

THE WRITER IN ISOLATION

Roderick Haig-Brown

A SURPRISED EXPLORATION OF
A GIVEN SUBJECT

THERE CANNOT BE, for a writer or for any other man, complete isolation. He will not find it in a monastery, nor in a hermitage, nor even in the careful architecture of some retreat especially designed towards that state. Influences are everywhere and the very fact of withdrawal, if he attempted it, would be in itself a most powerful influence. A writer is, by definition almost, a man sensitive to influences; he may reject them or accept them, search for them or flee from them, but he cannot be neutral or unfeeling about all of them.

The isolation of my title, then, is something at once less and more than the impossibility of withdrawal. It has no special reference to the “social consciousness” that was considered essential by many writers and critics of the depression years, nor to the “engagement” of postwar writers, especially Europeans. It simply refers to the writer who, by accident or design, has placed himself and done his work largely beyond the reach of intellectual groups or associations. How does it work out? Is it good or bad, satisfying or disappointing, confining or broadening? If a deliberate choice does it serve a useful purpose? If accidental, does it lead to frustration and indifferent work?

Absolute isolation from outside intellectual and artistic influence should produce that rather vague being, the primitive. But true primitives are rare creatures in a time of universal literacy; a painter or a musician absolutely without academic training or sophisticated influence is a possibility; but a writer’s basic skills are taught in school and no one with literary inclinations, even though they may be dormant, is likely to

evade all acquaintance with the writing of the ages. So a writer's isolation is likely to be qualified almost from the beginning. Someone will have tried to teach him to write more or less acceptably in his own language, and he will have experienced in some measure the power and effect of good writing. If he has any natural skill and ability, this may well be enough to start them working for him.

Most young writers feel strong doubts about the quality and potential of their skill, as well they may. After all, anyone can write. Why should one man's writing be of value, another's worthless? Where is there a test, whence can come the beginnings of self-confidence? Where can be found the assistance or instruction that will transmute ordinary writing into writer's writing?

The natural answer to these doubts, and the almost inevitable fate of the urban writer, is association with other writers, established or aspiring. Nearly all artists turn to such associations at some stage of their careers. Some treat them lightly and casually, some take them very seriously and use them extensively. Some men become lost within the groups so formed, contributing much within them and nothing at all outside them; still others find refuge from their own incompetence in talk of art rather than artistic production; others again contribute greatly and produce strongly; others may pass quietly, almost unnoticed, and go on to become important artists or great patrons or businessmen or ditch diggers.

There is nothing very strange about this. All professions and interests tend to associate among their own kind and all such associations contribute more or less to their participants. There have been some great and successful associations among artists—forced associations such as that of the Impressionists, purposeful associations such as the Group of Seven, deliberately chosen associations such as that of the Pre-Raphaelites, natural associations such as those of the eighteenth century coffee houses, casual associations such as those of Paris and Bloomsbury between the wars. Every capital and most large cities of the world breed them and have done so since the flowering of Athens. They are always of some importance to the individuals concerned and occasionally of importance to all civilisation.

It is these associations that the writer in isolation denies himself, either deliberately or through force of circumstances. Does he gain or lose? Obviously it is an individual matter and can only be discussed in terms

of individuals. And when I think it through, with a mind always faulty in recalling what little it has learned, I realise I do not know who were, or who were not, writers in isolation. Herman Melville, perhaps, and W. H. Hudson, Thomas Hardy, Kipling — but it won't really do; these men may have been independent of groups and group influence, but they were not out of touch with other writers of their times. Thoreau seems like a lonely man, but he was never far from his group. Old Izaak Walton, simple and contemplative though he was, regularly foregathered with such noble minds as Henry Wootton, John Donne, John Hales, Michael Drayton and Ben Jonson.

Among the artists I think of Winslow Homer and, paradoxically, the Group of Seven. Why these? Because they set out to see a new continent through new eyes, cutting themselves off as best they could from academic theory, and they succeeded. But surely there had first been training, associations, discussion and understanding of the older theories before a new theory could develop. They merely did what most artists of value do — they grew through associations and went out boldly into the isolation of maturity and production.

Consider, at the other end of the scale, those amateurs of painting and literature who are to be found in almost every Canadian settlement, however small. A few are primitives, unashamed as Adam and Eve before the serpent gave them an interest in life, and their work should be protected from the light of day, with flaming swords if necessary. Most are in touch with others like themselves; they may grow alone and produce alone, but they are not really in intellectual isolation.

When the topic of this essay was suggested to me, I readily assumed that I had some claim to be considered a writer in isolation. Now I am very doubtful about the claim. I was raised in a stoutly philistine atmosphere of athletics and field sports, but it was broken by a number of good school teachers and by a good post-school tutor; it was broken, too, by the memory of a father and a grandfather who had written.

By the time I was eighteen I had sold one or two short pieces of writing and was working in Pacific Coast logging camps. But I was not in isolation. For one thing, I read a good deal and not altogether badly; for another, my companions nearly always knew that I had ambitions as a writer and did not hesitate to advise and guide me. I recall dozens, if not hundreds, of bunkhouse discussions not a fraction less intense, if possibly

less recondite, than those of the most vigorous intellectual groups. My friends were realists to a man; they begged me to tell the truth, all the truth, not as poets and writers and film directors see it, but as they themselves saw it — the daily truth of hard work and danger, of great trees falling and great machines thundering, of molly hogans and buckle guys and long-splices. They made a profound impression.

In my early twenties I began to publish books and soon found myself on the fringes of intellectual groups — in London, Seattle, Vancouver. They were mixed groups generally, film and theatre people, a few writers, painters, musicians and those non-practicing amateurs of the arts who are often the strongest members of the groups. I contributed nothing that I can recall, invariably felt myself immature and insensitive, yet learned a good deal that removed me still further from the simplicity of isolation. Remembering my friends in the bunkhouses, I even became afraid of learning too much. I had a belief that if I could apply a straightforward mind to a wholly new country, then in some miraculous way the power of the pen would do the rest and produce literature. This was a conscious fear and a conscious belief and both, I think even now, made some slight measure of sense. I was never very happy with the theories of the groups and felt no urgent need of them. But I wonder if I did not withdraw mainly because of a sense of my own deficiencies. I lacked the intellectual background, the depth of reading and the measure of artistic understanding necessary to take full part in such groups. Rather than face the problems of learning in public, I turned towards an isolation where I supposed I could learn for myself.

I wonder sometimes whether I might have become a better writer if I had talked and listened more to theories about art and writing. But it is a profitless wondering. I am not a person who takes kindly to groups. I mistrust, for myself, most theories of writing that do not fit with my own instincts about it. I feel that showing unpublished work to other writers not directly connected with its publication is a form of indecent exposure. I am fearful of too much close analysis of style and purpose, because I feel it may destroy both. And I believe too much talk before audiences, however small and select, wastes a writer's substance. Occasionally it may sharpen something in advance of the actual writing, but too often it simply defers the hard test of writing — sometimes forever.

Even in retreat from the fringes of my uncertain groups I did not find,

nor really seek isolation. I married an intellectual, far better read and artistically far more sophisticated than myself. She has an untiring mind, which has grown steadily, and I have not been able to hide from it or run away. A hundred areas of thought and theory that might otherwise have remained closed have been opened to me; a dozen disciplines are there to test careless adventuring or shallow expression, a multitude of enthusiasms to stimulate and suggest. These are seldom spoken things or applied directly to the craft a writer must always ply alone; they are the simple outgrowth of living and companionship and by far the more powerful for that.

Few serious professionals, be they poets, novelists or essayists, can afford to live and write in isolation from the science of their times, and I am no exception. Biologists, educators, lawyers, sociologists, psychologists and a host of others expert in their various fields have directed me with influences as hard and unshakeable as those of my early bunkhouse mentors. It is true that they influence thoughts and conclusions rather than the techniques and emotions of writing, but this scarcely makes them less important or reduces their impact on the protective rim of isolation.

Lastly, there are the quiet and easy associations of maturity, the voices of those wise and experienced friends with whom one discusses many things for the sake of discussion, for the sake of broader understanding and deeper sympathies. These also are influences, fine shadings of influence that make larger differences than all the hot and anxious arguments of youth. Nothing, perhaps, is farther from isolation than these, no influence more subtly corrective.

It would be hard, I should think, for a writer of plays in English to live very far from London or New York. Producers, directors, actors, the very theatres themselves are all part of his life and his craft. Away from them, here on the shores of the Pacific Ocean for instance, theatre itself seems less important, a remote and artificial medium instead of the lively and powerful one it really is in its proper setting. Film, radio and television are less remote, but one still tends to approach them, if at all, as an outsider, a provincial. This, for the writer of books and verse and ordinary prose, is a beneficial isolation; he is largely spared the urgings and importunities and temptations of these other crafts.

But the writer of books and verse and ordinary prose is never in any degree cut off from the excitements and discoveries and stimulations of

his own craft. Books, reviews and criticism are his for the reading and no man has the advantage of him in this because reading at its best, like writing, is a solitary affair. A book read in New York or New Denver is the same book and carries the same values for the same reader. Books alone, without radio or television or films, without groups or discussions or any other intrusion of man, totally destroy intellectual isolation. And this is a type of destruction that few writers are likely to feel any inclination to resist. Jamie Anderson, the fur trader's son, rhyming his Cariboo ballads in Barkerville during the gold rush, might have been a better poet if he had never heard of Robert Burns. On the other hand, he might not have written at all.

I have written of isolation as though it were at once highly desirable and completely unattainable. Neither suggestion is altogether accurate. As Domdaniel told Monica: ". . . creators must simply do what seems best to them. Some like solitude, some like a crowd." Some writers like to think slow thoughts and struggle with them alone; others like the brilliance and stimulation of constant intercourse with their peers. Neither is likely to produce poorer work for doing what he likes, or better work for doing what he hates.

I think I have been overly afraid of influence or possible interference with my natural inclinations and such natural ability as I have. I know now that neither of these things is easily shaken or distorted or perverted. Any writer who has the necessary minimum of integrity can readily afford to expose himself to influences of all kinds without fear of loss and with some real chance of gain. Yet talk is a danger to writers. More than that, talk is a positive, ugly menace. Talk is so much easier than writing, its satisfactions are so immediate, that some of the need to write is all too easily lost in it. It may be true that no man will talk himself out of being a writer if he has it in him to write, and no doubt some men have capacity for both. But I think the frustration of enforced silence is good for most of us. Young writers who meet in groups to discuss their own work would be better at home writing more and talking not at all; and old writers who yield to the incessant demands of service clubs and other organisations are bleeding energy they need for the vastly more important business of writing. Even service club members can read if they would; and if they want a writer's words, the printed page is where to find them.

I have said nothing of the intrusion of economics upon isolation. They

do intrude, as every professional knows. If communication is the purpose of writing, which I devoutly believe, the intrusion is not always vicious; it may even be a healthy discipline. Publishers, agents and editors understand communication; their guidance is usually important and often artistically valuable. They can easily interfere too much, but the wise ones do not and the wise writer always knows where to draw the line of his treasured isolation, as surely as he knows when he can yield to economics without harm to his faiths. I have known moments of panic and despair at the thought that London and New York were thousands of miles away, but one weathers these. The mail serves somehow, the needed advance arrives, the commission is negotiated, the editorial doubts are resolved. And in the long run remoteness still serves a useful purpose. One is protected from easy dependence and from small interferences that do not travel easily by mail. Associations with publishers, agents and editors are likely to be among the pleasantest and most satisfying a writer can have. But a measure of distance helps to preserve respect on both sides.

In the end, all writing is isolation. A man observes and absorbs readily enough among his friends. He may test ideas or sharpen argument or search for encouragement in talk. But he must mature his thought, develop and control his emotions, plan his work, alone. And he must write it alone.

Whatever measure of isolation I have known, I do not regret. Writing is the most natural of the arts because it stems directly from man's daily habit of using words to express his thoughts and emotions. Refinements of style and technique, sophistication of thought and approach, are desirable in their time and place. So also is freshness, sometimes even simplicity, of view and the impact of the uncluttered mind upon the ancient scene. Reconciling these two propositions is by no means the simplest of the large personal problems every writer must face. I believe some measure of isolation is helpful in this, but at the same time many outside influences must play their part. It would be as absurd for the novelist of 1960 to come to his craft in the same frame of reference as Richardson or Smollett or Fielding as for the automotive engineer to go to Leonardo for his ultimate refinements.

No man, not even the primitive, has ever written from a vacuum. There are always influences, sought or unsought, subtle or obvious, fundamental and superficial. A blade of grass or a city street, a fine mind or a

rough one, friends or enemies, love or hate, joy or fear, reasoned argument or unfettered emotion, any or all of these things and many besides have made their impact upon the mind that guides the pen. Isolation can never be more than a matter of degree. It would be grossest ingratitude for me to deny my influences by claiming to have written always in isolation.

