

## INTRODUCTION

*In our previous issue, Tom Nairn's essay 'The Bourgeois Nemesis', foundational for NLR, appeared for the first time in English. In this number, four other articles, which came out alongside it in 1963, in the same double issue on Britain of the Italian journal Il Contemporaneo, are translated back into English, as the original texts no longer exist. These comprise Peter Wollen on the cinema, Raymond Williams on fiction and drama, Eric Hobsbawm on the social order of that time and Ralph Miliband on the prospects for Labour. The quintet of pieces published in NLR six decades later, striking enough as a set, made up less than half the length of the symposium in Italian. That included articles on the visual arts, music and economy; a short story by Alan Sillitoe; a script for television by Arnold Wesker; a conversation with Joan Littlewood; poems by Michael Hamburger, Geoffrey Hill, Ted Hughes, Philip Larkin, R. S. Thomas and others. Heading the issue was an introductory sketch of the cultural and socio-political landscape of the country, 'From the Suez expedition to the Profumo affair', by Giorgio Fanti, who put the double number together. A text on Fanti follows the articles we have had retranslated. Nothing like the collection he assembled existed in Britain itself. It was a remarkable feat. Is there anything comparable to it, published in any European language (including English) in the subsequent sixty years—a symposium of such length, with such a galaxy of talent from the target country, in any journal of a host country? The sad answer is simply, no. The lands of the European Union, which boasts of its cosmopolitan breadth, remain provincially preoccupied with themselves, their elites too ideologically at one to trouble themselves with the cultural or intellectual differences between the countries they rule. Lack of curiosity, born of confidence in political identity, is the hallmark of the caste.*

*The conjuncture in Britain that generated the coverage of Il Contemporaneo bears, in at least one respect, a close resemblance to that of today. Then, as now, Ukania is at the fag-end of thirteen years of Tory rule: the regime in place no less discredited, its economy flagging still more visibly, the Labour Party all but universally expected to return to office at the next election, looming less than a year ahead. Mark Twain's adage that history doesn't repeat itself, though it often rhymes, naturally holds good. Sunak, a more proficient leader, is not Home. But his party is much less popular today than the Conservatives remained even in 1963. It is highly unlikely it will come as close to clinging onto power as Home did in 1964. On the other side of the aisle, Starmer cannot hold a parliamentary candle to Wilson's performance*

as leader of the opposition, acknowledged even by opponents as a bravura display of eloquence, trenchancy and wit (evaporating in office). But Starmer's lead in the opinion polls is to date much larger, and control of his party absolute, which Wilson's was not. Like Blair, on whom he would like to model himself, and unlike Wilson, he enjoys the benevolence, not just of such reliable stand-bys as the Guardian and the Mirror, but also of the megaphones of the business press, the Financial Times and the Economist. That a clear-cut parliamentary majority for Labour might still prove out of reach is a function, not of any improbable Conservative comeback, but of the fragmentation of the political scene to which Ukanian decline has led, with the SNP still in power in Scotland, and the Liberal party leading the challenge to many a southern Tory seat. Yet the first-past-the-post system still favours the post-war dichotomy of the two big parties, whose logic is Starmer in comfortable command at Westminster. With Labour nearing power again in 2024, Miliband's prognosis of the outcome in 1964 has lost little of its critical edge today.

Socially and culturally, it is another story, as the texts of Hobsbawm, Williams and Wollen bring home. The class divisions of the country are not the same; the composition of its rulers has altered; its trade unions are weaker; sexes and races are less unequal. Britain's economic plight is graver, with a fall in the growth of productivity and per capita income steeper and more sudden than any drop in the past, whose causes remain to be explored. Culturally, perhaps above all, nothing comparable to the iconoclastic vitality and mordancy of the arts and satires of the early sixties has been visible since. Could the spectacle of a Public Prosecutor in Downing Street do something to alter that?