occasion of the PEN International Congress in London, and it will certainly do that. Not only the visiting Brazilians, Swedes and Belgians, but resident Britons, too, will find it stimulating. Mr John Lehmann has chosen his panel wisely, if a little unadventurously: we have Messrs Francis Wyndham, Philip Toynbee, Roy Fuller, G. S. Fraser, T. C. Worsley, L. D. Lerner, Maurice Cranston and others writing on the novel (two essays), verse (two essays), the theatre, criticism, the literature of ideas and so on. All in all, this is an excellent compilation, with plenty of hard thought in it and plenty of material for discussion.

If I now turn at once to the game of Why-this and Why-not-that which no decent symposium can hope to evade, it is in order to get such fault-finding out of the way. Briefly, then: Why all the genuflection before the shades of Lytton Strachey and Virginia Woolf, who score more heavily in the index than anybody but Shakespeare and Mr Eliot? Agreement might possibly be wrested from me that there is more than one tenable opinion about the Bloomsbury lot, but to imply that they still influence English letters overwhelmingly, or even strongly, will strike some as misleading. Well, never mind. Although there may be a few such sins of commission, there are next to none of omission. I did look in vain for the names of Mrs Hester

W. Chapman and Mrs Doris Lessing in the female novelist section. I found no reference anywhere to Mr Alexander Baron. And since Dylan Thomas got into the book in spite of the limitation implied in the last word of its title, I should have thought Messrs Gwyn Thomas and R. S. Thomas might have got in as well. But I quite see that not everyone can hope to get in, and especially that the inclusion of Wales would force the inclusion of Ireland and Scotland, which might not prove unmixed gain.

A more interesting approach to this survey might be along the lines of the points of agreement between the contributors, some of which Mr Lehmann has shrewdly extracted in his introduction. One he does not mention (it tends to be latent rather than open) is a suspicious and even hostile attitude towards universities, more notably the provincial ones. I should like, if I can, to still the fluttering hearts of the anti-academics by trying to convince them that even today seats of learning are often quite amiable places, where a good number of both staff and students can read and write, where academicism in the bad sense is hated just as much, and sometimes from a rather better-informed standpoint, compared with outside, and where lecturers in English are seldom seen fresh from the semantics laboratory in white coats wet with formalin and the precious life-blood of master-spirits.

But really it is lecturers in philosophy, rather than those in English, who draw the fire. I have noted – not of course with 'concern', just with annoyance – how non-philosophers are more and more taking it upon themselves to tell the philosopher what he ought to be doing, and using words like 'arid' and 'sterile' to label what they fancy he is doing. Soon, I suppose, they will be telling the statisticians to stop all that silly adding-up and start integrating the concept of the random sample into the needs of the modern consciousness. And already we find Mr Cranston faulting modern economists with being obscure – obscure, that is, to non-economists. Mr Cranston, again, faults modern philosophers with stylistic inelegance, with not treating their subject as a branch of literature. Now we all love style, but there seems no obligatory connection between it and philosophy or economics. The plea for more style ties up interestingly with

Mr Toynbee's assertion that plainness, dependence on ordinary speech, will no longer do for the novelist, and with Mr Wyndham's assertion that it is 'refreshing to find a young writer who can be accused of preciosity'. Is it? I would not be understood as faulting Mr Cranston here, but there does seem to be a lot of sonority-hunger about, a rather shamefaced nostalgia for the old purple patch. As if in confirmation, the essays of two other contributors, Messrs Alan Pryce-Jones and Paul Bloomfield, show here and there the cloven hoof of preciosity peeping out, as they might put it, among the rich skirts of urbanity.

The real complaint against the philosopher, however, is that he sells short not on style but on system. It is indeed true, as Mr Cranston observes, that 'philosophy in England has ceased to be a substitute for religion', and of this he clearly approves, but others would not do so. Certain minds must find it galling that the philosopher no longer provides the wherewithal for a sort of ontological debauch, that beauty, truth and goodness are no longer around to provide their own special brand of unilluminating uplift. From Wittgenstein to Ayer, not one of these fellows will give you a man-sized 'belief'. And of course you must have a belief if you want to do any serious writing; Mr Eliot has gone on record to that effect. I wonder if a distinction could be made between *an ideology*, which compels formulation, and *a set of ideas*, which do not need to be formulated, or even held before the attention, to have their effect. However this may be, it seems unnecessary to do as Mr Lehmann does and upbraid the philosopher for abdicating his function of manufacturing world-views. Nobody can order philosophy about.

An elegiac note frequently enters these essays: like the ideological philosopher, the literary giant has passed from our midst. Only Mr Wyndham doubts the final truth of this, and nobody at all doubts that, if true, it represents certain loss. There is a case for arguing that it could represent gain as well. The one unifying characteristic of our giants – the Jameses, the Woolfs, the Lawrences – was the immense seriousness with which they took themselves. Indefatigable writers of prefaces to their own work, unflinchingly pretentious about themselves in their letters to friends, inflexibly determined to

regard themselves at the highest possible artistic valuation throughout their huge egomaniacal journals, they grew to be giants partly (yes, all right, not wholly) because of their readiness to explain their qualifications for the name in interestingly unusual language. After all, this was England, and Carlyle had shown them the technique, and here were plenty of potential worshippers, even more than in Carlyle's day, to write the books on them: those who take themselves seriously get taken seriously. To be spared all that for the time being, even if it means forgoing some real talent, is not total disaster. There is some ground for equanimity in looking forward to an era of minor literature.

Finally, there is a point of Mr Fraser's I should like to take up. In a most interesting essay on the poet's media – his various outlets to his audience – Mr Fraser had a good deal to say on the role of broadcasting. I agree very strongly that to write with the spoken word in mind, even if it encourages dilution, must help the poet, not of course because 'verbal music' is of the least importance, but because the spoken word requires clarity. If a poet these days is interested in having his work read or heard, as distinct from having his name noticed, he must not only be clear after inspection, he must be clear instantaneously, on one superficial reading. (I do not mean that his working must yield up its all on one such reading.) Against these considerations must be set the inevitable disadvantages of the poetry recital. Poetry has the edge on music in needing no interpreter; it seems perverse to introduce one voluntarily. And readers are still usually bad, with an uncanny power of forcing their tones on the memory. This applies just as much when the poet does the reading himself: I have to make an effort, on having a look at 'The Teasers', to forget how Professor Empson recited it. Someone ought to tell some of the ordinary men readers, too, that contrary to their evident belief they are not there to do an imitation of Henry Ainley in *Hassan*. As for what some of the women readers ought to be told – I leave it to you!

Spectator, 13 July 1956

The American View

A Sinking Island: the Modern English Writers,
by Hugh Kenner, Barrie & Jenkins

It is firmly established that the focal point or centre of gravity of English-speaking culture, or something like that, has left here and come down somewhere transatlantic like New York or perhaps San Francisco. This has been accepted for so long, not only by Americans, that when in the mid-Sixties popular music took on a British accent the phenomenon was seen as a welcome redressing of the balance. Now here comes Hugh Kenner to explain that our literature, at any rate, has been no good since the year 1895.

Dr Kenner is a veteran American critic and teacher. His Irish descent, which I infer from his surname, may help to account for a certain lack of discipline in his account of our artistic decline. No wonder we write so badly in our crowded, foggy island with its dumpy little Queen (in 1895) and endemic snobbery (traceable to 1470, when Caxton frenchified Malory's diction) and all those vandalised telephone boxes in Trafalgar Square (just the other day). Dr Kenner interrupts his attack on Philip Larkin for apparently not minding the sight of lots of dismantled cars out of the train window (in *The Whitsun Weddings*) to reprehend our trains in general. Well, who could put a decent poem together on a diet of BR cheese sandwiches?

What has really deflected Dr Kenner from the true path of critical rigour can be guessed from the list of his works opposite the half-title. Starting in 1948, they deal with, in order of publication, Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, T. S. Eliot, Pound again, Beckett again, Buckminster Fuller, Flaubert, Joyce again and then Beckett and Joyce and *Ulysses*. This is not just any old veteran; this is a veteran foot-slogger or camp-follower of the old Modernist movement, or what he calls International Modernism, the prime example of which is notoriously *Ulysses*.

As Dr Kenner says of it in his distinctive idiom, 'anyone in 1895

who'd fore-guessed a book so transcendently innovative would have expected its dictionary to be French'. And, his story goes, the British were so incensed to find 'their' language used instead for an avant-garde work like that (rather a filthy one, too) that they turned their backs on it for good – on it and on all subsequent innovative works in that vein. The unforgivable crime of the tight little islanders is that they, we, refused to follow the Irish-cum-American lead, and instead set up a 'conspiracy to pretend that Pound and Eliot never happened'.

Dr Kenner's story is, needless to say, much longer and more detailed than that and it goes back much further, to 1895 in fact. By that date three disasters had hit English letters or were on a collision course with them. First, a mass-reading public had grown up, nourished by *Tit-Bits* magazine, a popular weekly anticipating the Northcliffe daily press, and by the romances of Marie Corelli, authoress of *The Sorrows of Satan*, etc. She died in 1924, but she must have injured the youthful Kenner in some awful personal way. My goodness, he does let her have it. Anyhow, what with her and *Tit-Bits* it was no wonder the British public were pretty effectively conditioned against all forms of good writing.

The second blow came from Everyman's Library, which, together with the Copyright Act of 1911, somehow stopped any of our fore fathers, and our elder contemporaries too, from reading anything published after 1870. That made us 'impervious to novelty'. And third, there was the Oscar Wilde affair, which finally burnt out any lingering traces of respect for art. Thenceforth, in British eyes, art was perverted, affected, foreign, unChristian, incomprehensible and connected with absinthe-drinking. The way was clear for Wells, Bennett, Conan Doyle and P. G. Wodehouse's Oxford doctorate in 1939.

Such is the liveliest and certainly the most original part of this book. What follows it is a series of essays on Henry James, Yeats, Ford Madox Ford and others who did less well in GB than Dr Kenner might have preferred. We hear too of D. H. Lawrence, Shaw, Virginia Woolf in discursive terms. The extent of his treatment of those born in this century fosters an earlier suspicion that we are

reading a smartened-up course of academic lectures on not very many not-very-modern English writers, with a final section on The Situation Today, or Yesterday, and a unifying theme hard to fault, that bad Brit-lit is not so hot. Among those not so much as mentioned, and presumably beneath Dr Kenner's contempt, are (novelists only) J. G. Ballard, Elizabeth Bowen, William Cooper, William Golding, Henry Green, L. P. Hartley, Rosamond Lehmann, Iris Murdoch, Anthony Powell, V. S. Pritchett, Paul Scott, Alan Sillitoe, Elizabeth Taylor and Angus Wilson.

Dr Kenner is nothing if not an academic, and an American one too, which means he can call Aubrey Beardsley's sense of line and design 'irrefutable' and find it 'orienting' to remember that Samuel Johnson died only sixty-five years before J. M. Dent was born. He, Dr Kenner, reveals his nature and outlook, his whole literary position, when he characterises *The Waste Land* as above all 'the century's most influential poem' and a 'supremely important poem'. If you see literature as a matter of influences and importances *of course* you are going to fall for International Modernism with its innovativenesses, experiments, developments and echoes, so much more inviting to lecture on than the intractable, unclassifiable qualities of an actual work of literature. *Of course* you are going to get fed up with people who go on contentedly ignoring everything your life's work has stood for. I think you are also going to lose the right to call such people Philistines, as Dr Kenner keeps calling us, but that is by the way.

It is tempting to suggest that what you get when whole generations of poets and novelists think in this way is a lot of innovative, stylistically aware, challenging, even great works that are not really much good and no fun to read, something uncannily like American literature of the present century, in fact. What needs saying to critics and others, on both sides of the Atlantic and elsewhere, is that influencing other writers, individually or by the batch, is neither here nor there, and that in literature, as in some other spheres, importance isn't important. Only good writing is.

Sunday Telegraph, 11 September 1988

Why Are You Telling Me All This?

Reading almost any piece of writing above the emotional level of a guidebook or a public notice is like listening to someone talking to you in private, talking to you alone. However well aware you may be that the words have reached and are continuing to reach countless others, you feel, in the act of reading, I suggest, like an audience of one, that is to say in a relation of peculiar intimacy and immediacy, less intense than when in company with a real person but otherwise very much the same, and unique in being so.

Accordingly you respond to what you are being told, if it is told well enough, very much as you would in life, thrilling to the adventures, chuckling at the funny bits, feeling a touch of the tender emotions when these are appealed to. This more or less simple correspondence breaks down when what you are being told consists of a passage of explicit sexual description, or ESD.

In life, the recounting of sexual confidences by one man to another (I know there are other possible combinations) is governed by an unspoken but pretty stringent contract if they are to be admitted at all. Even in the most favourable circumstances, venturing into physical detail is in danger of producing discomfort in the hearer. This discomfort is not really shock, not at any rate the sort that old ladies are supposed to feel at being reminded, or perhaps more fully informed, of the disgusting things people get up to. It is more like embarrassment, born of uneasy speculation about what sort of fellow it can be who is prepared to tell you all this. Whether he does it to boast, to indulge his fancy, to advertise his emancipation from something or other, to shake you out of your bourgeois sedateness, etc, will hardly concern you. Nor will you take the slightest notice of any pretences he may make of increasing the store of human knowledge, affected or half-baked protestations of wonderment at the mystery of it all, or suchlike. Whereas if his theme is the horror or nastiness of it all you will already have left. Very well, let it be shock, but at his telling it, not at whatever he might or might not have done.

Try as he may, the writer of such things is seized by the same trap

as his social counterpart. No matter that, by the very act of agreeing to read his tale, you have given him something of the privilege of a close friend, and that the conditions of reading make him at the same time secure from interruption and available for pondering *ad libitum*. Indeed, the fact that he well and truly has your ear only makes it worse of him. A writer has none of the real-life excuses of drunkenness, caprice, boredom. It is his considered judgement that you should be told exactly what he or what's-his-name got up to. No matter either how sincerely he thinks, or would say he thinks, that his intentions are immaculate, how loudly he protests his devotion to art, truth, love, self-understanding, the essential holiness of sex or anything else; the unbreakable connection between literature and life reduces him to the same moral level as the chap you make sure of avoiding in the pub.

It is often said that the sexual act is ludicrous to a detached observer, though opportunities to check this on the ground, so to speak, must be rare. Certainly sex is a subject very well suited for comic treatment, so much so that some accounts of sexual behaviour notoriously attract laughter against that writer's intention, and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* might be a masterpiece of unconscious humour but for the boring non-sexual bits in between. The book also provokes in full measure the irritation that is never far from the reader's mind in such cases, expressible perhaps by the grumble, 'Well, all I can say is if it was me doing it, I wouldn't be doing it like that.'

A full ESD in comic terms, if possible at all, would be a dubious venture; what little I have seen along those lines has indicated that a little goes a long way. But obviously enough the real sight of a copulating couple would to most people not be funny in the least. Most people finding themselves somehow faced with it would, from feelings I need not indicate, get out as fast as they could. A minority would stay; more practically, they would have fixed it up in the first place.

In life, that minority is a small one; among readers, not so small. These readers, voyeurs at one remove, are, of course, purposeful and responsive readers of pornography, obtaining sexual excitement from what purport to be accounts of others' behaviour. Pornography is unlike any other kind of writing. It has no analogy with the

social act of talking to someone and its reader has no sense of an author; places, time, individuals and their motives and reactions and whole lives vanish too. In this sense, as in others, it is dehumanising. And it is no respecter of motives. I mean that any detailed account of copulation, however 'purely' intended, is liable to excite sexually those whom it does not revolt, bore or move to laughter. That is in the strict sense the dilemma of the explicit describer. Some writers cheerfully ignore it and may make a lot of money, for instance Harold Robbins, whose *The Storyteller* shows its very Robbins-like 'hero' writing a rape scene in a visibly worked-up state.

Well, if you don't mind your readers seeing you in that light, go ahead and run off all the ESDs you fancy; forget that there are those to whom another fellow's sexual excitement is the least engaging thing in the world. In the present context to infer its presence is to realise that you have crossed the frontiers into pornography-on-purpose. Like many frontiers this one is often hard to draw precisely, but you can tell straightaway which side of it you are on.

To argue in this way is not – obviously, I hope – to interdict sex as a literary subject. The special importance of that subject, however, imposes special restraints on those setting out to deal with it. Such restraints are not constricting to a writer of any care or skill. Quite the contrary: the tension between the need to make matters clear enough and the need to do so tactfully can be turned to artistic account, like the poetic tension between metre and natural speech. In *Jude the Obscure* it is not just that Hardy succeeds in telling us all we need to know about Jude and Arabella, and Jude and Sue, without ever taking us into the bedroom; the manner of his success is part of the literary success of the novel. In Henry Newbolt's poem, 'The Viking's Song', a less familiar example, we hear how the raider's first forays were not welcome to the recipient territory. But, approaching the shore now,

> *Where once but watch-fires burned*
> *I see thy beacon shine,*
> *And know the land hath learned*
> *Desire that welcomes mine.*

Nothing could be clearer, or less explicit; and again, the poem would not just be less good if Newbolt had said, 'Darling, when I first started to . . .' etc, it would not exist at all.

The ESD-merchant's greatest disservice is not that of offending briefly and effaceably against good taste and good sense too, though he or she asks to be reminded that at a time when anything may be published there is a particular duty to be responsible. It is that the very nature of the enterprise reinforces the assumption that physical sex is the important part or the most interesting or only interesting part of sex. Life and a great deal of literature teach the importance and interest of those moments and days and whole relationships which are deeply sexual, but in which nobody even looks like touching anybody. Of course, the trouble with that sort of thing is that it can be quite difficult to write about. Breasts and buttocks are child's play.

Spectator, 23 August 1986

Writing for a TV Series

I first wrote for television in 1964: a full-length play for Granada called *A Question about Hell*. As was testified by the title and about fifty other quotations and clues, as well as most of the events, this was an adaptation of *The Duchess of Malfi*, set very roughly in the then contemporary Caribbean. I take critics into account no more than most writers, but I did think that, in this case, they might smile on me out of complacency at their own cleverness in having, against all odds, uncovered my source. I had overestimated them. Only two of them got it (a third scored an inner by naming *The White Devil*), and one of those two believed he had done a public service by having, against all odds, exposed a shabby attempt to plagiarise a great but little-known original. This has been on my chest ever since, so please forgive so early a digression.

Anyway: *A Question* was part of a series, but a short series, an

anthology series linked only by a loose requirement that grim or ghastly matters should be treated of. Other limitations, inherent in television as it was and still largely is, were hardly more constricting: not too many sets, not too many speaking parts, as little film as possible. Cuts for length in the original script were agreed without trouble; I had designedly written to be pruned rather than padded. Apart from the usual satisfactions and dissatisfactions of authorship, and the weirdness of eventually seeing and hearing all those non-existent persons walking and talking, the whole business was a useful exercise in discipline, though not a very stringent one.

Stringent is high on the list of things I would call writing an episode for *Softly, Softly*. Some of the factors working for stringency are obvious: inherited 'regular' characters who must be prominently displayed – I rather missed the second half of that one in my draft script; inherited 'regular' sets with the same sort of proviso; an inherited view (related to fact and flavour much more than anything moral or social) of how 'Task Force' police work is carried out. Various other limitations transpired at various stages. I could not choose which regular characters should appear. Fair enough. I could not have the murder I had originally designed, the quota for murders in this particular run of the series having been filled. Better than fair enough, as it turned out: by a mysterious yet familiar process the prohibition improved the result. For – I suppose – economic reasons, the recording of the episode must be continuous, hence the Detective Chief Inspector could not leave the pub at the end of Scene Sixteen and be in police HQ at the start of Scene Seventeen; he must duly proceed from one part of the studio to another while somebody else did something. Unfair enough at first sight, but good for discipline.

The initial proposal having been made and promptly accepted, there was a lunchtime thrash – I mean, of course, a meeting over lunch at which some problems and possibilities were thrashed out. I left with what proved to be just the right amount of jointly-agreed synopsis in my head – about half of it (the synopsis) had been crystallised into 'The chap's a shit but he didn't do it', or perhaps the other way round – and a bundle of previous scripts under my arm.

Later, more material flowed in by post, facts about the police, 'biographies' of regular characters, photographs of regular sets. It was nice to have, rather than any positive help. I was on my own.

Or I was until the draft script reading at the BBC. Thereafter, by telephone and mail, I had company enough. Having said at the one lunch, in a sudden access of modesty, that that draft must not be regarded as Holy Writ, I found myself taken at my word. The draft would make quite a nice play, but as a *Softly*, *Softly* episode, well . . . I asked for suggestions, detailed ones. They were detailed, all eight single-spaced folio pages of them. I incorporated the lot, one way and another. After several further exchanges, I had a script that was not only an acceptable contribution to the series, but a better play, too. I say 'I' rather than 'we' because I had written every bit of it. Not a single word was forced into anybody's mouth. A couple of days before the read-through, I was being telephoned to approve such restructurings as a change from 'Let's go', to 'Come on'.

All this was a nuisance to me, but it was both proper and necessary. At the time I often felt I was getting the Procrustes treatment; I soon saw that my reluctance to cut came chiefly from the simple fact that what I was cutting was already there, and the additions meant more work. To write for a series entails a compromise between the writer and the series, and that 'compromise' takes on its adverse tinge only insofar as the writer may feel *on reflection* that he has been pressed, in one way or another, to change what should have been left as it was. Not so here.

I hope I have not suggested that the exercise gave me no enjoyment. It gave me a great deal in several ways. Working with a group refreshes a man who normally sees, week in, week out, only the flat face of his typewriter. The actual writing of a script is a joy to a novelist who finds, as I do, dialogue relatively easy and everything else arduous. To be able, to be *expected*, to slam down:

1 INT. TASK FORCE CAR. NIGHT
(SNOW AND NESBITT.
NESBITT DRIVING)

in the knowledge that They are responsible for showing the car and the night and Snow and Nesbitt, clearly and quickly and believably and effectively, filled me with a sort of minor, malicious glee.

It is not all like that. For me, the production of a novel falls into three phases of an emotional state. 1. Before writing. Euphoria: god-like creation of beings and situations under no discernible pressure, until the dreaded onset of 2. Writing. Continuous anxiety. 3. After writing. Relief followed by depression followed by relief. A script is almost the contrary, as follows. 1. Prolonged anxiety about devising a complete, right-sized plot within set limits. 2. Euphoric rapid writing of draft from start to finish. 3 Anxiety about what They will say, followed by irritated speculation about what They will say next, followed slowly by relief. (Touching wood, I suppose, that, in unfortunate cases, relief is replaced by resignation or apoplexy.)

Lastly, the satisfaction of doing something new – new for oneself, of course. I believe that any proper writer ought to be able to write anything, from an Easter Day sermon to a sheep-dip handout. He will not want to write everything, nor would he benefit from doing so, but contributing to a TV series is the sort of thing that keeps in good repair what talents he may have. One or two of them might even gain a welcome sharpening in the process.

The Listener, 19 and 26 December 1974

Caledonian Attitudes

Scotland the Brave, by Iain Hamilton, Michael Joseph

The relationship between England and the other national areas of these islands has never been static, but there are signs that it is starting to change quite fast. The status of London may well be on the verge of a decline in an English as well as in a British context. The adumbration of yet another cultural 'trend' is not to be lightly undertaken these days, and nobody ought to want to give any established

regionalism a shot in the arm, but it does look as if anybody interested in what is going on in the United Kingdom has a rapidly increasing obligation to turn an occasional glance north of the Tweed and west of the Wye, if no farther. (North of Hampstead and west of Shepherds Bush will do for first-year students.)

These remarks may serve to introduce Mr Iain Hamilton's autobiographical account of a childhood and adolescence spent on Clydeside, on Lanarkshire farms and at school in Renfrewshire. His portrayal of these places and the people associated with them, of the varied and sometimes almost self-contradictory things that Scottish romanticism can mean, is sympathetic and illuminating, but in a vigorous and not an inertly contemplative way: the egotisms of the introspective kind of autobiography are sharply avoided. *Scotland the Brave* deserves a far wider audience than the localised one it may appear superficially to invite. And this is so not only because we should all try to keep up with the Jocks and what they are currently thinking, but because of the book's personal qualities.

Mr Hamilton has the virtues of honesty, humility and – above all – complete absence of that affectation which bedevils so many autobiographies, especially those in which childhood is important. Ability to re-evoke a world seen through a child's eyes is not uncommon these days, and Mr Hamilton manages it as well as most, but where he particularly scores is in describing those sudden random shifts of mood everyone has experienced and never quite – never nearly in some cases – outgrows. Those dreads and loathings of nothing very special, those trance-like lassitudes, those petrifying lonely boredoms are all beautifully caught. The author knows that it is vacuity, not sensitiveness, which fastens the child's attention on what the adult does not see, and that the tears which solitude brings are most likely the accompaniment of a jaw-dislocating yawn.

Such insights are the marks of an astringency which sets off, without ever being allowed to distort, the remembered sentiment and idealism to be found in other parts of the story. But one would not wish that sentiment to be remembered only, and it is not. Although there is abundant humour here (the adolescent's discovery that there are girls about can seldom have been treated so hilariously) and