

Letter from London

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MY STUDY is in the attic, and during the first weeks of the lockdown, the roof sprang a leak. I only found it because I was looking for a book about plague, and by a strange chance the leak was dripping onto studies of the Apocalypse, the Devil, the danse macabre, death rituals, and so forth. They seemed to be fatally ruined, their soaked pages stuck together.

I looked up online how to rescue them and discovered that the remedy is to plunge the book wholly underwater, soak it until sodden through and through, and then gently peel apart the stuck pages. Recently, during the strange void of the New Year in lockdown, I made the attempt. I sunk underwater the most richly illustrated volume, *Immagini della Danza Macabra*, a rare Italian catalogue of a wonderful exhibition in Como in 1998. Later, when I was carefully lifting and parting the limp, wet images, patting them dry and smoothing them, I found ruthless cavorting skeletons grinning up at me as they hauled off their victims, young and old, prince and pauper, bride and miser, and whirled them off to their fate—medieval visions of the plague which, in a ghastly fashion, fit the present day.

Their grim lesson doesn't make an exact match, however, since COVID-19 is not an equal leveler and is carrying off many thousands more of the less well-off, the less well housed, and the less well fed and cared for in the first place. Those of us who have houses and gardens and work that can be done at home are still in danger, but we have been proportionately far, far less assailed and snatched away. For which I know that I am lucky and give thanks.

My drowned book's gleeful jangling specters didn't only bring the virus to mind. Here in London the rampage of the illness has coincided with the last throes of Brexit; indeed the convergence helped

the Leavers hide the wreckage their campaign is wreaking on the country—as the warning on French railway crossings says, *Un train peut en cacher un autre*. But on the last day of 2020, at midnight in Brussels—11 p.m. here on Greenwich Mean Time—my country’s long union with the mainland of Europe was terminated: the decree absolute came down on a very painful process of severance. Alongside millions of my compatriots, I had never wished to part from the EU. Although we demonstrated and protested and wrote and argued, we could not stop this danse macabre spiriting away many hopes and ideals of solidarity and cooperation, as well as a wealth of practical measures. (It’s enough to make me grind my teeth like a dancing death’s-head to learn that, according to this treaty, the Erasmus Programme of student exchanges has been dropped, in direct contradiction of the Prime Minister’s assurances back in the summer.)

Medieval artists do not specify when Death’s victims in the skeletons’ grim embrace are suicides. But with Brexit it feels as if the whole of my country has committed a mass act of fatal self-harm.

However, even as I write the phrase “my country,” I’m confused as to what to call it, even though I have lived here since the age of twelve: should I have said Great Britain, or simply Britain, or the United Kingdom or the British Isles? Or England? Scrolling through lists of nations online when filling in a form often leads to frustration—where does this one come alphabetically? Under *G* or *B* or *E* or *U*? What are we called? In France it comes under *R* for *Royaume-Uni*, which can be hard to remember.

One of the effects—a feature of Brexit’s malignant reductiveness—has been to enshrine a claim on behalf of “Britain” and “Britishness.” The very snappiness of the word Brexit acted as a powerful spur to its reach and popularity, and both terms—(*Great*) *Britain* and *British*—have gained a new propaganda significance. Defining yourself as a real Brit, with that under-ear hint of “true grit,” dominated the claims of the campaign; Europeans were presented as antagonists to this historic cause.

The “Great” in Great Britain may have once only denoted a geographical comparison with the French region of Brittany, but became,

first, a description of the size and reach of the empire, and then a desideratum, a longing to retrieve “Greatness.” All this further complicates the question of what to call my country and its people(s).

Britain and *British* were most strongly associated with empire—“The British Empire,” which extended to many parts of the globe that were explicitly defined by their not being part of the metropole, Britain itself. Members of the “British Commonwealth,” as the empire became, thought of themselves, however, as belonging to the “mother country”—the writer Caryl Phillips has written powerfully about this broken pact with the Windrush generation, those men and women from the Caribbean who responded to the call to rebuild post-war Britain, and are named for the ship *The Empire Windrush*, on which the first arrivals sailed in 1948. They thought they were coming “home,” and after decades living and working here, have found themselves facing the threat of deportation. In many shameful cases, they actually have been deported.

The poet D. J. Enright, in *Academic Year* (1955), an early, witty, and thoughtful campus novel about teaching English literature in Alexandria after the war, gives a vivid glimpse of the snobberies around forms of being British and belonging to the “mother country.” He describes: “a couple at the next table were wrangling desultorily in a debased English. Neither was exactly English, but possibly both belonged to that outcast category which the English abroad were scrupulous to avoid, the British.” When citizens of India, Australia, Hong Kong, Ghana, the Caribbean, et al. settled in these islands, the adjective British traveled with them, in some cases with the added modifier, Black British. This growing identity labeling, hyphenated with other nationalities in Black British or Anglo-Indian, was modeled, from the seventies onward, on the example of the United States; recently, however, such categories have become more contentious, and the current favored handle applied by policy makers is BAME, which is used as an adjective. (The Royal Society of Literature recently appointed “its first BAME chair of council,” as the official announcement ran.) BAME stands for Black Asian Minority Ethnic. I confess that such labeling goes against my own sense of equality and inclusiveness, and

over the years the term has raised much controversy with the communities it aims to represent and enfranchise. But today, the use of BAME has settled down as an approved, even progressive, move and has been frictionlessly adopted by younger generations as a straightforward counterpart to LGBTQ+.

The racism of the Brexiteers was always denied in public by the leaders, but among themselves supporters trusted that, once out of the EU, immigration would end. The atmosphere in “Britain” has been tainted by a promise—from the then Home Secretary, Teresa May—to create “a thoroughly hostile environment” for foreigners; Brexit gives this legitimacy. May was talking about “illegal” claimants for asylum, but Brexit has succeeded in turning Europeans into illegals. She was maneuvering, like many politicians over the decades, to outflank the nationalists in the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP—the “Kippers” as they came to be known), and it suited them to lead many people who were being immiserated by their own government’s austerity to diagnose EU laws and economics as the chief cause of their left-behind state. A long-term effect has been that “British” is now associated with bigotry, just as the Union Jack has been turned into the Brexiteers’ party flag, reviving Paul Gilroy’s prescient cry in *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack* (1987). (Nigel Farage, the founder of UKIP, even took to wearing customized Union Jack shoes.) The likely consequence of Brexit will be that Scotland will secede, followed by Wales, while Ireland will unite to avoid all kinds of obstacles, such as the customs border in the sea. Eventually, the list of countries online will have to include “formerly the United Kingdom” as it once included “formerly the Soviet Union.”

In 1992 the historian Linda Colley called her landmark study of national identity *Britons* and asked, “Who were the British? Did they ever exist?” “Rule Britannia!,” composed in 1740 with words by the poet James Thomson, became the rallying cry of the new patriotic, political union against Catholics, French revolutionaries, and later Napoleon: “Britons never—never—never—will be slaves.” They were imagined to descend from Brutus, the great-great-grandson of Aeneas, and therefore, like him, a Trojan, an arrivant from Asia

To find a nation of such barbarous temper
 That breaking out in hideous violence
 Would not afford you an abode on earth.

.....

What would you think
 To be us'd thus?

It is a magnificent piece of oratory against “mountainous inhumanity,” eerily prophetic in its portrait of exclusion and prejudice.

Interestingly, More’s entreaty also applies to a writer’s task of entering others’ minds, as Ali Smith has done. Four years ago, she set out to chronicle events in this country as they unfolded, from the Brexit referendum in 2016 to the end of the process; she was writing almost in real time against the clock with a far-reaching cast of characters and produced the quartet, which begins with *Autumn* and closes with *Summer*. One of the multiple threads keeps winding back to immigrants and immigration in the past and today, puzzling over attitudes to foreigners that reached their nadir with Brexit. In the third book, *Spring*, her protagonist is a young woman who, in a period of high unemployment among youth, is glad to have found work as a guard in a detention center; her author has called her Brit. Smith follows Brit’s changing involvement, first in eager compliance with the demands of her job and the policy of harsh deprivation imposed on the inmates, and then her gradual withdrawal and awakening to the injustice of their conditions. The whole quartet is engaged, idiosyncratic, and at times lyrical, with a determined quest for sparks of hope and decency. Ali Smith is an allegorist and a Shakespearean wise fool: she loves a pun, is gifted with serendipity and synchrony, and her voice is rueful sweet.

It is commonly thought that Leavers hanker after the glory days of “Great Britain,” when the sun never set on the empire, and are possessed by nostalgia, and, above all, by memories of World War II, that they are reactivating the Battle of Britain and the Spirit of Dunkirk—Rule Britannia! Wishful historical epics, both in the cinema and in live reenactments, have had a potent effect on this yearning to retrieve the past and reinvigorate national pride. But the story of

British as a term doesn't bear out this reading alone; anti-Europeans now emphasize that national sovereignty has been regained, and that isolation is a price worth paying for all the mess and debt, alienation, and increased bureaucracy after Brexit. I think this concept of sovereignty revisits a historical moment more recent than the Second World War, namely the end of empire. Brexiteers see themselves as lighting out on their own, renouncing dependency and grasping autonomy. Just as India, Nigeria, and many Caribbean islands once colonized by Great Britain exulted as they pulled down the Union Jack to emancipate themselves from their master, Brexiteers saw themselves hauling down the star-studded flag of the twenty-eight countries of the EU, which they view as an imperialist and alien power. I think this perspective reflects a nationalist romanticism from the era of independent liberation movements in the sixties and seventies and is hopelessly superannuated. It's a vision of pride and nationhood that held when many of the leaders of the campaign were growing up, and which sadly led to the failure of valuable efforts at transnational federation—in the Caribbean, in the Arab world. The difference is that Brexit, its supporters claim, will reactivate the reach of the Union Jack over contemporary global markets. So in one sense, the nationalism of Brexit is belated, but in another, it masks, under slogans of patriotic nostalgia, a very contemporary, ever deeper subjugation to giant transnationals and the China hybrid of capitalist totalitarianism. (It is also sobering that while regaining "sovereignty" is trumpeted as the prime achievement, parliament itself was given one day only to read twelve hundred pages of the treaty, so that the agreement, whatever it said, was rushed through without the independent debate and scrutiny that union with the Europeans was alleged to repress.)

The catalogue of empty promises and falsehoods goes on and on. Of interest to me here, however, is the shift in associations of the word *British* itself. It never came easily to my tongue to say "Britain," or to call myself "British," but even less now when the word carries such depressing freight of political delusion.

I've always thought of myself as "English"—and usually mention that I am half-Italian from my mother's side. There is no adjective

from United Kingdom any more than there is from United States. I would never say I was living in Britain, but rather in England, partly out of an instinctive and unarticulated sense that Scotland, Wales, and, above all, Northern Ireland have a right not to be subsumed. They have distinctive histories and cultures and languages. Other regions invoke a distinct ethnic cultural identity but are not kingdoms—or no longer so, and not yet. The Cornish claim to similar recognition has been growing, and the language, which was almost extinct, is now cultivated by keen Cornish men and women, some of them irredentists. The list of discrete cultural streams flowing together could be expanded: the writer Alan Garner, a very fine, mystic fabulist, draws on the lore and dialect of his birthplace, Cheshire, in classic fictions like *Red Shift*; Ted Hughes drew on the local idioms and lexicon of Yorkshire; Daljit Nagra and Grace Nichols mix Punjabi and Creole into their poetry. The variety of Englishes spoken and written is more and more marked.

When it comes to describing our culture, some writers, such as Paul Keegan in a highly original, gorgeous anthology (*The Penguin Book of English Verse*, 2004), and John Kerrigan in *Archipelagic English* (2008), have proposed, instead of the vexed term *English* literature or the unknown phrase *British literature*, the word *archipelagic* to reflect the constellation of islands that make up the region and to sidestep the manifest difficulty that Ireland is a salient player in the culture, but the Irish Republic is emphatically no longer one of the nations included in Great Britain / UK. Seamus Heaney reflected hard on this conundrum and, taking a cue from the historian Hugh Kearney, proposed the term *Britannic*—but it has not caught on.

Heaney had struggled throughout the most violent convulsions of the Troubles to keep faith with his multiple inheritances—Catholic, Irish, Ulster, English, farming, scholarship, manual labor, literature, masculinity/femininity. At the level of language itself, Heaney kept the hum of the Irish in his ear as he was writing in English and sounded echoes from the Anglo-Saxon of *Beowulf* and the Scots of Robert Henryson in *The Testament of Crisseid*. Roy Foster's recent luminous study of the poet quotes him saying that "Simply being called

‘Seamus’ . . . made his position on Northern Ireland implicitly clear, as the name’s Gaelic provenance implied a nationalist background.” As he wrote in “Whatever You Say Say Nothing”:

That Norman, Ken and Sidney signaled Prod
And Seamus (Call me Sean) was sure-fire Pape.
O land of password, handgrip, wink and nod,
Of open minds as open as a trap,

Where tongues lie coiled, as under flames lie wicks

The schism that has split the whole of the country over Brexit has cut deep into wider discussions of identity and history: on the one hand, glowing—and best-selling—accounts extol British fair play and glory (Andrew Roberts on Churchill in 2018 and Boris Johnson four years before); on the other hand, in a fury of horror and lamentation, Carmen Callil explores the violence of her native Australia’s colonial history in *Oh Happy Day* (2020); before her, in 2017, Pankaj Mishra, with *The Age of Anger*, issued another blazing denunciation of empire. In 2020, the curator Dan Hicks’s *Brutish Museums* (the play on words that picks up its sound associations) lacerates the “acquisition” of the Benin Bronzes, their installment in the British Museum, and the looting and massacres that went into creating our temples of knowledge.

To mitigate this imposed confinement to Britain and Britishness, petitions for alternative nationalities, through a parent or grandparent, have been growing apace. The Irish embassy has had to take on more staff; queues are long. Because I can’t bear being hauled out of Europe, I’ve also started the process to acquire Italian citizenship. In my case it requires a legal suit because until 1948, according to a law of citizenship established by the Fascist government, an Italian woman who married a foreigner was stripped of Italian nationality. And so, when I was born, my southern Italian mother had perforce already become British.