“No Other Island”:
Shima complex and the tragi-comic otherness of the Isle of Wight

Abstract: This essay presents a consideration of Englishness refracted through and anecdotal and discursive reflection on the way the microcosm of an island mediates Englishness as a condition of national identity, peculiar to islands. The island chosen for consideration of this “exemplary singularity” is the Isle of Wight, given its peculiarly overdetermined status – at once rural paradise, Brexit voters’ haven, extended retirement community, and locus of much counter culture activity over a 50 year period.

Keywords: counterculture, class, popular music, national identity, Englishness, postmodern narrative

An apocryphal anecdote, with which to begin: so the story goes, and has done for a number of years for anyone moving in the increasingly diminishing and always small musical circles of the Isle of Wight – or, following Fanny Price (allegedly) in Mansfield Park, “the Island”, as I will occasionally refer to it (Fanny Price, c’est moi!), if only so as to introduce a sense of variation concerning a location about which there is none – ; there were once two brothers, Foulkes by name, who had the idea of staging a small music festival in 1968. And they did, Jefferson Airplane headlining, with other acts appearing such as Fairport Convention and the Amazing World of Arthur Brown. This small event, held in the even smaller village of Godshill – reputedly named so because at some point in the 13th century, God decided one evening to move the church from the bottom of the hill where it had, allegedly, been built, to the top, much, one supposes to the surprise of the residents there, the morning following – was such a success, that the Foulkes brothers decided to hold a second festival the following year. So, for much of 1968 and early 1969, they worked tirelessly, using pre-modern methods such as the telephone

1 Much of this essay is anecdotal, not to say apocryphal, and therefore not suitable to footnoting of the more obviously scholarly kind. Most literary references are passing and do not require crediting, they are not being cited. There are exceptions and those will be noted accordingly. The adventures of Ray Foulkes and his brother were related to me by Ray, during a book launch at Dimbola Museum and Galleries (once home to Julia Margaret Cameron), August 20th, 2015.
and letters, in order to organise the second of what would be three festivals. The second was held at Wootton, a slightly larger village, unhelpfully divided by a wide creek leading to a marsh and wetlands. Joe Cocker was booked, as were The Who, the Third Ear Band, and the Nice. But thought one of the Brothers Foulkes, Ray by name, we need a much larger act; who to get? How about tempting Bob Dylan out of retirement? Dylan had already been offered a headlining spot at Woodstock and turned it down. Neither Ray nor his brother knew how to get hold of Dylan.

So Ray set off to London, across the raging waters of the Solent (all 7 km of it), to brave British Rail (part of the mythical good old days of nationalised industry) and the 100 kms to the capital, and walked the streets of Soho until he found Bob Dylan’s British agent – who, one imagines, must have had very little to do at that time. Dylan’s agent told Ray it was unlikely Dylan would reply to any letter, but gave him the address of Dylan’s US agent. Ray being an enterprising youth managed to get hold of the phone number of this agent, and collecting enough coins for the phone box, placed a trunk call – those were the days – to New York. Being connected, Ray asked if he was speaking to Bob Dylan’s agent. The reply he received was “this is Bob”. Ray quickly explained, in between the voice of the operator saying “another 2/6d for three more minutes, please”, who he was, what he was doing and where it was going to be done. Dylan apparently asked “what’s the Isle of Wight?” Not “where” but “what”. The ontological concern is not one of indifference, as it happens. Ray replied, “it’s a small rock off the south coast of England”. Dylan then, perhaps a little out of left field, asked: “anyone famous ever live there?” Ray felt beads of perspiration breaking out on his forehead, in the time honoured tradition of all apocryphal clichés. In what seemed like an age, but which, Ray believed afterwards was merely a few seconds (the operator hadn’t chimed in again), he replied to Dylan, “Alfred, Lord Tennyson”. Dylan responded, “I’ll come”. At the time, Dylan had, by chance, become fascinated by Tennyson’s poetry, presumably not realising that the poet had not written a decent thing after he moved to Freshwater. (Also once home of Julia Margaret Cameron; more of her and Tennyson shortly.) Renting a farmhouse in the village of Bembridge on the north-east coast (Bembridge is itself an island within an island, abutting the coast on one side and separated from the rest of the Isle of Wight by small waterways and tributaries), Dylan stayed for more than a month, inviting the Beatles to stay with him, encouraging rumours that the Beatles, and not The Band would be Dylan’s backing band, and so see a return to live performance by the “Fab Four”. Whether Dylan ever visited Tennyson’s house in Freshwater is unknown. Certainly Tennyson never visited Bembridge, its one literary connection being through Oscar Wilde, who visited briefly in 1884, to give a lecture on fashion (what else!?) and to meet, by chance, a young woman whose name would become used for a character in The Importance of Being Ernest: A Trivial Comedy for Serious People – Cecily Cardew. The 1970 Isle of Wight festival, also organised by the Foulkes brothers, may have been a much starrier affair, with Chicago, The Doors, The Who, Miles Davies, Joan Baez, Jethro Tull, Free, Emerson, Lake & Palmer, Leonard Cohen, Joni Mitchell,
Sly and the Family Stone, and, of course, Jimi Hendrix, whose performance it turned out was to be his last (“play the Isle of Wight and die”, might well be the motto), with an audience of 500,000; but in 1969, Wootton had Dylan, Woodstock didn’t.

Anecdotes aside, what this brief cultural history might suggest to you, is that the Island seemed at one time the centre of counter-culture, although equally it was also a hotbed of Tory gentry mentality and all that this implies. Though the 1970 festival brought about an Act of Parliament banning such gatherings as potentially threatening to the nation and politically and culturally subversive, nothing could be further from the truth. The Isle of Wight, despite its pockets of musical resistance, and the occasional famous musician – not to mention the odd cannabis farm, and rumours of much family inbreeding, in villages out in the west, or “back of the Wight” as it is still referred to – is, and has always been, a largely, almost exclusively white, petit bourgeois suburban holiday retreat, as well as a now largely defunct farming location, agribusiness having consumed many traditional family farms that had occupied the Island for generations. The Isle of Wight is England in miniature, with all the negative connotations that such a phrase might suggest to you, particularly in the recent cultural context of Brexit. The Island is poor. It has some of the worst achieving schools in Britain, high unemployment numbers, and all the attendant problems. Picturesque £2,000,000+ homes owned by weekend visitors and second-home owners nestle in bucolic lanes, less than 100 metres from dilapidated social housing, in the garages of which, the youth, suitably tattooed and pierced, cook crystal meth, while their parents read right-wing, nationalistic tabloids, which proclaim how Brexit will be finally a freeing of Good, True English People from the Norman yoke. (No, really.)

It should really not be surprising therefore that such a small island as the Isle of Wight has hardly inspired much great literature. True, Wioletta Grzegorzewska lived there for a while, while establishing her reputation as author Wioletta Greg, but Tennyson’s output aside, you can just about count the number of novels concerning themselves with the Isle of Wight on one hand. There are the three novels to which one might turn one’s attention, these being Julian Barnes’ England, England, Wish You Were Here, by Graham Swift (particularly miserable, even by his standards), and Lynne Truss’s funniest fictional work, Tennyson’s Gift. (There is too a novel concerned with the late 1970s and early 1980s by the author of this essay, Silent Music.) Even though borrowing his political and ideological themes quite possibly from the Ealing film Passport to Pimlico (made in 1949; taking the long view of the English island mentality, the words plus ça change, were this not a foreign tongue and therefore anathema, spring to mind) Barnes can be forgiven with hindsight for being prescient in his 1998 novel about a Rupert Murdoch figure, Sir Jack Pitman, who buys the Island with the intention of turning it into a theme park, when he wrote of the Isle of Wight:

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“Then there was the question of what should happen immediately after Independence. Suppose that the new Island Parliament… decided on a policy of nationalization. Bad news indeed for the banks and stockholders: but what could they do? The Island, regrettably, would not yet be a signatory to any international agreements… Of course [Sir Jack] would promise to repay creditors. In due course. At some percentage. After a great deal of debt-restructuring. Oh, it made him feel good to contemplate it. Think how they’d be shitting themselves”.

Only the most remote hermit reading this today would fail to realise the resonance with the shenanigans of Brexit. To quote the puff from the novel, “as every schoolboy knows, you can fit the whole of England on the Isle of Wight”. In Lynne Truss’ Tennyson’s Gift, a novel in which people spend a lot of time running away from, or chasing after one another, avoiding American tourists, and never being on time for tea or dinner (“It was a curious fact, remarked on by many visitors… that whatever time you arrived for dinner, you’d missed it”), the painter G. F. Watts makes the political point somewhat more obliquely, yet as tellingly nevertheless: “The Isle of Wight has the great advantage of being near yet far, far yet near”. Satirical political critique aside, there is nothing remotely humorous about Graham Swift’s Wish You were Here, only that illusory experience of Tom Luxton’s being that “when he’d crossed the water, a strange, light-hearted mood had gripped him”. This being a Swift novel though, this is hardly going to last.

Novels aside, there are also a handful of poems, including work by Auden, Tennyson, and John Betjeman, and a play by Virginia Woolf, titled Freshwater. (Woolf, a cousin of Auden, and niece of Julia Margaret Cameron, spent some of her childhood summers with her sister and family visiting Cameron; the play is possibly an inspiration for Truss’ novel.) But other than these, there is little else, save for several of the once best-selling novels of the now neglected and almost obscure novelist Maxwell Gray (the pen-name of Mary Gleed Tuttiett), whose most famous Island novel is the sensation narrative, The Silence of Dean Maitland, which is set in Gray’s fictional version of the Isle of Wight, as are several other of her novels, which attempt to do for the Island what Hardy’s novels had done for Dorset and the south-west of England. Among modern novels though – Barnes, Swift and Truss being the most significant – the Island is largely a place of comic-tragic farce, and what I call in my title the “shima” complex. The word “shima” is Japanese, meaning Island. The Japanese refer to the “shima” complex when asked what makes Japan and the Japanese singular. The response is, in Japanese, shima-guni. We are island people. Idiosyncrasy, singularity, cultural pride in national difference summed up in a single phrase. While I am arguing that there is a “shima” complex in the literature of the Isle of Wight and in the Island itself (which arguably may be seen

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6 Lynne Truss, Tennyson’s Gift (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 2010), 37.
7 Truss, Tennyson’s Gift. 56.
8 Swift, Wish You Were Here, 119.
as a microcosm of all Britain, in its own “island” condition, which some patriotic “idiot” had once referred to as a “sceptered isle... this precious stone set in the silver sea”), this complex or condition is hardly comparable with the intention behind the Japanese phrase, unless ironically. It is rather, as we will see more akin to British comedian Tony Hancock’s famously and deliberately bungled misquotation of Shakespeare’s lines, a “jewel set in a septic sea”.

Peter Conrad turns his attention briefly to the Island’s cultural history in Islands: A Trip Through Time and Space, introducing the Wight by suggesting that “we travel to such islands in quest of sun, not enlightenment, “holy days become holidays”. Such is the commercialization of particular islands, or as he puts it “the most approachable and urbanized, that simultaneously, bargain basement, cut-price mammon is presented with a “glow of rapture”, found in such places not in visions or epiphanies but cheap alcohol and cheaper theme parks. The Isle of Wight led the way, in the early Victorian era, with the discovery that sand in different colours could be sold in glass vials shaped like animals, or hearts, or anything else the glass blower’s imagination would allow. Though “kitsch” is not a native English word, the native English embraced it with abandon and glee. Indeed, such is the kitschy condition of much of the commercialized Isle of Wight, with its garlic and llama farms, its sand art and animatronic dinosaurs, that England is a virtual paean, albeit a highly ironic one, to this materialist tradition.

As a(n admittedly extended) side-note to this, when T. S. Eliot was drafting The Waste Land, early versions indicate a family of a minor businessman from Highbury taking a vacation in Shanklin on the south side of the Island. Pound thought the location too déclassé for someone from Hampstead (as it was to become) and insisted on Eliot relocating the holiday destination to the south coast, somewhere more “suburban”, all bourgeois without the “petit”, such as Bognor Regis instead. (A town of which, despite its royal appellation, King George V remarked, “bugger Bognor” – in The Waste Land, buggery implicitly falls under the purview of Brighton, an altogether more dubious location.) Still, we can always rely on Dickens even in regard to the Isle of Wight, who, taking his heavily pregnant wife to Ryde (opposite Portsmouth) for a holiday while writing Oliver Twist, insisted, despite her heavy bouts of morning sickness, on reading to her in their

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10. Patriotism is a form of ideological idiocy, a limit to thinking the other or being unthinking apropos the other, and is given its quintessential expression in the line that follows my remark from Shakespeare’s Richard II, the remark being John of Gaunt’s. (II.i.40ff.) Of course, like many speeches of Shakespeare’s that are pointedly ideological, this death bed apostrophe is just a little indeterminate, making it available to a strong reading. Gaunt prophesies the fall of the kingdom, which in the context of the 21st century has a certain ironic register, given Brexit’s own ideological bêtise.


15. Conrad, Islands, 71.

hotel, The Prince Consort, drafts of the brutal slaying of Nancy by Bill Sykes. The passage from Eliot though was excised almost entirely, reduced from 11 to 4 lines, those which remain referring to Highbury, Richmond, and Kew. What we can read from this now silent passage, with its small, pathetic pride expressed in the affirmation of one’s “people” as “humble and conservative”, is the voice of the petit-bourgeois Tory and Brexit voter once more, the kind of person who buys a retirement home on the Island (and they are there in their legions, not quite the walking dead, more a shuffling pack hanging on in a mixture of what Roger Waters referred to as “quiet desperation” and what Elvis Costello pithily termed “pitiful discontent”. The speaker of the erased Highbury clan is not the heir of a Company Director, merely the daughter of a small business owner, whose life is consumed by the business, as that in turn is anthropomorphized in the excised lines, being “small” and “anxious” (presumably like its proprietor). The anonymous voice takes pride in belonging to a community of suburban conformity and humility. (Today, were she Polish, she would vote PiS and excoriate drinkers of lattes and people who ride bicycles and eat vegan food.) The very lines enact the unadventurous sentiment of the collective psyche for which this voice speaks. Here in deceptively mild expression is Eliot’s cynical dyspepsia manifested in and by the middle classes once more. The intensity of Eliot’s animosity is sounded out in the apparent reasonableness of utterance, which still manages to imply complaint in its repetition of “business”, and the fact of its limitations as indicated through the location of the family home, the destination for the annual holiday, and the remembrance of a day’s excursion to the somewhat wealthier, and certainly genteel suburbs of south-west London. Evidently, once more Eliot was keen to get the tone of this vicious caricature just right, in changing the Highbury residents’ holiday location in the excised passage from Shanklin, on the Isle of Wight, to Bognor on the Sussex coast as I have said. What is edited from the passage is the extent of the critique, its narrative clarity, its small affirmation of family and community, of settledness, of the very kinds of existence that the Isle of Wight encourages and which Barnes, Truss, and Swift expose in different ways, to greater or lesser degrees. Perhaps the lines are removed because, it might be argued, they could explain or excuse the sexual rebellion on the river on the part of Elizabeth and Essex. One cannot tell. From the marginalia we see that Pound was in two minds, instructing Eliot to “type out this anyhow”, while Eliot was dissatisfied already, having struck through the lines quoted and already at work on the rewrite. (Pound did find the moment of sex in a canoe “echt”, though; it rang for him as true or real.)

Eliot though is not alone in his apprehension of island life – I mention his London suburbs as, being, in themselves small islands, therefore mediations of the Isle of Wight as, once again, England in miniature – among modernist poets. In 1936, as Peter Conrad tells us, a new railway line “from London to Portsmouth made possible quick connections to the ferry that crossed the five miles of water to the Isle of Wight”.

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17 Conrad, Islands, 70.
This was celebrated by a documentary titled *The Way to the Sea*\(^\text{18}\), with a musical score by Benjamin Britten, and a commentary by W. H. Auden. Eliot’s island bound holiday makers are as much types as Eliot’s: they are, in Conrad’s words, “lonely”, or “trapped in tedious marriages”; all though, in Auden’s words “‘seek an island’” as a locus of some modern version of spiritual renewal or, as with Eliot’s modern suburbs “some sort of erotic fillip”. However, this is deeply ironic, for as Conrad points out, the Isle of Wight, with its “pocket-sized landscapes”, was “the last place in Britain to succumb to Christianity”. I would suggest that for many parts of the Island, it still has yet to succumb. There are still villages, it is said, where one does not go after nightfall, the men are men, and the sheep are afraid. As in Auden’s mildly acerbic vision, the Isle of Wight remains a place where “Narcissists undress and parade their bodies, while the sedentary and the shelved vegetate in deck chairs”. If the Isle of Wight is definable, it is as a locus providing a countersignature to every other romanticized and post-Romantic projection of the utopian and transcendent qualities of other literary and cultural representations of islands. It is a place where, again to cite Auden, escape is into “‘the happiness of the immediate present’”\(^\text{19}\). That “happiness” though is always ambiguous, it is the reverse of Lewis Carroll’s jam tomorrow, or jam yesterday, but never jam today. The Isle of Wight offers, all too often, if one has even a mildly critical eye, a place without present or past – and consequently is not so much the site of a moronic inferno, but rather what Paul Weller once described as a private hell. As Conrad notes, the Isle of Wight began “fictionalizing itself in the 1840s when an entrepreneur opened an amusement park at Blackgang Chine: [the place where Victorian tourists poured different coloured sands into little animal shaped glass figurines, to take home as souvenirs of a prehistorical world] here [observes Conrad] you can now reel from a tropical jungle to a cowboy town…, from a smugglers’ cave”, and so forth. (72) As Conrad concludes his overview, the “‘bliss’ the Island purveys depends on our capacity for self-deception”\(^\text{20}\), and this captures all too well the condition of England, and all too dire, all too banal English condition, which the Isle of Wight imprisons, encapsulates, and then packages for retail opportunities. The reality of the Isle of Wight is and has always been as a “community” or series of communities conjoined by gossip, rumour, farming, sex and death, qualities and experiences that abound in what today be called a blockbuster, Maxwell Gray’s marvelously overheated rural melodrama and sensational bestseller, *The Silence of Dean Maitland*\(^\text{21}\), first published in 1886, and having appeared for the first time in a scholarly edition at the end of June, 2019.


\(^{19}\) This and previous quotations after: Conrad, *Islands*, 71.


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