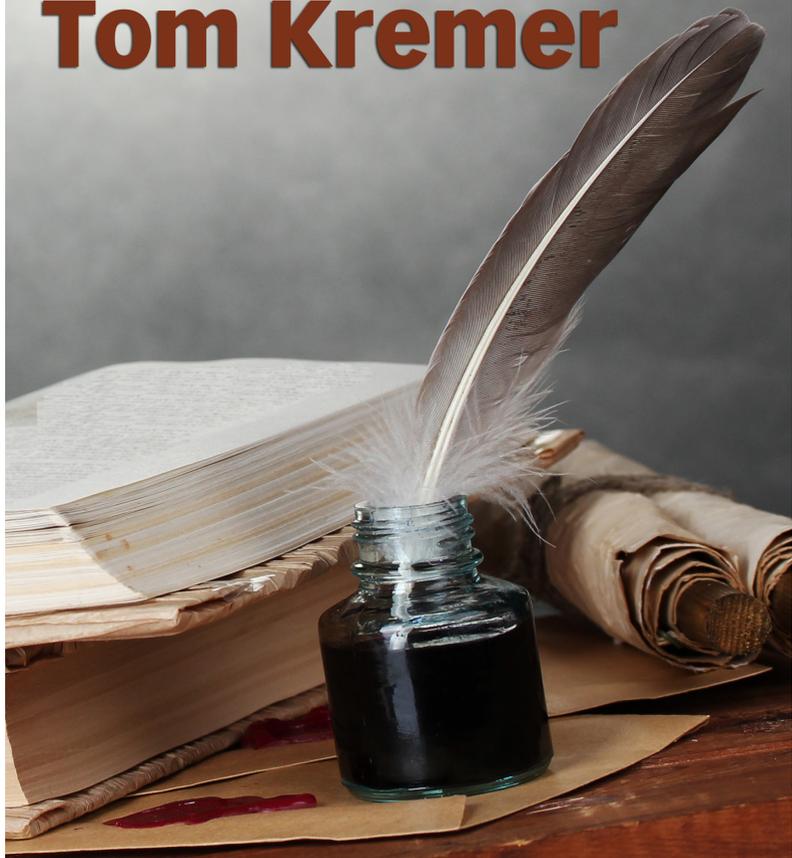


Essays

by
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Abu Quatada

For those of us who read the daily press cursorily or not at all let us re-state very briefly the simple facts. Abu Quatada smuggled himself on a false passport into this country in 1994. Since then he has established a family here of a wife and three children who have all been housed, dressed, fed and generally maintained in comfort at our expense. Abu Quatada did not have the time to earn the money needed to support himself and his family because he was otherwise engaged. Instead of working to provide a roof and bread for those dependant on him, he has devoted himself full time to teaching and preaching a version of the Moslem religion that is contrary to the most elementary and fundamental guidelines of our society. We believe that our people should be allowed to choose their faith, say more or less what they like, be equal facing our courts and pursue freely their lives so long as it does not encroach on the life of others. Abu Quatada teaches the very opposite.

He would like to envisage a society founded on a strict religious dictum of the very few where people could not say or do what they liked and the idea of equality played no part in the proceedings. Iran and North Korea come nearest to what this would mean but the notion propagated here goes even further than that. A tiny proportion of our laws is concerned with a limitation to the principle of free speech. We can say what we like, wherever and whenever we like to say it. The active propagation of his ideas with an incitement to the violence required for effecting such a transformation of our society led inevitably to Abu Quatada spending a great measure of his time in our jails. After many long years the somewhat futile legal encounters reached a final and fairly obvious conclusion. The ultimate decision of the highest court we have has been the natural repatriation of our guest to Jordan, the country of his origin and nationality. He was to be put on a plane and deposited in Jordan, back from where he came to us, cheatingly, in the first place.

The story of Abu Quatada, expensive, incredible and troublesome as it has been, reached finally a conclusion. Or so we thought. What came as a horrible surprise, for almost everyone in our midst, was the intervention of a European Court of Justice forbidding the repatriation of our illegal, cheating and dangerous guest, to his own country. It may be difficult for most of us even to entertain the premise on which the judgement of the European Court was grounded. Apparently, the extradition of anyone who smuggles himself into our country back to his country of origin, does not depend on anything he does, or does not, do here. He may commit the most repulsive and deadly of crimes, he may constitute a living danger to the well being of our community, and we in turn may prosecute and punish him as severely as our

law allows. But what we cannot do, according to the relevant European Court, is to send an individual back to his own place, no matter how he had wiggled his way into our country, unless the court is satisfied that he would be treated at home by the same justice and civility as we are practiced to expect here.

Reading these lines, it is almost incredible to believe that they apply fairly to a reality we all live and the reality we all know. The fact is, however, that our leading politicians, as our leading legal authorities, not only believe this to be the case, they also act in the full acceptance of it. The man has been released from prison and now lives happily here, in the bosom of his locally acquired family. His home is apparently carefully surrounded and watched by a goodly number of policemen who are expected to be aware of all communication that may, or may not, reach his followers here or abroad. Such surveillance, with so many officials and with such sophisticated means, has not been available to any single individual in this Kingdom thus far. Conservative estimates of the cost involved are running at about one million pounds a year. We do not know, of course, how long this situation will last. Theresa May, our Home Secretary, is reputed to prepare a flight to Jordan in the hope of extracting a promise from the authorities there safeguarding the terms of Abu Quatada's treatment before and during his trial.

It is not possible, of course, to predict the treatment that awaits prisoners awaiting trials in Arab countries, or almost anywhere beyond the boundaries of the more civilised European states. But, of course, this is not the point. Theresa May's proposed trip may, or may not, materialise. She may, or may not, succeed in extracting promises of one sort or another from the Jordanian authorities. Abu Quatada may well escape the retribution of countries that find it difficult enough to manage their affairs even in the absence of any violence. None of this matters. The sole purpose of this essay is to help set the boundaries of the nation state and estimate more accurately her independence.

Britain evolved slowly over the last eight hundred years to become the state that it is today. From what may be termed as an absolute Monarchy, at the Norman invasion of the eleventh century, to the parliamentary democracy we currently enjoy, this evolution is characterised by at least one capital feature. No foreign power ever governed us. We have consistently and stubbornly governed ourselves. This is such a fundamental fact that only foreigners can really be aware of what this means. The people of the Baltic States or the Balkans or those inhabiting countries occupied by the Germans as recently as the second world war, can never be unaware of the reality of independence.

The founding members of the EU, France, Germany, Italy and Holland, traded in their independence with a full realisation of what this meant. The central preoccupation with what such a trade involved has been at the very core of the Union's creation. The first founders and those following closely behind never lost the sight of what was being exchanged. Facing the Second World War and its consequences has been the primary impulse to launch the European project. Giving up a huge chunk of their independence and gaining other, and different, advantages has been at the root of the communal agenda. The reward for Germany has been the re-admittance to respectability. France took over, once more, the leading continental role. Holland's life depended on her agriculture and international trade, both principally Europe based. So their calculations have never been basically ours, especially so if you take into account the 'independence' factor. What they gave up, they never substantially, and always, possessed.

All this may seem tantamount to theory, not so relevant in practice to the immediate case of Abu Quatada. In fact, on the contrary, the present situation highlights one of the most important elements in the future of the European project. For, slow, stumbling and uncertain as we have come to be, we have not lost completely our centuries long, deeply felt innate attachment to the certainty of independence. We simply cannot accept to be subject to laws conceived abroad, judged and interpreted abroad, and settled by people who have never imbibed our different way of life.

What crucially differs here from our continental counterpart is the close, and always practical, relationship between those who make and practice the law on the one hand, and the general public who has the misfortune of coming in periodic contact with this legal world, on the other. Most of our civil law was inspired in city chambers around the Middle Temple, where the practitioners were mostly brought up in the profession by their spiritual elder brothers. None of them was allowed to forget for an instance the intimate relationship between the law and its victims, between the law and her practitioners, or most importantly, between the law and ever present circumstance of actual life. And here lies one of the most important distinctions between the continent of Europe and Britain.

Over the last forty years, ever since we became members of the European Union, our legal competence, developed painfully over many centuries, has suffered a significant erosion. This process was so gradual, so subtle, so encumbered in the details of every augmentation of the underlying treaties, that we have learnt to accept the most far-reaching changes in the fundamentals of our statehood almost without any resistance. At no point through this profoundly imperceptible regress could we ever have contemplated the present impasse. It is almost impossible to believe that

we needed someone else's permission to repatriate a criminal whose entire focus and ambition is to destroy a state we built up over 800 years.

It would be quite interesting to see in some detail how such a major transformation actually took place but such an examination would require at the very least another essay. What is urgently needed right here and right now is to understand and digest the essential divide in Europe between the culture encapsulated with traditions of the Roman Law as against a culture embodied in the Common Law, lived and practiced hereabouts. The vast majority of the inhabitants of the European land mass inherited, developed and practiced legal systems manufactured in major seats of learning. The universities of Bologna, Delft and Amsterdam, among a very few other distinguished centres, created legal realities characterised by two major factors. Everything had to be served and resolved in writing and the underlying principles had to be derived from, or related to, survived bits and pieces of what functioned very well about a thousand years before. To be a little more accurate in this domain, there is an important sub-division within the continent of Europe between the German, Dutch and Scandinavian countries on the one hand and the French inspired rest, on the other. The legal realities in the first lot, for historical reasons, come a little closer to our culture while everything that follows applies, more strictly to the bulk of our neighbouring land mass.

In complete contrast, the English Common Law evolved gradually in line with the actual daily life of the local population. As such, and significantly, the practice of this Law depended less on ancient embodied texts and much more on the spoken word uttered always in an open court, in the presence of a jury made up of twelve members drawn, by luck, from the environs of the accused. And, even more significantly, this Law was not fine honed in distinguished seats of learning but followed one precedent after another the judgement of judges schooled not in the remote academia but grounded in the daily life of the community they served. That is why it has taken a few generations to restrict the beating of wives to a rod no thicker than the husband's little finger, and a few subsequent generations before the beating of wives was no longer acceptable. That is also why a practicing criminal lawyer will have to have at least ten dinners with members of a chamber before he has the luxury of appearing in court to take up his chosen function. The sharp division between solicitors and counsels here does exist at all elsewhere on the continent.

The most profound difference of the working law here from its continental counterpart is not simply an unfortunate historical accident. This divergence provides a crucial key to the understanding of our dubious adherence to the whole European project. The sanctity of the written word against what we hear on first

hand or see with our own eyes, just about sums up one of the most questionable assumptions of the EU. The British social and political structure has always rested, in the final analysis, on the man in the street. The continental equivalent, almost everywhere, has been left in the hands of highly trained specialists. The law, and all that goes with it, has been entrusted to the upper section of chosen centres of learning. Juries of equals, evidence given verbally by living and actual witnesses, a judge to control the form and not the content of a case, are still considered on the continent as a peculiar British eccentricity. The case of the French fishing industry could never be understood otherwise. For over ten years fishing went on in the Mediterranean with nets that never distinguished between large and small fish. This was clearly and unequivocally against the European law, designed to safeguard the future of local fish. After more than ten years of illegal fishing the French were fined by some millions of Euros, a sum that merely dwarfed the surplus they continually enjoyed from the very outset of the Union.

The same kind of duality is present in the relationship between tax authorities and the general population. In my experience, the starting point here is that people are honest, even when filling in their tax returns. Of course, when this is questionable the tax authorities will swing into action and pursue the case for many years if need be. In France, exactly the opposite applies, everybody is suspect but at the end of two years all is wiped out and forgotten. Or so they say.

Returning to Abu Quatada after these remarks, the matter is quite simple. After some forty years of somnolence we have just woken up. No one can possibly fail to see what can happen if we give up our absolute right to do what is in our power to defend the particulars of our imperfect democracy. It seems to me that giving up our enshrined right to deliver people like the reverend Abu to his own natural home is tantamount to giving up the most precious portion of our independence: the absolute right to defend our country.

France

In human relationships triangles, on the whole, do not work. Two men and one woman do not, generally speaking, form a long lasting, coherent and stable group. The same applies to an organic group of two women and one man. There is always an element of competition, jealousy and strife within such groups which forebodes its ultimate dissolution. The same pattern applies when human beings are substituted by nation states. When two states of more or less equal strength find themselves in the same neighbourhood, periodic confrontations have proved unavoidable in the historic past. But, on the whole, these clashes resulted in wars and peace conferences that adjusted relationships without destroying the continued existence of the warring parties. Something like this took place through centuries of rivalry between the Scandinavian states, between Spain and France, and between France and Britain.

In the course of slow moving centuries these relationships changed profoundly only with a corresponding dislocation of the equilibrium. So it was with the successive rise and fall of the dominance of Norway, Denmark and Sweden, and again, in the seventeenth century, with the diminution of Spain and the break up of the Habsburg domain. Two centuries later, after the demise of the Sun King in France and the revolution that defined all subsequent revolutions, history demonstrated the same configuration. The brief but spectacular Napoleonic trajectory opens a nineteenth century characterised by the emergence of a powerful Germany, a dominant but circumspect British Empire and a much travailed France. Defeated and occupied, split in half by the Dreyfus affair, the twentieth century finds a convoluted country grimly hanging on to its former Gallic pre-eminence.

After Talleyrand manipulated his way into the Vienna peace conference in 1816, the century opens with five powers: Austria, Russia, Germany, Britain and, remarkably enough, France. At the end of the century, the same five powers still maintain enough eminence but the equilibrium is significantly altered. Austria is approaching disintegration, Russia withdraws, Britain is still a pre-eminent world empire but with a diminishing weight in the continent, France is confused, divided and weak, and Germany, ambitious, powerful and victorious, wants more, much more, of the palatable world.

In this dramatically changing continent one feature is constant. Constant and powerful enough to imprint itself on its future form. Napoleon, with all his vices and virtues, created the foundations of a unique educational system that holds good

to this very day, two centuries later. In contrast with what was taking place in the rest of the civilised world, the French ideal was built on personal ability alone. From primaries through secondary schools and branches of higher education any advance was selective and dependent on competitive results. From then onwards it was only academic merit that mattered. Class, money, parental connection, provenance were all sacrificed. To get from Primary schools to the finest Lycees, from there to the great Universities and particularly to what they termed the Ecole Normale Superior, depended on your personal command of language, thought and the quality of its expression. In this domain, with her few thousand elite, France remained supreme. With this numerically small class of people, France succeeded to aligning Britain and the US during the first and second world wars. It was these people that took a conquered, weak and demoralised country, over fifty years of strife and hard labour, to the very summit of the top table. It is thanks to them that we are where we are.

Monnet, the originator of the idea of a European state in the Twenties, was French. The drafting of the successive treaties, the ever growing bureaucratic administration, the dominant figures at each level, the political leadership through those first fifty years, has been Gallic through and through. This is perhaps the most astonishing fact in the creation of the Union. Astonishing, because at the beginning of it all, in the years just after WWII, France was a defeated, conquered, disintegrating and confused piece of reality. Her Communist party was foremost with well over 30% of electoral support in the country. Yet within less than two decades France assumed the leading role of a distressed but slowly re-emerging continent and two more decades later she was firmly established at the head of the EU. By then her work was done, her objective accomplished and the shape, form and content of this union, bearing all the Gallic imprints, presented the world with a typical, new and old, French reality.

Yet, in spite of the assiduous construction of this political union, within the half century of its creation, the world had dramatically altered its shape. Even more significantly, the European triangle at the very base of its foundation has been transforming itself. The France of Napoleonic dimensions has lost its economic eminence and a political power to dominate a continent. Britain, having gradually and painfully withdrawn from the status of a ramshackle world empire, began to focus its energies on finance, its trade on markets closer to home, and on the culture of its language and political institutions which stood the test of time across many, many centuries. Germany, in the meanwhile, reached at last the political status that it craved for the best part of two hundred years, in line with the character of its people and proportions of its growing and stable economy.

So the triangle on which the European Union was built is still there but its shape

and form has so far altered that it is necessary to hazard a guess to its future fate. Just how strong are its bonds, how tenuous the links, how compatible the differences, how good is the fit. One of the principal keys to this particular door is France, so it is helpful to start with her. If politics is about the interplay of power between individuals, classes, parties and institutions, diplomacy must have the same parameters except that it takes place between nations or states. One of the principal considerations that apply to politics and diplomacy is that their language and thought processes should, on the whole, correspond to the material world in which they take place. If a politician bears too far from generally perceived reality, he will lose his audience. If a diplomat tries to negotiate an unrealistic agreement, he will almost certainly fail. But remarkably enough, this self understood principle, somehow or other, does not seem always to apply to the France of the last two centuries.

For how can we otherwise reconcile Talleyrand's intervention at a peace conference to which he was not invited and which resulted in France keeping its primary position in the European continent? And how can we explain the ability of France to organise a massive alliance surrounding Germany after her complete capitulation to those far superior forces barely thirty years before. And if this was not enough how did she succeed in bringing in the United States to help clinch the conflict in 1918. And in the negotiations that followed in Versailles a year later, how did she manage to range her more powerful allies in the imposition of a peace treaty on Germany which not only secured for her Alsace Lorraine but also led to the collapse of the Mark and the emergence of Hitler a few years later.

But, even more amazingly, coming to the recent past, we have to ask ourselves by what means, by what exceptional talent, did a devastated, morally and physically bankrupt country, smaller than Germany, take over the leadership of a major continent like Europe. It is, of course, evident that the post-war scenario was unusually favourable, even inviting, for someone with a single, all pervasive, purpose and exceptional diplomatic/political orientation, to make a significant move. For the major powers of a world war centred in Europe were all clashing, exhausted, or otherwise engaged. The US, most powerful of all, had its interest and forces spread across the globe; Russia wanted at first to envelope the continent but once rebuffed, directed its energies to Asia and Africa; Britain was absorbed in transforming its society and winding up her empire; whilst Germany, suffocated in the mires of the Holocaust, focused her attention purely on an economic revival,

All this presented a wonderful opportunity, but by no means an easy one, for someone to mount the central stage. One cannot, should not, underestimate France's monumental achievement. WW2 left behind her a ruined continent. Yet, exactly as at the Vienna peace conference in 1816, miraculously, France was

adopted from that moment on as a fully fledged partner among the victorious few. She was given full authority to administer a quarter of Berlin, with rights to equal the US, Russia and Britain. Over the next two decades, despite the bloody loss of the Algerian province, in the face of her dominant Communist party and under the massive Russian shadow, France re-emerged as the principal parent at the birth of Europe's new political union. From then on, throughout the next three decades, she provided the principal drive and authority for the creation of her legal, financial and economic structure. In one word, she was the boss. The framework, the matrix, the management and workings of the European Union are French all the way. In fact, it can be truly said that the entire administration of the EU is more French than its equivalent in France itself. Naturally so because the EU has always lacked the underlying national soil where the populace could form a powerful resistance to a bureaucracy overreaching itself. The great difference between the EU and Britain, for example, can be most clearly seen precisely here: laws and regulations are formulated, codified and enforced with an ease and speed never experienced at Westminster.

Thus the French. At the same time what has taken place in Britain? Nothing much. Nothing much if one considers the age long, gently moving constitution, the centuries old legal world, the priorities of good family connections and the well established democracy of political life. But within the same time frame, the British empire was dismantled, the trade unions grew massive with a corresponding welter of worker's rights and the country succeeded in joining the European Union. This joining was a very painful affair. De Gaulle, in charge of the EU, rejected Britain's first attempt in the Sixties and when Heath succeeded in swaying British public opinion in 1974, he did so by an absolute guarantee of preserving the Democratic way of life which has been one of the most important features in the history of life in this country. We did know, of course, that this promise could turn out to be one of the most outrageous lies of the twentieth century. And so it proved. The erosion of British independence was smooth, gradual and mostly free of serious reaction right until the furore erupted with the compromised conclusion of the Maastricht treaty under the premiership of John Major. From then on the integration of the continent encountered an altogether more rough and slippery road. Five significant economies, with Britain among them, refused to abandon their currency in favour of the newly created Euro. The compulsory plebiscites held in Holland, France and initially in Ireland, rejected by a clear majority any further deepening of the integration. The continued, top down enforced and still growing European entity which reached its apex in Lisbon three years ago, reinforced in Britain precisely the opposite trend. Quite clearly, the great majority of her people wanted less and less to listen to the commanding voice of an undemocratic Bruxelles, less and less prepared to adopt laws going against the grain, less and less wishing to live the life

of continental countries that failed politically, ending their lives in war. This is where we are now, now that Britain refused to go along further integration merely to save a dodgy Euro, probably on its last leg.

What about Germany, the third side of this current, convoluted triangle? For the best part of the two last centuries, ever since the emergence of Bismarck on the European horizon, Germany, more than any other country, played a decisive part in the history of our continent. Ever since Prussia defeated the Austro-Hungarian empire in the middle of the nineteenth century, the German side of the European triangle had a preponderant influence on our own history. As she assembled herself, swallowing Bavaria, and all the smaller states around, demolishing France and taking to her bosom Alsace Lorraine, Germany was set to be the dominant force in mainland Europe. At the turn of the century the gradual disintegration of France was highlighted by the Dreyfus affair dividing the country into two symmetrical halves. The Catholic Church, still powerful, the wealthier upper class, the army and half the intellectual elite were engaged in a fatal confrontation with the other half of the intellectual elite, a republican and highly self-conscious, professional middle class. The confrontation was never fully resolved, even with the return of Dreyfus from the deadly islands and the moral dismemberment of the country continued apace.

At about the same time, on the other side of the channel, the Conservative party, under the Salisbury/Balfour leadership, began to be aware of the first tremors threatening an empire built with such difficulty over the previous few centuries. It is only thus, at the emergence of a powerful Germany and a desperately weakening France that we can understand the circumstance of the creation of the Entente Cordial between France and Britain in 1904. Balfour, one of its principal architects, clearly wanted a free hand to maintain an Empire stretching across the whole world, leaving a less dangerous France, with her superb diplomatic skills, to assemble a coalition of anti German nations to face an ambitious, voracious and aggressive force intent on taking over the continent.

Thus were the critical lines drawn on the map of the continent at the beginning of the 20th century. On the one side an avid Germany, all ready to enlarge its reach to accommodate her growing industrial might and on the other a distraught France desperate to encircle the gathering menace by a chain of minor allies, more or less meaningful at the outbreak of the open conflict. Britain, in accordance with her custom, did her unsuccessful best to keep out of a land based struggle. The late but crucial involvement of the US, the subsequent peace treaty, the collapse of the German Mark, the rise of Hitler and the whole story of the second WW, are too fresh and too well known to need any reminder. Suffice to say on the broadest

lines the two wars, and their outcome, were remarkably similar. Of course, the US became by far the most dominant world power with communist Russia not too far behind and Britain allowing her empire to be deconstructed while engaged in transforming her society at home. But, most relevant of all, neither Germany nor France altered significantly the trajectory of their destiny as a result of the fateful two world wars. Germany, without adding an inch to their landmass, now finds herself in the industrial forefront, well above Britain and France. And France, despite leading the creation of a political continent over half a century, is not too far where she was at the end of 1900. Her ability to introduce and maintain the class of people prepared in her institutions in key positions of the new entity has not diminished. Madame L. as the head of the IMF is a good example but she is just one spectacular appointee among many similar cases. At the same time, the current French President, M. Sarkozy, with his haphazard, febrile and ill considered observations, exemplifies perfectly the confusion that governs French thought. Their economic status has sunk deeply below that of Germany as it ambles along at the second order in line with Britain's, Brazil's and South Korea's. Britain, in the meanwhile, is maintaining a vague but substantial Commonwealth and provides the home to what is fast becoming a universal language. Both France and Britain have very similar nuclear and military capacities, far superior to the ones employable by Germany.

So now we have the emergence of a new European triangle, shaped quite differently from the one we used, and got used to, over the last two centuries. We have to adjust our sight, take new measurements and reform our expectations of a very uncertain, fast moving, future. Germany has been the most stable side of a once more or less equilateral triangle. She has continued to excel in the different branches of a technically advanced industry. The German optical instruments, fridges and kitchen apparatus, cars and dental implements are still leading the world. They work in coherent groups, always aiming at minor improvements and keeping ahead of their Chinese competitors, and often partners, by at least two or three crucial steps. There are few strikes by union of workers for the simple reason that the leaders of these unions have often a constructive task allotted to them at a managerial level.

The one major obstacle in the evolution of inevitable German dominance is their more less, endemic war guilt. The Old Testament refers to this phenomenon quite clearly and distinctly. It says that God only forgives such major sins after three or four generations. We are now in the political hands of the third generation. Merkel's grandparents were steeply mired in the Nazi holocaust. How else can we understand her acceptance of the responsibility to deal with the debts accumulated by almost all the Southern European states? How else can we bear witness to the elaborate dances that Sarkozy performs exclusively for her and only in her presence. Germany is torn apart by a dichotomy not exclusively of her making. The South of Europe

simply cannot live on a German diet. Greek, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese will not transform themselves into good German citizens, not today, not tomorrow, not at any foreseeable date. No matter how Germany will try to transform the Southerners into Northerners, this simply cannot work.

There are many reasons why a single currency cannot work for different people, living and working in different economies. But there is one critical, obvious and overwhelming fact: every currency can only be backed by one economy. If the economies diverge, so will the currency. In the long history of financial rectitude no currency has been invented and kept afloat by two different and independent states. These facts were there and well known at the creation of the EURO. This heroic but stupid business had to come to an end. The end is here and now.

Historically significant moments are of two kinds: ones, like the outbreak of the second World War, may be condensed into a single day, others, like the dissolution of the Soviet empire or the emergence of the European Union, are more difficult to compress into a precise date. Nevertheless, even in the second case it is possible to identify a specific event that marked a significant historical change. David Cameron's refusal to underwrite the Franco-German initiative to save the EURO, is precisely such an event. For it signifies, as later will be acknowledged, the formal beginning of the currencies' break-up. We all know that this currency was brought into existence a decade ago, at the insistence and guidance of France, to fortify, stitch together and seal the Union. We now have tangible proof that the opposite happened. As always, and invariably so, the economy takes precedence over politics.

The financial markets, the rating agencies, the economists and even some of the national leaders, have realised that the EURO in its current form and surrounded by all the artificial safeguards, is doomed. The consequence is more clearly visible. Many important people, Soros one among them, hold their hands to their brows bemoaning an impending catastrophic fate. They associate the demise of the EURO with a general collapse of the entire financial world, followed by unimaginable economic consequences all around. In their eyes there is a scene of nothing short of a prolonged period of severe depression all around. And, of course, it is all because of the failure of the EURO.

One of the most notable characteristics of this country is to react to surrounding events of the adjoining world late rather than early. This was the case from the Norman invasion onwards to the present day. More recently, the Boer uprising, the two world wars, the development of Europe, the break up of the Soviet empire, found Britain singularly unprepared. But in almost all cases throughout her history Britain compensated the late awakening with endurance, dogged resistance and a

determination to see any threat all the way through. So, I believe, this will happen with the break up of the EURO. The scene painted for us is far from what is going to happen. The scenario of the world turning upside down is just not real.

The break up of the European currency is already on its way and its consequences are very far from tragic. There well may be significant political upheavals but the financial and economic changes are likely to be, as always, relatively minor. We are facing two principal possibilities: the break up of the EURO will mean a return to seventeen formally independent currencies or the establishment of two EUROS, a weak one in the South and a strong one in the North. After the initial upheavals both possibilities would lead to a more realistic and enduring financial and economic structure throughout the continent with one notable exception.

The remaining question is France. Where does she belong? To the South or the North? Where should she find a comfortable place to maintain a leading position on the continent she largely constructed and still, in some measure, dominates? Her debt ridden finances, modest economy and diminishing exports, would find life in the North uncomfortable, especially given its high value EURO. On the other hand, the leadership of an impoverished and debt ridden half continent is not exactly attractive either. Italy and Spain would find an effective devaluation of their currency an initial shock but the sudden erasure of most of their debt would, without doubt, rejuvenate their economies, reduce their unemployment and re-establish the health of their banks.

So the European triangle has now to be re-drawn. It is no longer equilateral. Its three sides, as the three countries it represents, have radically altered. Germany has reached an economic superiority she always desired, and by the end of the nineteenth century, she was beginning to enjoy. Its political counterpart escaped her on three consecutive occasions: by the last Kaiser's weakness and miscalculation, by Hitler's mad over-ambition and lastly, more recently, by the intervention of a far superior political force in the creation of the EU. But now, at long last, she is in a position to occupy the place for which she longed for nearly two centuries.

Britain, whose world position has massively altered during the last two centuries, finds herself, within the European context, very much in the same position as she had for at least half the last millennium. As she was never part of the EURO, the current currency upheavals affect her less than the rest. She has the nuclear deterrent, a proportional armed force, a vague but still valuable Commonwealth network, a most prestigious financial industry and, above all, the home of the language the world is in the process of acquiring. We need neither strengthen nor weaken her side of the famous triangle.

It is France and France alone that poses the fundamental question. The uncertainty of the future lies principally in her court as she performs her most desperate dances, trying to arrest an inexorable movement that is destined to change history.

Government

In September this year the US Government sent a Predator drone aircraft from the Nevada desert to a village in the wilds of Yemen. On the road out of the village Anwar al Awlaki, a radical Muslim cleric of some renown, was proceeding by car to a destination perhaps known or unknown. Suffice to say, the drone aircraft released a Hellfire missile which, in a blinding instant, vaporised the cleric and his entourage for evermore.

Anwar al Awlaki, apart from being a Muslim cleric, happened to be born and be brought up in the US, a country that gave him a citizenship, a nationality and a home. This cleric, having been in daily contact with Allah, took upon himself the role of Al Qaeda's head of external operations and the accomplishment of many murderous acts all over the place.

The world at large, at least within its component of civilised societies, breathed a sigh of great relief. One less rampant maniac with the gift of the gab to create mayhem and arbitrary waves of human sacrifice. The world at large, that is to say, with the exception of a familiar and well respected columnist who used his page in the *Times* to advance the opposite view. Ben Macintyre, taking well rehearsed academic steps, reached the remarkable conclusion that the elimination of Awlaki by such a 'legalised' killing would put the whole world in danger. To put his proposition into remarkable clarity let me quote the actual words of the subtitle of his article that appeared in our much respected newspaper. It reads: 'America's remote controlled execution without trial of one of its own citizens sets a terrifying precedent.'

I surmise that not many people, even including the most perceptive readers of the *Times*, lost any sleep after reading the Macintyre article. Nevertheless, such is the unbelievable extravagance of the claim, that it merits, and requires, a rational response. Let us disregard for the moment the millions of Russians exterminated by their government before, during and after the second WW. Let us forget the hundred of thousands of German Jews extinguished by the German government in the concentration camps. Let us ignore the huge number of Spaniards eliminated in their civil war. Let us turn a blind eye to the vast number of French citizens who lost their lives, thanks to their government, in the Algerian conflagration. Let us even disregard some the Northern Irish Catholics who were eliminated by the British government more recently. I am not even thinking of the Serbs, Croats, Iraklis, Turks, Indians, Syrians and the many African democracies who are all doing away with many thousands of their citizens without thinking twice as to means, rights and consequences.

We all know that there is of course much more worldwide in the same vein. Governments all over the world have invariably considered the elimination of traitors to be one of their natural duties. Certainly, even more so, when any traitor had at his disposal the means to damage his own home. When, for example, he had the mental means to undermine the foundation of his country or when he was reinforcing alliances which posed a threat to his original state, or when organised physical forces were intent on attacking his own society.

So what is striking and new in the Macintyre article?! Apparently, and so his argument unfolds, the US government has now at its disposal the means to reach and eliminate such traitors at a distance without having the recourse to the usual legal procedures of a court of law. It is, without doubt, the usage in sophisticated democratic states to employ the full majesty of the law, in all its manifold branches, when dealing with assumed traitors. For this to take place it is necessary, of course, to have the accused 'traitor' present in the court that determines the case. If the Muslim cleric had been available to face the accusation and defend himself in person, the expensive pilotless plane would not have taken off and the Macintyre article would not have adorned the pages of the *Times*.

We are now at the crux of the matter. Awlaki organised his activities from Yemen and there was not the slightest prospect of him appearing voluntarily in any US court, any time, anywhere. This left the US government just three choices: to use some international law and diplomacy to extradite their own national, to do nothing or remove him from the land of the living by using their technical superiority. There may have been a fourth choice, to be discounted on practical grounds. They could have attempted to kidnap Awlaki, as the Israelis did so successfully with Eichman, and then tried him within the full formality of an Israeli court.

The American authorities used the third alternative and removed the danger by their superior technical resource. To have done nothing would have meant a dereliction of their fundamental duty. To have attempted diplomatic means in an attempt to bring Awlaki home would have, even if successful, cost a great deal of time and provided him with a massive platform. The Eichman paradigm would have challenged the law of another country even if the White House possessed the appetite and expertise of the Israeli intelligence.

It is a choice that any self respecting and truly democratic authority would have inevitably to take if faced with self confessed treachery and in possession of a working remote-controlled missile system. America is technically ahead of us, and ahead of anybody else. It is due to their superior resources and their determination

to preserve a democratic way of life that the threat posed by Awlaki was removed. This much should be obvious to almost all the readers of the *Times*.

Sitting behind the substantial philosophical fortifications of British academia, where idle speculation, meandering debates and free flying imagination are the order of the day, Macintyre ventures to draw a terrifying vision. Just imagine a world where these missiles, each of which by the way costing many millions of dollars, are flying about in search of arbitrarily chosen victims to be killed by the order of unknown and obscure powers all over the world. In my mind's eye I tried to fashion various pictures of such a spectacular future. Mandela, or Putin, or a North Korean leader, or even a Chinese figure in the hub of his intelligence network, pencilling in a few names of men who dared to critique their government and then setting off one of these future missiles to find and kill the chosen individual. I confess my imagination let me down. I simply could not raise such a thought that terrified me. Instead, I just saw the many thousands of citizens in the Arab world, in almost the whole of Africa, In South America and in China, all genuine nationals of states within the compass of the organisation of the United Nations who have been imprisoned, tortured and killed by the ruling bodies of their own government. And strangely, none of these unfortunate creatures were victims of individually targeted flying missiles. They suffered, like many millions of others, by the violence and inhumanity of their own principal leaders.

This is the reality that Macintyre, and many columnists of his kind, have been fortunate enough to avoid. They all have been spared the ugly events that befall, with irregularity but frequency, the vast majority of the human race. They are the blessed few born and bred on this island a good few years after the second WW. They all had the good fortune of being part of a society that evolved over a few centuries a stable and highly sophisticated political framework we all recognise as a living democracy. The parliament, the Monarchy, the courts of law, the dimension and variety of the press, television and radio, and their presence in the daily life of the vast majority of the population, combine to perpetuate a social climate of self awareness we tend to take for granted.

It is the luxury of this natural, but local and harshly limited, condition that permits Macintyre, and one or other negligent editor the *Times*, to give such arrant nonsense the space in an otherwise respectable newspaper. And, strangely enough, it is paradoxically the appearance of such useless perambulation on the pages of a respected instrument that reflects the strength and endurance of the British state. Nowhere else in the whole world could an article of this nature have been taken seriously. Everybody else in the world, under a democratic umbrella or not, sighed with a whole hearted relief that an obvious enemy of Democracy has been put away.

The political evolution of this island, from the Norman invasion onward, is the best testimony of the fundamental difference between the revolutionary jolts of the continent and our slowly creeping move from what we once were a thousand years ago to what we are today. A long list of extreme ideas, at both boundaries of what is practicable, found their way into public debate. Locke and Hume set out clearly the dominant philosophies of the real possibilities. Kant and Hegel, on the other hand, set out principles of what they believed was the desirable. Both German philosophers provide excellent material for the inhabitants of universities but neither great mind helped to prevent the holocaust.

Thus it is as important to give the Macintyres of the world the space to circulate their extreme notions as it is to bury them instantly in the massive vaults of academic extravagance.

Hitler's Vast Shadow

It is now more than sixty years since one man succeeded in turning the world upside down. There are now fewer and fewer people left in the world young enough to have had a personal experience of the Second World War. Even less of them are still alive with a fate transformed by those cataclysmic events. A sombre and fatal six years ate up well over fifty million people. As I sit down to compose this essay I am conscious of the privilege of being probably sane and certainly still alive.

Hitler, like Napoleon, Alexander and Caesar, is one of those preciously rare historical beings whose name will live forever. But we are not there yet. At this distance away from those fateful years the world has already learnt to relegate that infamous name to the shelves of respectable history. This is true of the world at large but not so for the Germans and the Jews. The third generation of Germans and Jews after the war are still too close to that fateful image and to that dreadful name. They are neither able to profoundly understand nor rationally assimilate the effect on Jews, Israelis and Germans. Despite the vast library and massive literary output touching and commemorating those critical events, we are all still blind to the essentials.

According to the Old Testament, God is not ready to forgive our sins until the third or fourth generation. We are now somewhere there, some sixty years after a war that transformed the world. As almost always, an apparently trivial event that takes place here and now, hurls me back to the maelstrom of that past and forces me to cast my eye on what I thought had been safely buried long ago. Through a BBC world broadcast at some unearthly morning hour I came across accidentally on an astonishing event. Apparently the highest German court, or the most prominent judge of that court, has taken upon itself to declare the Jewish custom of circumcision of male babies to be illegal.

The origin of this tradition is unknown and unknowable but it lay at the heart of Judaism for at least for four thousand years. The Old Testament refers to it in a story set in the first days of the original Hebrew incursion into what became the Holy Land. A member of a neighbouring tribe raped the daughter of Jacob. The leader of that tribe wished to settle the disputed animosity and offered what obviously seemed to him a peaceful resolution. His proposal was simply to join the two competing tribes and somehow legitimise the union of the raped woman in the new union. The sons of Jacob would agree with his proposal on one significant condition. All the males of the incoming tribe had to undergo the procedure of circumcision.

And so the male members of the donkey-worshipping tribe found themselves lying prone one night in Israeli tents where they were all simply assassinated. Jacob was suitably mortified by the treacherous behaviour of his sons and feared the obvious consequences. What he probably never realised is that the final outcome of the affair would be played out thousands of years later in the concentration camps of Auschwitz and Birkenau.

In the intervening time the Jews learned, adapted and suffered the meaning of the mutated, or freed, male member. And so much as they have achieved in the annals of mankind, vastly out of proportion to their numbers, has been conditioned by their physical, self-imposed and sophisticated, isolation. The German story leading to the same climactic moment is of course substantially different. Its origin is at least three millennia later with a starting point in mid Asia as against the Middle East. In the Great Migration of the first century a multiplicity of German tribes invaded a whole continent, embraced local populations with their blood and language, confronted the might of Rome in murderous battles, all that before they defined themselves in a dominant European state.

There is an astonishing but profoundly meaningful counterpoise between the two histories. What the Jews created in their isolation corresponds conversely with what the Germans attained by the guiding principle of physical challenge. It took Bismarck most of the second half of the nineteenth century to establish the modern German state but the roots of that state stretch much further back in culture, language and, above all, race. The philosophies of Kant, Hegel, Marx, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Wittgenstein, the great classical works of Richard Strauss, Beethoven, Mozart, Handel and Bach, as well as the works of Durer and Grunewald, are all monumental fragments of a cultural stream that nourished for many centuries all our lives.

The overwhelming question that must torment our minds, especially if you are a Jew or a German caught up, one way or another, in the Holocaust, is just how could two such people, both with finely elevated culture, meet each other face to face in fields of deadly extermination never experienced before in the history of man? Any answer to this question cannot be easy, brief and precise. Nevertheless, it is the most critical question that this generation has to answer.

Let us start at the beginning with the central figure in the catechistic unfolding of the event. Hitler, in technical terms, was not a German. He was born on the Austrian side of a half-German border town as the first son of a non-descript official overseeing incoming and outgoing goods. After schooling he came to Vienna with his only and best friend who much later wrote a fair memorial of those early years they had spent together in the Austrian capital. Hitler tried and failed to become

a member of the Academy of Arts but continued to create pictures some of which have survived to the present day. More importantly, he became acquainted with a thoroughly diverse society composed of Austrian, German, Hungarian, Czech, Polish and Jewish elements. It would appear that he even had occasional support in those early difficult years from members of the Jewish community. A few years after the First World War Hitler was one of the leading members of an attempted Bavarian putsch that placed him in a comfortable and convivial prison where he wrote *Mein Kampf*, the German bible of the Second World War.

The people of this country have had an enormous difficulty in grasping the phenomenon of Hitler, such being the difference between the leader of a nation and a Hyde Park corner orator standing on a wooden pulpit and gesticulating wildly into the thin air. In the late Twenties and early Thirties very few people could even vaguely envisage the rise of the Nazis, the ascendant power of Germany and the systematic consequences of Hitler's deeply held beliefs. The most notable exception was Churchill who fought alone for an entire decade of political isolation. It is easy to see all that here and now. It had been bloody difficult then.

So now, in something like a historical perspective, it is perhaps a very good time to raise the selfsame troubling question: how, in our days, was it possible for one profound civilisation, like Germany, to try wiping out another civilisation, even older, even more deeply rooted and influential than the forces of the coming nemesis? The situation in Germany at the rise of Hitler was interesting in almost all respects: economic, social, political and racial. The defeated country had to pay an unbearably large amount of reparations to the victors in a period of an approaching global economic collapse. Almost valueless paper Marks were carted to the banks by wheelbarrows, leaving large segments of the population bereft of means and hungry. The social divides between the working class and the rest, professional, academic and commercial, became too large to bridge. In politics, the middle classes were squeezed between the massive forces of Communists and Nazis. Into the midst of this already toxic terrain a large number of Jews, pitched in from the East, began to take over highly visible segments of the country's life. In the universities, medicine, journalism, the arts, commerce and industry, the Jewish presence was difficult to ignore. Especially by the home grown Germans who lost out.

At the same time many Orthodox members of the race, wearing Kaftans and long black coats were asserting in their appearance, their manner and their language, the ancient uniqueness and persistence of being. Thus the range of Jewish penetration into ethnic Germany was not only vast but also only partly visible. Some of the incoming people adopted the German type absolutely. In professional, religious, social and political adherence, as well as in the use of language, they could not have

been distinct. At the other end of the scale the intruders just kept, in every respect, to themselves. The majority of the Jews were scattered all along the scale, dispersed in fine nuances between the two extremes. This is partly why the Nazis struggled with defining German Jews. What about people who had one Jewish parent or one grand-parent? Where to set the defining line?

Sitting in the comfortable office of his prison, Hitler was not concerned with such niceties. He was already seized by one central idea: the victorious German revival. And looking back now on those fateful fifteen years between 1924 and 1939, it is hard not to be impressed with what the man achieved. From a defeated, ruined nation in total disarray, he created a most powerful, united and optimistic country able to confront on its own the might of almost the entire world. Any historic account of that period that fails to appreciate that monumental achievement, is not worth reading.

So the question that set out this essay not only persists, it becomes even more acute. How was it possible for such a mighty and accomplished civilisation to end up on the wrong side of an Auschwitz? In other words, would it have been possible or even imaginable, for Hitler to achieve what he had without his devastation of the Jews? One disturbing thought, by the way, is the real possibility of envisaging an ultimate German victory with the help of the outstanding Jewish exiled scientists who helped to create the Atom in America. Be that as it may, it still leaves us with the original two dimensional question. Just how was it possible to resuscitate a derelict people in such a brief time and turn it into a power to challenge the entire remaining world? And how and why was it possible to turn that high ranking civilisation to an efficient instrument to try and annihilate an older and more profoundly established civilisation than itself? These two questions lead immediately to an obvious new one: are the two questions necessarily related to each other, or is it possible to posit the one without the other?

In the cold light of day it is quite easy to envisage Jewish physicists creating the first Atom Bomb in Germany one or two years before the end of the war. The consequences of such a scenario would have meant a totally different historical sequence. At the very least with a German dominated Europe some sixty years before today. But such an alternative would not have been possible simultaneously with the virulent anti-Semitism of the Nazis and their objective of exterminating the Jewish race. This brings us even closer to the next dilemma which is even more interesting and decisive than everything that was presented hereto. Would Hitler have risen to the heights he bestrode without an overarching commitment to the elimination of the Jews?

In answer to this question there is no immediate, logical, easy reason against a loud and definite 'yes'. Of course it is possible to imagine an entire historical sequence of German success without the tragic fate of the Jews. Subtract the painful episode and positing at least a partial German success is not too difficult. Indeed, in this country and at this time, it is almost natural to visualise Hitler's overwhelming preoccupation with the Jews as an unfortunate personal aberration unrelated to the history of the Second World War. The theme of this essay is to explore precisely the opposite.

Any close study of the systematic events that led to Hitler's rise to power, scene after scene, demonstrates with a terrible clarity the dual character of his vision, a vision that conquered the psyche of the people, a vision that had to lead to a substantial and catastrophic war. That vision was emphatically and devastatingly present in the last day of Hitler's life and burnt in fierce flames to accompany his suicide. The German people failed to rise to their thousand years 'ubermentch' destiny and the Jews ultimately had to be all exterminated because, left alive, they would always conspire to undermine the rise and victory of a superior race.

The anti-Semitic element of the dual vision was already well and truly established, in vastly different degrees, right across the continent. All Hitler needed to do was to cultivate, enrich and make respectable that sentiment. The infinitely more difficult, more subtle and more substantial task was to bring to the surface a hidden German-ness of the German people. I have to embark here on a subject and a view that is not only highly unpopular, but in some parts of the world may be even against the law. What has interested me for many decades, is the simple question whether a Birkenau or an Auswitch could have happened in any other country of the world. The answer to this question has been clear to me from the very beginning. There have been many programs, atrocities, persecutions and slaughter of Jews since times immemorial, but what happened to them in the last war was totally unprecedented throughout four millennia.

What Hitler achieved in an amazingly brief time is almost inconceivable. To assemble Jews from Germany, Poland and many other countries of Europe, to transport six million of them to pre-established camps, to lead them to gas chambers for an efficient execution, all almost without resistance, is a massive performance that no other state could ever have attempted, never mind accomplished. Forced to face this simple fact many, many millions of us turned away, to gaze at the horrors with self blinded eyes. A fair number of the remaining victim race took the opportunity to recreate a new country in place of the one lost a few thousand years before. And they did their best to ensure that what happened then could never happen again. In the midst of an Arab sea of people they not only built a superior military machine

but created a race in contradistinction to the one that perished in the holocaust. The victims became the aggressors.

Thus, like it or not, Hitler was the principal agent in the fulfilling of the Jewish biblical destiny. It does not matter that he could never have imagined himself as the harbinger of such a fate. It is really beside the point that he set out, with steely and consistent determination, to achieve precisely the opposite. It matters even less that, throughout his actual and historic life, he was never accorded a recognition he indubitably deserved. This much is certain and no future historian will be able to adumbrate the re-creation of Israel in ignorance of the nation's most profound enemy.

But, even more significantly, what about the context of Hitler, the Germans and Germany? After all it is over those people that this huge shadow casts her most dreadful gloom. It is they, their parents or grandparents who were on centre stage during those monumental and decisive years. And it is they who bear now most acutely the consequences of the last war. When Merkel declares loudly and continuously that she will do all in her power to help the survival of the EURO, it is easy to see her reluctance to be associated with another European calamity. Yet, at the same time, the economic realities place Germany on a level well above most of their neighbours. The contrasting duality of economic dominance and a profound political guilt cannot, of course, be resolved with one sudden miraculous stroke. The economic supremacy will inevitably continue to grow so any resolution of the duality must lie with the diminution of the guilt.

Biblically speaking, God forgives only after the third or fourth generation. As we are thereabouts counting back from the war, it may be the right time to approach the Hitler years once again. Especially so since everyone in the world, except the Germans, dismisses Hitler as an arch-criminal with the calm of utter certainty. That this is so should hardly be surprising given that the relationship of Hitler and the Germans was far from a simple one. A great many articles and books have been written to describe Hitler's rise to power. Although varying in detail and the degree of distaste, they all have one, not unimportant, feature in common. They depict a wholly undeserving man, using wholly despicable means, seducing a whole nation to take up arms and manufacture a disastrous, and self-defeating, war. Such a description leads immediately to a universal wonderment of how was such thing possible? Indeed, almost all that has been written on this subject avoids an answer to this very question. But this question has forever troubled us and tiptoeing around it, in obvious bewilderment, is just not enough.

The apparent nonentity, who was not even a humble German subject, rose to the apex of a massive and sophisticated civilisation, from where he challenged a continent

stretching from the Urals to the Atlantic sea and from the Mediterranean to the Arctic Circle, leading that civilisation to an almighty and brutally self destructive war. How did he do it, or better still, how could he have done it all by his single self?! Was there no other power, much more massive than his own? The answer to this question is remarkably simple and glaringly obvious. Hitler never accomplished all these fantastical acts by himself and certainly never alone. He had with him all throughout those fateful years the will and yearning of the most powerful European nation, demanding to be recognised in its rightful role. It is really intriguing that we are precisely at that point now once again. Almost a hundred years after the fateful signing of the Entente Cordial, Germany is in a position to take over the leadership of Europe at last.

The ideology of Hitler rested on two basic and contrasting planks: the extraordinary greatness of the German race and the poisonous presence of the Jews. Right from the beginning to almost the very end these two ideas remained firmly fixed in his mind. With his last breath he condemned the Jews and mourned the failure of the German people to rise to their intended destiny. Nothing in his initial struggles to climb the political ladder, his virtual conquest of the continent, the horrendous defeat at Stalingrad, even the destruction of his country from the skies, made the slightest difference. He stayed faithful only to the two pillars of his original belief.

It is possible to speculate as to which has been the most favourable moment for Germany to make the right moves for a reasonable European peace. At the fall of France, or perhaps at the conquest of Poland and a massive portion of Russia, around 1941 or 1942, would have worked best. A rational leader may have seized the opportunity to strike a favourable deal, placing Germany at an even more incisive position than she is likely to occupy in the Europe of tomorrow. Why did Hitler not even try to take that step? Why could he never contemplate anything else than a complete victory, a German ruled, Jew-less Europe? To say that he was irrational, even mad, merely begs the question.

Hitler was by that time certainly irrational and later on conveniently and increasingly what may well be considered insane. But he was not alone, significantly isolated, in some sort of asylum. He was the leader of the German nation. He could never have acted by himself. He had to take the Germans with him. We know a vast amount about Hitler but what about the other partner, the German nation? Could a Hitler phenomenon, of similar proportions, have taken place in any other European country? We had quite a number of dictators in the same period but Mussolini and Franco could never have taken their people with them on any comparable course of action. There had to be something utterly different at the very depth of the German psyche to create a tragic and cataclysmic world war with the virtual extermination of another race.

The question most frequently asked contrasts the great German philosophers and composers with the Nazi devastation. After all, how could a civilisation of Hegel, Marx, Kant, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Wittgenstein, with composers like Bach, Mozart, Beethoven and Richard Strauss, also slaughter systematically six million Jews? The question thus posed requires no answer, it is merely an expression of total bewilderment. It is simply a confession of incredibility. It is some kind of admission that the contrast is somehow inexplicable.

Yet without delving into this contrast, without exploring it, without allowing ourselves to understand it, the history of the 20th century will remain for all of us unintelligible. But for the Germans themselves the puzzling contrast is far more serious. They will never come to terms with a tragic century without tackling its essential dilemma. Will they be allowed to continue believing that the Hitler era was a single aberration which could have taken place anywhere on the continent? For how long will they be permitted to think that there is absolutely no connection between their exalted philosophical and musical culture on the one hand and the madness of the Hitler years on the other.

There can be no doubt about the unique German genius displayed in the fields of Music and Philosophy. No one else comes near it. More than that. Listening to Beethoven or Strauss, reading Marx, Kant, Nietzsche or Freud, I always feel I am in a superb lecture hall where questions from the floor are unthinkable. One is merely free to stay or leave, never to interrupt, challenge, question or argue. I have no trace of the same feeling or reaction when I come across philosophies or music masterpieces of other European sources. Where other communities tend to produce great works which serve as an invitation to some form of dialogue, the greatest German equivalents are delivered with a final authority that forbids response. We are expected to be all ears, having lost our own voices.

Hitler can in no way be considered on par with the giant German composers or Philosophers. But the voice of his authority over his people and their whole-hearted, enthusiastic response through nearly two decades of unrelenting struggle brings to mind something quintessentially German, both in victory and defeat. The Germans will have to learn to approach those two fateful decades with a kind of objective dispassion possessed by them in abundance for everything other than the possible greatness of their nation. This is the critical moment in European history when Germany occupies centre stage. It is what animated their nation and inspired their spectacular achievements. It is only they themselves that can come to terms with Hitler. No one else can do it for them. We must all hope that they will carry the responsibility of leadership with a greater maturity this time.

House of Lords – Yes or No

Broadly speaking, significant changes in a country's political structure can take three basic forms: an internal revolution, like the French one in 1892; a massive and sudden change in its international fortune, like the aftermath of the second world war in Germany or the collapse of the Soviet Union for the surrounding states, and a painfully slow, gradual evolution like we have experienced here for at least the last eight centuries. The current House of Lords follows relatively closely the last reform of 1908 when the Liberal party, having a comfortable Commons majority, flooded the Upper House with its own appointees. Since then the composition of Lords has essentially been determined by political fortunes and no longer by aristocratic birth. This transition itself has been somewhat chaotic, unprincipled and illogical, in line with all structural changes of the Anglo-Saxon tradition. So, very gradually, the authority of the Upper House lost its aristocratic origin. This authority now rests, almost exclusively, in the hands of the political parties. It is they who create and dominate its composition. Whichever party is in power at any given time has a preponderant influence in the appointments of new Lords to replace those that die or retire.

Whilst the composition of the upper house has radically changed over the last hundred years, its function remained much the same. Legislation created by the Commons is reviewed by the Lords, amended and then accepted or rejected but its ultimate fate remains with the Commons. After two rounds of debates and votes in both houses, the final formality of the legislation requires a royal signature but any change of law is in the hands of the government of the day. For most of the thinking people of this country this form of government seems quite rational. That is to say, a parliament consisting of two such chambers, one to govern and the other, to take a longer view less party inspired, seems a reasonable idea.

Unfortunately the relative government stability, with its painfully slow and insecure response to the changing world, has created in many circles a sense of great impatience. There is now an inclination to be in line with our neighbours. In theory, almost everyone in the world is asked to subscribe to 'democracy'. At the same time, few countries come even close to the Athenian ideal when, for a brief period, all her citizens had an equal say in the government of their country.

It is worthwhile to reiterate this ideal since almost the entire civilisation so slavishly believes that 'democracy' has to be a first principle of any desirable form of government. To be democratic is unquestionably laudable whilst to be undemocratic

is axiomatically wrong. I do not readily recall any serious written trace of questioning this principle since Nietzsche wrote his Zarathustra in the second half of the 19th century. If I dare to raise any such consideration, it is only because it has a vital bearing on the current ongoing debate about the future of the House of Lords.

We all know that the House of Lords, with her a-democratic roots, has survived the relentless drive of 'one man one vote'. The hereditary element of the aristocracy and the political contribution of the church have been almost wiped out. So we are now bequeathed an almighty confusion. The present House of Lords is composed of fairly arbitrary political appointees of worthy people who reached, more or less, an ambitionless age. Most of them have done something to benefit the community and many find themselves there in order to make way for the rising generation of political substitutes. However the present drive has nothing to do with the quality of the institution and everything to do with its non-democratic composition.

So the current issue has to do more with an adherence to democracy than the function and usefulness of the Lords. It would be reasonable in this context to examine 'democracy' in the first place. The historical study of English and British political evolution demonstrates that what is profoundly at stake is very seldom at the forefront of critical debate. So it has been with Protestantism in the sixteenth century and again at the fall of absolute Monarchy with the head Charles II more than a century later. The controversies reintroducing a modified Monarchy, those accompanying the 1832 reforms and the assumption of power by Churchill, all bear the same imprint.

The transition from the catholic to the protestant state religion in England was a convoluted affair, turning back and forth, resting to a large extent on the sexual frustrations of an eccentric monarch. At the same time France remained almost wholly catholic until its revolution two centuries later split the country into two equal parts: the religious and the secular. While Luther arose from nowhere suddenly in Germany to divide its thirty five states neatly for or against the authority of the pope. The majority of the states went with him and turned Lutheran leaving the others in the Papal domain. The revolution in France was a deadly affair presaging five different republics and many more constitutions. Germany, at the time was in its infancy but more than made up for it a little later by swallowing Bavaria, the Sudetenland and Austria. She has ended up not only without a king but with a brand new constitution imposed on her by victorious enemies.

A mere glimpse at European history should enlighten everyone about the difference between what tends to happen there from what is customary here. For someone born, brought up and schooled on the continent it is an effort to grasp how political

structures change in this country. I have lived, studied and earned my bread here for the last sixty years. It has taken me almost that long to learn and appreciate the value of an extrinsic, unsystematic and haphazard political evolution. The consequences of Henry's irreversible determination to marry Ann Boleyn, the execution of a reigning king and the fairly quick restitution of a monarchy that is still with us today, the epic confrontations of Gladstone and Disraeli, two major figures of undistinguished birth, and the massive effect of a world-war winning Churchill, were all unexpected, unpredictable and highly controversial episodes in this country's history. These episodes should help to illuminate the present controversy about the reform of the House of Lords. So in contrast to past traditions, let us venture nevertheless to touch on the meaning of 'democracy' even though it is exactly what drives our immediate preoccupation.

Plato, in his 'Republic' outlined four different governmental forms, Democracy among them, and found them all wanting. He lived close enough to most of them to observe and experience their actual functioning. This is why he recommends laying the political governance of the state on the shoulders of a few philosophers, both ready and able to forego any reward or recognition for their all-important work. Twenty five centuries should have taught us how impossible it is to divorce money and family ties from the exercise of political power. Nevertheless, the egalitarian drive has ensconced itself in the political ethos of our society, even though its practical realisation is unachievable. The Soviet empire and the Chinese state most clearly demonstrate, if demonstration is needed, that the straggling masses and the few multi-millionaires will stay with us for the foreseeable future, no matter how hard we try to translate the socialist ideal into our daily lives.

Current consensus would have this august institution transformed rather than abolished. What is unclear are the functions of the new House and the selection of its inhabitants. The wish list is not short of items: the Lords should be part of the legislative process, amending, improving, delaying, opposing changes proposed by the Commons; it should act, in the context of an unwritten constitution, as a bulwark to protect liberties and rights under threat from the centralising tendencies of instant government; it needs the expertise and fund of wisdom to judge all aspects of society and state; it should be broadly representative of a cross section of the population; its members should be democratically elected; it should not follow partisan party political lines; it should not provide a retirement home for pensionable or troublesome MPs; its seats should not be for sale for donors to party coffers; it ought not form a second chamber with a power sharing agenda reflecting the American format.

All these objectives have merit. As things stand, however, it is hard to see how they can all be encompassed in one coherent structure. Indeed, some wishes obviously

preclude others: a conventionally elected Lords would naturally encroach on the domain of the Commons and divide mostly on party lines. The kind of compromises talked about, with two thirds elected members and the rest appointed by the Prime Minister or some other artificially created body, would just perpetuate, or even entrench, the current state of profound confusion whilst doing nothing to help the work of an upper chamber or improve the quality of its incumbents.

Yet, despite the apparent impossibility, there may be a way of combining some of these desirable objectives to create a more effective and coherent upper chamber. There is nothing revolutionary about the proposed solution. We cannot see it because our culture simply conflates two quite distinct concepts: the principle of equality and the principle of democracy. It is now taken as axiomatic that democracy equates to one man, one vote. All over the world, even Iran and Iraq included, this issue is about free elections based on universal suffrage.

But the substance of democracy, at least as it has evolved hereabouts, is not the periodic ballot box exercise. It is the degree of participation of the governed in decisions taken by those who govern. This participation rests on a series of power delegations between individuals: members of a small local party association elect delegates to a larger constituency-wide association; that in turn is represented by an elected member of parliament who delegates his authority to the Prime Minister of the day, as head of a cabinet. With the increasing assimilation of the parties, the centralising tendencies, the sleaze and the spin, this slender link between the governed and those who govern is becoming dangerously tenuous. Public regard for the politicians, as a class, is at a very low ebb. Turnout numbers at local, general and European elections reflect clearly that people feel less and less involved in the decision making process. As for Brussels, the European Parliament and the 400 million ordinary folk, this vital link is virtually non-existent.

In this fragile democratic context a wholly, or mostly, elected second chamber would produce an additional quantity of politicians, operating on party political lines and turn what has been a valuable institution into a paler reflection of the Commons. A Lord would be merely a lesser MP with little influence and even less authority. Is there anyone in the land, beside politicians who actually wants to double the number of career politicians?

A rational reform of this august institution would define the functions, objectives and powers of this “other place” before considering who should sit in it. The Lords, both before and after the dilution of the hereditary lot, had a distinctive quality that contributed much to the sophisticated and eccentric British political culture. Being there for life, not intent on building careers, not beholden to any constituency, the

lords could afford to speak their mind, stand up to the government of the day, oppose, delay or curb the worst excesses of instant or ideologically inspired legislation. At critical junctures the upper chamber played a significant part in protecting the unwritten constitution as well as forming a supreme legal authority in the land. Abolishing the role of the aristocracy need not have meant doing away with the valuable attributes of the institution that served the country for centuries. On the contrary, the very essence of successful reform, as English political history exemplifies, lies in the judicious balance of what is retained and what is adapted to changing circumstance.

So what is the House of Lords for in the 21st century? Its purpose is precisely the opposite of that of the Commons. Where the governing party uses MPs to drive a party political agenda calculating future votes, the Lords should critically examine each piece of legislation, whether home produced or Brussels dictated, as to its merit, its precise formulation, its full implications and cost. Where one House responds to media pressure with instant legislation, the other House questions more profoundly the need for further rules and regulations. Where one is short term oriented, the other should always view perspectives in the longer term. Where one has to bow to “political correctness”, the other should be free to express opinions that would wreck political careers. Where voting in one divides usually along party lines, voting in the other should be left to individual decisions. Where one is constrained and predictable, the other will be provocative, controversial and non-conformist.

But beyond merely responding to the activities of the Commons, a reformed House of Lords could initiate proposals in matters that the Commons does not address because they are divisive and yield no immediate political capital. It would safeguard the integrity of an unwritten constitution where the government of the day ignores it. It would have the power to call and oversee referenda, particularly in relation to far reaching transfers of sovereignty to the EU. It could appoint royal commissions to investigate government action, or inaction, where there is reason to suspect, misdemeanour, cover-up or a hidden agenda.

Typically, among the subjects that would feel more at home in the Lords than in the Commons are: euthanasia, abortion, smoking, hunting, renewable energy; spanking children; division of power between central and local government; the ethical issues of priority in the NHS with ever greater demands on finite resources; art, culture and sport; the awarding of titles and decorations; humanitarian issues and a host of others that are below or above the government radar but where improvements, guided by common sense, are essential.

But a second chamber with such a rich menu, with genuine powers that are complementary to the Commons, requires a diverse body of men and women of

ability, achievement and s measure of originality. How to identify them and give the process a meaningful democratic content so that the reformed House has the legitimacy commensurate with its authority and its purpose? Direct elections by a mass of some 30 Million people would inevitably be conducted on party lines and produce the same brand of professional politicians that the country has more than enough of. Yet to devise a different electoral format from scratch tailored to a reformed House is simply antithetical to the political evolution of this country.

But there is no need for a revolutionary new design. Democratic habits are so ingrained in the fabric of our society that there is a surfeit of existing bodies and organisations that have practised free and fair elections for donkey's years. Architects, engineers, solicitors and barristers, doctors and surgeons, nurses and midwives, industrialists and company directors, bankers and trade unions, academics in diverse disciplines, teachers and headmasters, anglers and farmers, retailers, insurers, pilots and actors, scientists, writers, journalists, surveyors, one and all are organised into societies, institutions, associations, unions and councils of various shapes and sizes that certainly have greater democratic legitimacy than our parliament itself. The distance between leaders and the led is shorter, the link between delegates and their representatives is less tenuous, individuals at all levels are more involved in the decision making process and there is greater trust all round.

Farmers, for example, would elect candidates for the Lords just as they chose the President of the NFU. Solicitors would be balloted no doubt by the Law Society. Men of business would emerge through Chambers of Commerce. Head teachers have their own association, nurses have a Royal College, train drivers have ASLEF, the Sports Council could produce quite a number of outstanding potential Lords, so on and so forth.

However diversely these groups function and however they are constituted, they should not find it too difficult to furnish a pool of men and women of sufficiently high calibre to make for a more modern House of Lords. Its membership would reflect a fair cross section of our society and its diversity would provide the necessary skills, talent and experience to meet the institution's new remit.

The immediate objections to such a proposal are as obvious as they are irrelevant. Who will decide, and on what grounds, as to which groups are more eligible to contribute and the proportions as between them? Having differentiated democracy from equality, we are no longer bedevilled by the numbers game. We are after quality not quantity. It matters not how many barristers, or train drivers or doctors help to elect a Lord so long as the likely contribution of delegates to the work of the House is worthwhile. Nor is it necessary to establish exact criteria for group eligibility.

Given a certain area of expertise and clearly defined special interest that requires study or practice, every group irrespective of size should be given the opportunity to participate in the selection process. It may be helpful to think in terms of medieval guilds in this context. At the end of the day a royal commission would carry out the due diligence and produce a proposal that the Commons, not divided on party lines, could debate, amend and approve. The final eligibility and weight of the groups need not be cast in stone: some groups would naturally be discounted (may be lighthouse keepers or gymnasts), some would merge and many new ones (like IT professionals) come into being. The Lords themselves will have a standing committee to monitor and recommend the necessary changes.

To further improve this method of selection, and thus the composition of the second chamber, the basic principle needs some amplification: to prevent the duplication of the Commons, candidates will not have active political affiliations beyond opinions and party preferences; to ensure basic standards of intelligence, aspiring members will have to sit a simple exam of linguistic competence, comprehension, communication and general knowledge.

To maintain a certain degree of freshness, each member, however selected, will surrender his or her tenure after seven years. To allow for greater continuity, there will be no wholesale periodic elections but once a year the House will be replenished by a generation of new members to replace those who died, resigned or came to the natural end of their term of service. In acknowledgement of a great tradition and in recognition of the universally accepted principle of breeding, a small proportion of the seats will be reserved for dukes, marquises and earls elected by their peers. Another small proportion of seats will also be reserved for outstanding and creative individuals, winners of prestigious awards in their field, scientists, authors, inventors, sportsmen and the like, proposed by the Lords own commission.

Having assembled an impressive pool of suitable candidates, at least three or four times the number required at any given time, the final selection would be based on the time-hallowed practice of drawing lots. In the history of mankind, across all cultures, the intervention of chance, fortune, luck, fate, call it what you will, has been universally accepted as important, fair and as an inevitable part of life. The legitimacy of the House of Lords would not be seen as complete without an element of luck. Besides, such a dramatic yearly event would attract the attention of the populace so sadly lacking in the case of political elections, be they local, general or European.

The House of Lords is at this moment in a kind of limbo. It clearly cannot fulfil any meaningful political function in the long term. All are agreed that a profound

reform is needed. If, following the lines suggested by the Royal Commission, the leaders of the three parties between them stitch up a deal of a part elected and part appointed chamber, in whatever percentages, the Lords will lose whatever credibility it still has. Universal suffrage can only produce mediocre politicians of an increasingly pale-grey hue. Prime Ministerial appointments are inevitably tinged with political manoeuvring, cronyism, sleaze and, more recently, corruption. What the country needs is a profound reform producing a talented and wise body of more or less impartial men and women who will act as counter weight against the media and all career politicians per se.

Such a reform is only possible if we understand the distinction between the principles of democracy and equality. Contrary to the view of the United Nations, the European Union and the popular media, that free and fair election, with the slogan of one-man one vote, gives birth to democracy, it is the other way around: the democratic fabric of a society, evolving over centuries, enables free and fair elections. One man one vote, merely facilitates an apparent orderly change of government

The reform outlined here need not to be carried out all at once. It is best accomplished by leaving the House of Lords more or less as is but gradually introducing all new members selected by the method suggested here. Such an approach would help the continuity of the institution with a yearly turnover of members amounting to no more than a sixth or seventh of the assembly at any one time.

Such a reform cannot come about through political initiative. As always with major reform it the people who must demand it. It is public opinion that has to generate strong enough pressure to accomplish it.

Leadership

A well known columnist of the *Times* wrote recently a 'sensible' piece about the current political scenario. His view sets out a childishly simple picture: an overwhelmingly solid and rational majority is framed between two more or less lunatic fringes. The extreme left comprises some of the major union forces, the extreme right is embodied by UKIP. The forcefully sane Blair had his work cut out to overcome the creatures of Tony Benn and now a wise Cameron, occupying the same middle ground, has the unenviable task of coping with the few old and decrepit fuddy-duddies still ranting on about the glories of the desiccated British way of life. He recommends that such ridiculous remnants of the Tory party should simply join their disjointed UKIP friends.

The author of this article, read by about a million better educated subjects of this kingdom, had he been carrying such thoughts in earlier times, would have relegated Margaret Thatcher and Winston Churchill to the same marginal relevance as the 'extremists' of today. After all Thatcher took the same 'extremist' line against the sane, deep thinking Heath and Churchill faced virtually the entire, solid and peace loving, Conservative party for at least ten years before the Second World War. Both Thatcher and Churchill, in quite different ways, grew into their leadership roles from outside the central core of the Tory party. For different reasons they were considered essentially outsiders brought to lead by unhappy and extreme circumstances rather than by the customary ladder of party promotion.

When trying to foresee the political future it is therefore at least as important to assess the oncoming climate as to judge the attitude and behaviour of the likely players. For circumstances may radically change and key leaders coming to the fore then may exactly appear outsiders now. If life is allowed to go on more or less as now, we may be content with leaders like Cameron or Major on one side and Blair or Brown on the other. They will navigate from the centre of the stream, as well as they are able, trying desperately to cling to what they consider to be the public mood. These are leaders that never lead, they are just dragged along and are forever led.

So let us look ahead and try to anticipate what awaits us next. If we trudge by or continue to float mid stream, and that stream keeps its form, our leaders will go on being led and we will be dragged along veering gently between right and left. Tory or Labour, Labour or Tory, it will not make a crucial difference. But looking around and surveying the scene, it is not what I see, it is not what we are entitled to expect. Our economic well being, that of our neighbours, and that indeed of the

whole world, underwent an almighty shock. And for the last four years we are all still suffering its consequence.

A brief factual economic summary reveals an overbearing reality: more than half of Europe is drowning in a sea of debt unlikely to be repaid. The entire economy of the continent is virtually at a standstill. The national debt of Japan is now out of all proportion and a great deal of its industry has been transferred to China whose voluminous commercial growth is presently declining. India is teetering on the edge while in the rest of the world losers hugely outnumber winners. But the most critical and largest world economy is that of the United States where massive unemployment is still increasing and there is almost no growth. What worries me most of all is the relatively stable value of the Dollar, particularly measured against the value of other currencies. Nobody knows exactly why this is so and there is no simple way of quantifying its value because it is almost the only currency that measures all international trade. So monumental is its dominating function in the commercial world, from wheat to gold, from aluminium to oil and other currencies between themselves, that its domestic function is entirely secondary. This is not a situation embedded in eternity. The Chinese, Japanese and Indian currencies are already flexing their muscles and showing signs of things to come. In other words we are on the brink of a major economic and financial convulsion. We know not what is going to happen and even less can we foresee the consequences of such a game changer.

Yet at this moment of time there is a disturbing fear in the air. Very many of us are preparing, as best as we can, for the falling blade of the guillotine even if few of us carry such expectations on our sleeve. The stock exchanges round the world, manned by professionals, all bear clearly the profiles of such trepidations. The price averages all over the place are, and have been for years, in a peculiar state of limbo, as if expecting a storm.

It is in times like these that we have to wake up from our slumbers to reassess our expectations of the political scene. In both economic and financial spheres the world is more inter-connected than it has been ever before. Even minor events in the depth of Africa, like strikes at gold mines around Johannesburg or civil wars in Ethiopia, resonate all over the civilised world, leaving their imprint on the all-invasive media that seems to govern our lives. One of the most difficult and interesting ventures is to relate the massive global status quo to its effect on smaller, but more relevant, areas. In the present case we have to frame our questions so that they take account of the state of the global finance and economy as they affect the European Union, and even more importantly, as they impact on our fate within that Union.

In the swirling storms of the current global economic climate Europe is, as we ourselves are experiencing it, perhaps the most exposed continent. One of the principal reasons for this state of affairs is the relatively recent creation of her principal currency, the EURO. We are all very familiar with the history of the Euro's coming into being, the underlying reasons for her existence and the forces straining to keep her alive. Suffice to say that her *raison d'être* has always been rooted in Politics, never in Economics. For the first time ever a currency has been brought into being not by the authority of a single country and expected to function unsupported by a single coherent economy. Her origin is to be found in the idealistic dreams of the disciples of a single European state which could and would rival the USA.

The dream envisioned a unified single economy that would bring together all the widely disparate peoples and states of a continent trying to recover from two deadly world wars. In simple terms, it was not sister and neighbourly states coming together to create a single state that would lead naturally to a single economy. Their idea was to turn the process the other way around and let a single currency lead to a single economy that would then result in a single state.

That dream shared the fate of all dreams. They are almost never realised. A common currency can never lead to a single state while every state must, in the last resort, have its own currency. This is so simply so because no currency could ever have created a state while every state had to have a currency in line with her economy. The contravention of these obvious fundamentals must have a very bad ending. It is the highly predictable chaos and all round failure we are all experiencing now. The southern European states are sinking in a sea of debt while those in the North, principally Germany and Holland, have to try to bail them out. How long this situation may last, and how deep the Northerners have to dip in their pockets, no one can or dares to say. The dreamers hang on desperately to their dream. The debts can never be repaid. Reality must strike all of us very, very soon.

It is something very much like a piece of good fortune that we, in this country, are not struggling in the same hopeless mire. We are suffering the travails of our continental neighbours but we are not party to the sinking EURO. Even so its imminent, or not so imminent, collapse has to be a serious factor in any survey of our own political future. So, in returning to the estimation of our current parties and their leaders, we have now a living and urgent context in terms of which they should be judged. Neither Thatcher nor Churchill would have had such a critical influence on our more recent history if they had come to power in any other epoch.

It is already clear however, that the demise of the EURO, at least in its present format, is going to create, in all probability, major political realignments. If the

EURO can no longer maintain its present format, future financial formats are rather limited. It is quite easy to envisage the return of the 17 currencies that preceded the merger into the EURO. The previous individuated currencies could return to their original format almost as easily as the original merger took place. Casting one's mind to those days, a full decade ago, the expected ructions of the transfer almost never materialised. Although it is almost always more difficult to retreat than to advance, a reverse to the original status is likely to be much less catastrophic than the hideous scenes conjured up by a leadership still transfixed by a vision of a United States of Europe.

Of course, the possibility of the creation of such an overall continental state will have to wait at least a few decades longer. But then the creation of new lasting empires always took a century or two. Such a diametric return of currencies to the real economies of existing states will be disappointing and painful. But then confronting reality always was. The actual pain will principally be felt by the political leadership of the European project and the massive bureaucracy of Brussels. The Mediterranean countries will have to tighten their belts, lower their standard of living and start rebuilding their economies from a much more real and lower base. But that will have to happen even if they continue living within the confines of the EURO. At the very least they would know exactly where they are and give up dreaming phantom dreams.

As for the Northern states presently occupied in finding the money and throwing the financial life belts, they will have to work even harder to safeguard their exports with significantly stronger currencies. Both Germany and Holland have done so on previous occasions and there can be no doubt that they will survive without the severe burden of East Germany and without the yawning hunger of the South.

The second, fairly obvious, alternative is the natural division between the two sections of the continent where the economies of the constituent economies are close enough to allow a closer financial co-operation. The situation of the Mediterranean countries bears a close enough resemblance to share perhaps a single currency and the same type of consideration applies to the wealthier, and much less indebted, North. It is not difficult to envisage a financial structure to bring Germany, Holland, Sweden, Denmark, Austria and perhaps the Czech Republic into a currency that would reflect similar enough economies. And it is perhaps more difficult but not impossible to imagine applying the same principle to the economies of Portugal, Greece, Spain and Italy forming a close enough association to the share a common currency.

For the sake of ease and simplicity let us call the two currencies a soft and a hard EURO. Such a nomenclature may even suite better the Brussels crowd who, no

doubt, wish to continue cherishing their continental dream. The exact date when such a convulsion would take its final shape it is not yet possible to pinpoint. But it is the most rational and predictable outcome of the slowly fermenting current crisis. There will be many dreary conferences, upper, median and boringly repetitive, to come. Elections, conflagrations, crises will be the orders of the day. Banks and institutions of various size and weight will change and re-change a few times their positions. But sooner or later and most probably well before the professionals or the general population expects it, the EURO will have change its colour. Reality is simply too strong an opponent. No political dreams can withstand it.

There are but two questions that remain to be asked. Where will France find herself after the new settlement and, even more importantly for us, what will, or should, be Britain's reaction to such fundamental re-alignments. As far as France is concerned the answer is both very simple and infinitely complex. She could find herself in either camp but she would be most unhappy in both. For more than three centuries France occupied a dominant position in Europe. Even after the Second World War, defeated, occupied and humiliated as she has been, she managed to rise again and dominate the continent for half a century. Such a dominant position requires an equally leading economy. However her supremely schooled political class maintained itself, the economic landscape is now vastly altered. She could certainly never assume her first-rate position in the North. On the other hand, to be the leader in the southern section of the continent would not be easily acceptable to her distinguished political class. For this reasons, if not another, she is condemned, for the first time in over two centuries, to fight alone a losing political war.

So what about Britain? How would she react to the change of the situation on the ground? How would she adapt to a changing continent of which she is both a neighbour and an important inhabitant? This is where in the coming months and years the political leadership of the country will have to assume, once more, a dominant role. For one thing is sure, in this coming period we have to hark back to the influence Thatcher and Churchill have exercised in the critical periods of their office. We have to think again of parties, people and leaders in the crucial times ahead of us. Britain's historical position vis-à-vis the continent of Europe deserves a serious study ranging over many learned volumes. There is, however, a permanent and over-riding feature of it that is decisive in sharpness, permanence and great simplicity. She has been profoundly part of this continent and at the same time, even more profoundly, detached from it. The channel between us came into play throughout the last nine centuries both as a guarantor of our undefeated independence and as a unique conduit of our close involvement with the European reality. This much has never changed and is, as the present re-alignment will once again demonstrate, unalterable.

Whichever future alternative comes to pass, the survival of the EURO in its present form, its rupture into two halves or complete removal from the scene, the British response will retain its essential duality. Whether the EURO comes to be more solidified, is rent in half or disappears altogether, nine centuries taught us that the channel will not disappear and we have to remain true to ourselves.

In practice what this means is that the political parties, their leaders and indeed the population as a whole, have to understand what is at stake and be well prepared to face an imminent future in whatever form it comes. The labour party will want to do what it always does. She will take her cue from what the surrounding majority believes, practices and tries to accomplish. If the European leadership continues to be in power, leaning towards greater and greater uniformity, the socialist essence of the party will be happy to adjust and follow along. If, on the other hand, the Euro is going to break up or sink into oblivion, our political Left will have to face a situation it thoroughly dislikes. Producing policies that are particularly favourable for us, irrespective of what they may do to other parts of a continental embrace is not something they ever did or likely to do now. Ed Milliband was foisted on the party by the Unions and the Left wing of the respectable Left. At best we can expect nothing more from him than a feeble extension of the Wilson-Blair line. Wilson smuggled us into the European Union through an artificial and biased plebiscite, Blair strove hard to eliminate the Pound and give us the EURO.

The Liberals have survived for the last hundred years on the meagre leftovers of the two major governing parties. Squeezed harshly between the Left and the Right, it assembled the malcontents of both without producing any original viable alternative. As a junior partner of a temporal and rocky coalition it is in the process of fast shrinking below counting in any future political re-alignment. They are pro-European not because they like Brussels but because they hate even more the politicians that are near at hand. Whichever way the continental crisis turns out the Lib-Dems, or what is left of them, will continue to inhabit the margin.

What matters more, thinking about the near future, are the perambulations within the Conservative political circle. For it is here that the funeral marches of a dying EURO will have the greatest resonance. First of all, being the principal force of the actual government, it has to attend, and react to, the daily twists and turns of the European crisis. Secondly, the wide-ranging views of her MPs on almost all European matters must bring the date of a decisive public vote on our EU membership ever closer. Almost forty years of declining to give the chance for the public to make its views known on a matter of such vast significance is not compatible with a vibrant, living democracy. Thirdly, the impending collapse of the present EURO will have to change all the current equations, for every country, within the Union.

One of the most decisive moments in the last seventy five years of British History is in the hands of a party assailed by a very dodgy past. Over the last four centuries the governing elements of what has formed, and been the seat of, conservative politics experienced great leaders from the Salisbury family through the Pitts to the Churchill of our day. But inter spread right through that august period of time there were many more leaders of the party weak, mediocre and thoroughly indifferent. Assessing the fibre of the current personnel the signs are not encouraging. Cameron seems singularly unable to stamp his authority on a rapidly moving economic scene perhaps because sadly he never had that innate personality that trusts itself. He surrounds himself with advisers whispering singly or from a gallery of committee gatherings so that his own voice is never heard. He simply seems more at ease doing virtually nothing that makes a difference than in the midst of making any decision.

Recent parliamentary events seem to indicate, on the other hand, a rapidly changing mood. Although Major suffered rabid nightmares at the moment of the Maastricht Treaty, the 'bastards' making his life so difficult were loud but relatively small in number. This is not the situation today. At least a third of the party is not only ready to block any power transfers to Brussels, they have a determination to move legislative authority the other way. More than that, the shift of balance is in fact so great that pro-EU Clarke finds himself almost alone in not admitting the enormity of the crisis. Nobody knows ahead of time the exact configuration, the form or the date, of the demise of the EURO. We can only hope that when the time comes an undivided Tory party will be led by an outstanding leader.

There is one more element we need to take on board in this brief exploration of our reasonable expectation. At this time there is just one party, and one man, to have the prospect of effecting the fate of our country in the denouement of the EURO crisis. The party is UKIP, the man is Farage. The party and its leadership came into being as the mood of disappointment with the EU was becoming more and more evident. Since its inception UKIP has grown relatively fast, having a small band of its members elected to the European Parliament. In recent months it began displacing the Lib-Dems from their 'exalted' position of significantly complementing one of the two major parties and becoming junior partners of a governing coalition.

Since its early days UKIP has moved from being merely a party opposing Britain's semi-membership of the EU, to developing a better understanding of the individual character of the people of this island. The party must now broaden her attention and focus on the huge economic and social benefits open to the country way beyond just the question of EU membership. Such benefits will not come our way merely by transforming out relations within this continent. We must try to give full rain to what we do naturally best. This means exploiting our native economic

originality, our language which is fast becoming the lingua franca of the world, and our democracy, copied all over the place.

Not born here and being immersed in the business and culture of many of our neighbours, I have to admit my heavy partiality for what I found here. It would be disastrous if we lost our particular uniqueness when we all most need it

December, 2012

Marriage

There seems to be a rising swell of public opinion to accommodate gay couples who wish to marry each other. The current coalition government is committed to bring in legislation to make this possible and there is no sign that the opposition has any objections. The laws concerning marriage may well form the most mysterious segment of our current legislature. The memory of my acquaintance with this subject, reaching back well over fifty years, is still very lucid and unforgettable. Cohabiting with my girlfriend and driven by idle curiosity, I paid a visit to one of the most popular headquarters of this institution, Caxton Hall, and posed what appeared to me a simple question. I have asked one of the legal officials in charge to let me have a look at the Marriage Laws of the country. He looked straight in my eyes, shrugged his shoulders, and uttered the following highly memorable words: “We have no marriage laws.”

It took me lot longer to come to terms with the extensive, complicated and largely insecure legal world of ‘divorce’. For someone not born, bred and educated in this country, it is not easy to grasp how is it possible to enter an official union without having a clear understanding of the legal implications of such a decisive act. As far as I know in all civilised European countries there are simple and clear laws governing family assets belonging to married men. In Austria, for example, whatever a will may or may not say, one third of the father’s estate will go to his children. So when you marry, at least you know for sure that much. Similar provisions are provided in all our neighbour countries. It is therefore a little surprising that no such provisions exist here. Whatever belongs to you, you are free to bequeath it in whatever way you chose. You may leave the whole of your money to a charity protecting donkeys just as easily as to your first born son.

Of course, if you have lived here most of your life and managed to absorb profoundly the eccentricities of the local culture, all this is hardly surprising. The legal customs, as many other aspects of communal culture, have very little to do with what happens in the rest of the continent. The legal universe has not grown here by royal fiat, or by learned academic universities, or even in the shadow of political might. It evolved slowly in the inns on either side of the Strand where lawyers of all abilities and status assembled to discuss what the people of the real world would consider as reasonable. They never had any intention to make men better than they actually were. They had no preconceived notion of how to improve the character of their clients. They accepted the people for what they were and pronounced judgements in the light of that reality. It is the critical case that these

judgements and pronouncements created and changed the law. Not vice versa. This is the great difference.

Sometime in the second half the nineteenth century a new law came into being constraining men to beat their wives only with a cane of lesser circumference than their little finger. This law improved the life of the wives at that historical moment but it merely recognised what would have been considered then as reasonable. Nowadays, naturally, such a law would only be acceptable if the wife was the administrator of the caning and the husband the sufferer. It seems to me that we must understand what this means when we turn our attention to the 'marriage of gays'.

There are two dimensions that make life in this country unique and significantly at variance from those even of her closest neighbours. Awareness of them is critical when assessing the current matter. One is the language, the other is the law. Both help to define the relationship between what is out there and how we deal with it. As members of the human race we assume a common origin but we happen to have hundreds, if not thousands, of different languages. The English tongue is by a huge margin the most sophisticated and the richest of them all. It is on the way of becoming the greatest *Lingua Franca* of all time. The law of this island may be eight hundred years old but its underlying foundation remained one and the same throughout the whole period. Its dominant feature is what we tend to term as 'the common law', precisely because it is deeply rooted in the ordinary daily life and ongoing custom of the people.

Thus any change in the meaning of a word may have massive repercussions, especially so when that word occupies a prominent position in our vocabulary. The Oxford English dictionary defines the term 'marriage' in a number of different settings, all originating from the Middle Period of the language's life. By Shakespeare's use of the term we go back at the very least to the sixteenth century. I have no doubt that the origin of the term goes back much further, probably to the Latin in Roman times. However used, it always required at least two contrasting entities, somehow or other, brought together. The most obvious, predominant and frequent application applies to the union of a male and a female.

Over many, many centuries the terms 'marriage', 'marry', 'marriageable' and 'married' intrinsically referred to a male and female or, better still, to a man and a woman. When such a word featured in any conversation no one could have the slightest doubt that the two principals involved were of the opposite sex. If we allow gays to marry we should be aware that we are going to lose one the most basic qualities of the term in question. It may well be the case that many clever individuals

when asked would simply say 'so what?!' And of course it is true that, especially in the English language, words lose or change their meaning all the time. The Oxford English dictionary adds, removes or changes, no less than 60,000 words at each of its editions, in the interval of some fifty years. But some of these modifications are much more important than others.

'On line' or 'on screen' would refer to the use of computers and their lifespan is dependent on the rapid transformations in the computer universe. 'Hangman' will not last much longer since the profession of hanging people no longer exists. The life of 'marriage', and its related companions, is another matter altogether. This word, and its relations, refers to a reality that is with us today, just as it has been for many hundreds of years. Throughout that long lifespan its quintessential meaning, as a union of two quite different and complimentary individuals, is remarkably unchanged. A man and a woman remain the two principals then and just exactly so today.

What is being suggested, if I understand it correctly, is meant to be a significant change in the status of gays. The proposed legislation is supposed to give them some sort of rights currently available to heterosexuals only. The idea is that gays should not be deprived of anything that is available to others. After all we live in a society of equals where what one has should be available to all the others. So what we should do first is to understand the rights that form our subject.

As I have indicated earlier there are no set of laws in this country relating to marriage spelled out clearly in a written form. So far as I know no couples contemplating matrimony are advised by a competent professional setting out the legal implications of their intended union. In recent times certain well endowed marriage candidates have gone out of their way specifically to seek legal advice concerning property brought to the union and property acquired thereafter. They were probably given decent guidance based on precedence and often special agreements were drawn up to protect their wealth. Such agreements, though relatively rare, demonstrate clearly the absence of a relevant written law.

The common sense version of what tends to happen is quite informative. There is, of course, a clear distinction drawn between what there was before the ceremony and what was acquired thereafter. But the lifestyle of the married couple is added to the equation irrespective of any income gained. So that the rules of marriage are not written out explicitly in a rule book, they are created progressively by the evolution of the court judgements given as the cases arise. That is exactly how the law of this country functions in contrast to the flow of most of our neighbours. Our ancestors found that the law of the land is infinitely more helpful if it keeps close to how people actually live and not aims telling them how they should.

The fashion in our present time is heavily biased towards equality. The 21st century will be forever remembered as the century of the female sex, so irrepressible is the advance of women in virtually all walks of life. This dominant sense of equality also affects our attitude to the gay community. Why should they be deprived of what is freely available to everyone else?! If we are free to marry, why should they not have the same opportunity?! This is the question that needs answering and the purpose of this essay.

A few years ago my daughter was bathing her children in the usual common bath. She introduced my newish grandson to her two older girls and pointed out the essential difference. She showed and highlighted his prick. The instant response was devastating. The younger girl, not yet three, simply asserted that she had a prick too. I mention this episode because it has a close bearing on what we are discussing. My youngest granddaughter simply dismissed the essential sexual difference, exactly as the proponents of gay marriages ignore natural facts. They both assert that the sexual divide does not matter, that we should neglect it altogether even in forming marital bonds.

Even if we pay but little attention to Freud's theories of acute sexual awareness from very early on, there are not many of us who have not noticed that boys prefer mobile and construction toys just as almost all little girls like playing with dolls. We also know full well that such differences persist along all our lives from coiffure and the use of scents to all the aspects of our homes we chose to live in. But in no area of life is this distinction more acute than in the union of the sexes. Marriage does differentiate us, as it always has, from man to woman, from the male to the female of the species.

I have always regarded marriage as a very personal affair. It took seven years of living together with my wife-to-be before embarking on a venture that is still alive, after some sixty years. I was even allowed to design my own ceremony for the occasion, in the spirit of the 'laissez faire' so characteristic of this country. The sole involvement of the state consisted of a brief residential requirement and the invitation to anyone of the public to stand up and loudly claim a previous marital ceremony still in force at the time. Apart from Papal intervention, dynastical or otherwise, the attitude in this country has always been the drawing of a profound divide between affairs of the state and the privacy of the individual. I cannot think of anything more damaging to the fantastic degree of our freedom than the loss of this divide.

As matters stand at the moment, cohabiting gays have three options when it comes to the question of marriage. To do nothing and let life take care of itself. To get a simple legal document, like the now fashionable pre-nuptials, to set out

what each of the partners owns or will own in the future. To arrange a meaningful ceremony of their own, to celebrate, with relations and friends, their decision to live their life together for all time to come. This is almost exactly the same case as for two heterosexuals sharing their lives without entering the official pact.

So what is the remaining difference between homo and heterosexual couples in the marriage stakes? Only that men and women have the right to call upon the state to arbitrate automatically in matters of property and offspring while gays cannot avail themselves of this highly onerous option. In relation to judgement on the fate of offspring this does not matter since gays have none. Insofar as rights to property are concerned it is far easier and wiser to make simple and prior arrangements privately without dragging in a cumbersome state. This is already what the really wealthy and intelligent, straight or gay, are doing already in any case. It saves the individual from the state and the state from individuals who tend to be complex and difficult.

Although any new legislation to embrace the gay community would certainly help to enrich further the legal fraternity, it is bound to make the life of gay couples harsher, and definitely no easier. For rather than making their life easier, the possibility of entering the infinitely complex, expensive and uncertain world of divorce would place an additional burden on shoulders bearing a great deal already. I think if I were a gay I would not try to assimilate myself to the heterosexual culture. I hope I would know that such an assimilation is never possible. But, given the fact, I would attempt with every fibre of my being to find elements in the gay life that are not available to the vast majority.

The difficulties in the gay community no longer arise for the surrounding society's condemnation. They are inherent in their profound belief that something is not right, that something should never have happened, that they are lacking what all those around them are freely given from the date of their birth. No matter how generous and accepting we all are, it is only the gays themselves that could change the situation. The legislation contemplated will make that even more difficult.

Origins

We all have a few memories from our youthful years and some are engraved on our minds endowed with a special significance, allowing their reappearance on a number of special occasions. They are treasured and encapsulated in the same format throughout our lives. It would seem that their long-term survival depends somehow on a formulation that need not necessarily correspond to the original occurrence. Still, for one reason or other, they stay with us and have a powerful effect on our subsequent history. I have quite a few of such persistently preserved moments from my childhood onwards, but they are almost wholly conserved in my most private library where all items are of no interest to anyone else.

There are, of course, very odd exceptions. Occasionally, in a few lives, a rare moment may impress itself on one life and even reach beyond it to acquire a broader significance. Such a moment, and I say it with unaccustomed modesty, crept into my life once at the age of nineteen. Having just emerged from the front lines of a pretty brutal Middle Eastern war, I was challenged by our teacher of Hebrew literature to produce an essay on any subject of my choice. My thoughts were captured by a tiny segment of the Old Testament forming the third chapter of Genesis. Here is the text that caught my eye and has embedded itself at the core of my thoughts ever since:

‘Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which God had made. And he said unto the woman, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden? And the woman said to the serpent, we may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden. But of the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it or touch it, lest ye die. And the serpent said to the woman, Ye shall not die. For God does know that in the day you eat thereof your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil. And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and pleasant to the eye, and helpful to wisdom, she took the fruit thereof, and ate and gave also to her man by her side and he ate too. And their eyes opened to reveal their nakedness; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons. And they heard the voice of God in the cool of the garden and hid themselves from the presence of God among the trees of the garden. And God called on Adam and said to him, where art thou? And he said, I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked and I hid myself. And He said, who told you that you were naked. Hast thou eaten from the tree that I forbade you to eat? And Adam said: the woman that you gave me, she gave me of the tree and I ate thereof. And God said unto the woman, what is it you have done?! And the woman said, the serpent beguiled me and I ate. And God said to the serpent: Because you

have done this, you are cursed above all cattle and creatures of the field, upon your belly shall you go and dust shall you eat all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your seed and her seed: she shall bruise your head and you shall bruise his heel. Unto the woman He said: I will greatly multiply your sorrow and labour; in sorrow shall you bring forth children, your desire shall be the man and he will rule over you. And to Adam he said, because you listened to the voice of your wife and ate from the fruit of the forbidden tree, cursed is the ground for your sake and in sorrow shall thou eat for all the days of your life.'

'And God said: man has become as one of us, to know good and evil and now he could reach with his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat and live forever. And God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from where he was taken. So He chased away the man and placed Cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden with a flaming sword to guard the road to the tree of life'.

Being so young, and so inexperienced, the deadly shaft of the story for me was unequivocal: once our eyes are open, they cannot avoid seeing our inevitable mortality. Unlike all other creatures in the world we are forced to live a life knowing that it must, inevitably, have an ending. I do not know why this realisation at that time struck home, and with such a force. It seemed to me then, and still it does so today, that the fated end of our life and our awareness of this finality, was a tragic, unbearable dichotomy. My essay laboured to restate this somewhat obvious fact but ended, somewhat dramatically, with its only possible resolution: given our mortality and our awareness of it, the only possible act of defiance had to be suicide. Committing it was somehow the only step we could take against the pre-ordained universal world.

I submitted this essay to my teacher with a degree favourable anticipation. I looked forward to a response of some praise and at least some interest. What I did not expect was a frantic visit from an anxious and fear inspired teacher trying desperately to dissuade me from ending my life. It took a little time and several meetings to assuage his spirit and convince him that I had no intention to take my own life. Nevertheless, that biblical passage stayed in the forefront of my mind ever since and subsequent readings taught me over many subsequent years just how imaginatively and profoundly it expresses the reality of our precarious life on this planet.

The origins of the Old Testament are complex, shrouded in rich uncertainty, and covered in an ongoing volume of research greater than that bestowed on a hundred historically important texts. Nobody knows, or claims to know, where, when and

how the third chapter of Genesis was conceived. It is very likely that the expulsion from the Garden of Eden had been a verbal story a few thousand years before the Old Testament took its final form around the third century B.C. It is also probable that the story had its roots in a Middle Eastern civilisation. None of this is of great significance. What matters is that man, at the very dawning of his intellectual development, realised the fiercest manifestation of his tragic fate. His response has been the creation of a story. Our story. He could do nothing else.

For millennia the creation and adoption of stories has been the dominant feature of mankind's need to come to terms with a reality half understood. Truth, contemplation and a science that came to the fore in the last two centuries. You only need to accompany the mental development of young children to understand the tribulations and prolonged periods of precious time involved in moving from imagination to fact. To make sense of this Biblical chapter it is necessary to hark back to the mind of a child, a brilliant one, nigh to a genius. He grasps mortality and knows that we are all going to die. At the same time, he realises that we are contemplative beings, a degree above all animal life, so that we can imagine immortality even if this is reserved to beings a degree still higher up. The world of gods.

I do not know where and when this story originated. This is hardly surprising with me having been an admirer, but not a scholar, of the Old Testament. I doubt, however, whether any one of the many distinguished experts of the acknowledged text is in a position to locate the source of this story. It does not matter. It is quite sufficient to realise that somewhere and somehow in the ancient annals of our race, man had to acknowledge the fundamental tragedy of our race. The story identifies that moment to coincide with the emergence of a moral code. For the offending tree in the middle of the Garden of Eden, or at least the fruit of it, 'would open your eyes knowing good and evil'.

It was precisely at the moment of eating that fatal fruit that they became aware, and ashamed, of their own nakedness. It was then that they had to sew fig leaves together to make aprons in order to hide their sex. Thus, three distinct themes are woven inextricably together in the story before us: mortality, morals and sex. It is not possible to conjure up three other themes of such profound dimension being introduced in one such simple and brief story in the third chapter of Genesis. What distinguishes us from all else on this planet is the moral dimension and the sexual privacy. What we share with all living creatures is our mortality. What makes this story devastatingly significant is our awareness of both the one and the other.

What follows then, after the fatal step that seals our tragic destiny, is again set out with devastating clarity in a story that goes back many thousands of years.

The snake, having no wings to fly, no fins to swim and no legs to walk, whilst still being the most astute of all creatures created by God, is condemned first. He it was who initiated the rebellion, so he is doomed forever. Set apart from all the other creatures, he is stuck to the dust of the earth for the rest of his life. More than that, he is embodied in the antithesis of all that mankind is destined to attempt. He is set to hurt our heel while we cut off his head. Between head and heel lies the whole of our world. Our gaze looks up to the vast expanse of the sky whilst we are mired with our feet on the solid but unpromising ground. The tragedy could hardly be expressed with greater clarity.

The woman's punishment is equally precise. Giving birth to the next generation is laborious and painful. It is part and parcel of her yearning for the man who is fated to rule over her forever. The deal is pretty awful but, again, profound. The continuation of the race is rooted in her but the price is devastating: pain and subjugation. Despite the magic of modern science and the shifting gender burden of children's upbringing, the verity unfolding here is still unyielding. Producing children into the world, bringing them up and setting their course in life, remains, for now and the foreseeable future, principally in the women's domain.

As for man, his fate was sealed when listening to the voice of his wife he accepted and ate the forbidden fruit. This has not been just a momentary weakness, allowing a single slip to seduce him. It was a decisive failure to maintain his independence and essential manhood. A manhood which lifted him up from the rank of other created beings and brought him perilously close to divinity. This is why God decreed that he should have to earn his living by the sweat of his brow well outside the perimeters of the Garden of Eden. And just to make sure that the human tragedy was eternal, Cherubim were placed to guard the gate with flaming swords to ensure that the tree of life was forever denied to the human race.

A tragedy so monumental, so all embracing and so profound could never be borne in all its simplicity. If I had the temerity to make the slightest addition to this strikingly brief tale, I would add the following words: 'And on his way out of the garden, man looked back with a despairing glance to the tree of life, knowing full well that he could never eat its fruit.' For it is precisely this backward glance, and this realisation, that lies at the base of all religions. Our imagination allows us to contemplate eternity whilst our reason confronts the reality of death. Each funeral, each burial, each symbolic act that celebrates the end of a life, underlines that enduring, overpowering dichotomy. The wills we write, the provisions we make for our grandchildren, photographs and letters that we carefully file away, properties, jewellery and other precious possessions jealously guarded, could not be envisaged without a reference that goes beyond our own, very finite, life. None of these actions

would make any sense without a trace, irrational that this may be, of imagined immortality.

It must have been something like these thoughts that caught my attention well before my twentieth birthday. It seemed to me then, but I see more clearly now, just how the greatest verities in life transfuse the Old Testament, lying in wait to be discovered, understood and serve as philosophical insights relevant to the here and the now. Indeed, the very riches scattered in such abundance all over its pages helped Islam, Christianity and the Jewish faith, to build monumental bodies of religious dogma based on the book. But this vast array of written and spoken word also meant a massive and deep burial of some of the most valuable expression of human literal thought.

A tragedy is so because it is irremediable. It cannot be undone, or reversed, or ignored. If I look back on my life, after so many decades, I see it now as a constant struggle against this very tragedy. A struggle that could never succeed, a struggle I could never give up. For almost everything I did, everything worthwhile, has been an attempt to sneak back into that damned garden and partake of the forbidden fruit of the tree of life.

Parliament and the English language

There are some situations in life that compel one to speak up and warn the others. If, for example, I were to notice the seas rising to inundate the lower regions of the land I would feel obliged to point out to my neighbours the danger of drowning. If they appeared unaware of the rising tides it would seem even more imperative for me to raise my voice. Thus, as I see parliament preoccupied suddenly with redefining our language, I feel it is my duty to sound the loudest of all the alarm bells. For many centuries of its existence our parliament never engaged itself on changing the meaning of words without, inevitably, trying to change the reality to which those very words tried to correspond. I do not know exactly how other democracies and their languages interact but at least in the case of France there is a special non-political academy devoted to the task of keeping the meaning of words crystal clear.

The word in question is ‘marriage’ or the verb ‘to marry’ underpinning its abstract noun. As we all are fully aware, a proposal lies before parliament to redefine the meaning of this term so that it should be applicable to homosexual and heterosexual unions equally well. In matters relating to the meaning of words the highest authority of the English language is the Oxford Dictionary. It does its best not only to give words their meaning but also their origins at least back to Middle English, instances of their appearance in literary works, their principal and secondary form of usage and a context of appropriateness. In all the instances defined or quoted it is clearly understood that any marriage union has to be between two separate and different entities. On the criteria of the Oxford dictionary a man can marry a woman just as easily as a screw may be married to a nut. It is simply so because a man and woman are essentially different while belonging to the same race just as a screw and a nut may be married because, different as they are, both are part of the family of metal tools.

Thinking along these lines it becomes quickly obvious that components of any marital union have to be both different and also the same. The screw and the nut, complimentary as they are, can only function together both because they belong to the same family of tools and because they are significantly different. Similarly men and women may marry both because they are essentially different but also because they are members of the same race. That is why we refer to them as ‘he’ and ‘she’ without thinking twice and that is why ‘father’ and ‘mother’ are not indiscriminately interchangeable terms.

Taking this line of thought a few steps further, eradicating the male/female distinction in marriage has other, even more widespread consequences. Maternal love with its daily intimacy, breast feeding and nursing gently to sleep, would have to be allocated to the more neutral and weaker 'parental' source. So from the first moment of every baby's life the sexual divide is embedded throughout his and her life. The grammar of our languages, the composition of our fighting forces, the structure of the entire sporting universe, the fundamental dancing patterns and the range of our singing voices, all underline and reinforce this profound distinction.

Keeping in mind that the survival of our race depends on the coming together of the two separate sexes it is hardly surprising that the literary output from the Egyptian Book of the Dead and the Hebrew bible through the medieval lyric and Shakespeare right through to contemporary works, cannot be understood or even imagined in the absence of the sexual distinction. All this is shatteringly obvious and I bother to mention it only since Parliament has taken it upon itself even more shatteringly to ignore it. For to say that marriage has nothing to do with bringing the two sexes together and has no part to play in the survival of our race, is simply and brutally asinine.

Many, many million years ago the long process of the emergence of our human race began. At some point of the distant past the egg and sperm got separated creating the womb in the female of the species and leaving the male sperm to make its tiresome and adventurous excursion to meet and split the egg. In the more recent past this critical encounter between egg and sperm was hedged and formalised by the custom and formal institution of marriage. That forms one of the most important differences between the human and animal worlds. Without taking profound account of it we cannot begin to grasp our history nor understand the highlights of our thousands years of literature.

Current advances in medical science may well permit the splitting of the egg without the involvement of the sperm but this cannot make any difference to the principal axis of the male and female interaction. For this difference has long surpassed its biological origins. It is has set itself deeply in our body and soul. So what parliament proposes goes vastly beyond both its competence and historical boundaries.

One of the principal reasons of the highly unusual stability on this island for the last nine centuries was the close relationship between the political ideas of those who governed with the actual daily lives of the mass of people being governed. This is known as political reality and this is what distinguishes the exercise of power here from the power exercised in the rest of the world. Right throughout this vast

period it is difficult to find a serious rift between the language heard in parliament and the general English used in all other walks of life. And yet this is precisely what we are asked to accept. We all know what a husband and wife are. We all know what it means to be married. This parliament wants to ask us to wipe out from our dictionary these everyday terms and replace them with artificial, vaguer and less meaningful words like 'partner' or 'parent' whilst trying to award the right to call themselves 'married' for couples of the same sex.

For the first time in the life of our Parliament laws are created for the sole purpose of facilitating a change of the meaning and use of one of the key words of our language. This is a moment to pause, to question and think again. What would such a revolutionary move mean to our language, our society and our lives? Imagine you meet a man at work or at a party. He has a largish ring on the fourth finger of his left hand. You may most naturally ask him about his wife, is she somewhere here, at work, or at home? The answer would be along these lines: I have no wife, we are two married gays and my partner is at home with our children. Your children? You may ask a little surprised. 'Yes, we have three adopted young kids and one of us usually has to stay behind and hold the fort in the meantime' comes a confident and relaxed answer. After pondering awhile, you may venture to ask something about a mother's love that the children may perhaps be missing. The man, at complete ease, answers your hesitant question rather like a teacher teaches his pupil: 'Oh, we both love them deeply. Affection flows all over the house, they are all basking in the flow, confident and secure in their parents.'

There are many of you, perhaps, reassured and confident that the parenthood of two men or two women in a family may be tantamount to a family of a female mother and a male father. Even so, everything in my life, over eighty years of it, tells me the exact opposite. From the first moment of a natural birth the love of a mother and that of a father are, and always have to be, irreconcilably different. They contribute their own distinct quality of care, attention and influence to the evolution of a child into an adult, be a she or a he, a girl or a boy. Languages are never arbitrary. They have evolved over many thousands of years in tandem with the life of people. The gender distinction is just as profound in the language as it is in the people who use, speak and write it. Changing the meaning of words is not capable of changing the people. The behaviour of the people, on the other hand, does inevitably change the language. If, by some scientific miracle the male/female differentiation were to disappear the linguistic gender distinction would or could be extinguished as well. Reality creates and changes language. Not the other way around.

So why does Parliament embark at this precise historical moment on a project designed to reverse 'the language and reality' order that prevailed for so many

thousands of years?! Why does this august institution consider suddenly reversing the meaning of 'marriage' merely to embrace the gay community within this olden institution?! The answer to this question is starkly obvious. After many centuries of violent oppression our society feels guilty, or at least uneasy, about the suffering we inflicted upon a vast and untold number of our brothers and sisters who were born with an abnormal sexual orientation. I realise that the use of the term 'abnormal' is likely to raise many hackles. It is likely that the majority of people would prefer terms like 'different' or 'unusual' or a 'minority inclination' instead. Just as in choice of fashions some people prefer a violent pink or in nourishment a more or less sugary or fatty variety of a meal. But, of course, this is precisely the critical difference between being partial to a particular colour or a dish on the one hand and engaging in a homosexual relationship on the other.

Marriage is one of the principal means of creating a family, of having children, of prolonging the race, and, most vitally, reuniting the protected egg with a wandering semen. These are the fundamentals of marriage. Gays, in the marriage stakes are 'abnormal' for the simplest of reasons; they are not, and cannot be, involved with these fundamentals. If 'marriage' is to continue having a deeply entrenched meaning, same sex relationships can never be part of it.

But let us assume for a moment that Parliament succeeds in an enterprise to bestow some sort of additional equality to the life of homosexuals. If a pair of gays is allowed, or even encouraged, to declaim that they are married, what advantages have they been given, what are the actual benefits would they now enjoy? Obviously, they could refer to each other as 'my married partner' or 'my better half' but it is more difficult to envisage 'my husband' or 'my wife'. Would they be at ease kissing and fondling each other in public? Would the rest of the community, the vast majority, get used to men sexually fondling and kissing each other as a matter of course? This century this is most unlikely.

As we well know, explicit marriage laws are far few and far between. There are not many couples who are searching or trying to visit specialist solicitors to acquaint themselves with the legal obligations following the marriage vows. Indeed, there are probably no solicitors equipped and ready to supply a manual specifying the duties, obligations and the new legal status of husband and wife. I have not heard of such a manual which is not surprising given the virtual absence of such a body of law.

The laws we are searching come into play only at the point of divorce or death. Since nobody who is divorcing or who is dead is interested in the legal consequences of getting married, the laws that concern us are precisely those that come into operation at divorce and at death. And here, of course, the law comes into its own.

The traditions of English law go back many hundreds of years and one has to go back to the inns of Chancery Lane to trace the origin and evolution of laws relating to parentage, inheritance and the divisions of material wealth in cases of divorce. Fortunately, very little of the massive evolution touches on gay marriage. Gays are seldom, if at all, blood parents, inheritance is freely bestowed by those just expired and any wealth jointly acquired rests almost uniquely on the couples whether married or not.

Having no children, gay couples are naturally free of the often difficult and complex responsibilities, material and psychological, towards anyone but themselves. If what is bestowed or inherited belonged entirely to one member of the couple, again the situation is the same whether the couple have been formally joined or not. It is only when ownership is in question, that there may possibly matter whether or not a couple is formally united. But even in these cases, which may be often difficult to resolve, the English judiciary will generally take greater account of the actual relationship of a couple and not the formality of their union.

In essence, the calm consideration of the matter should acknowledge that the gay community, if accorded the right to marry, is to be given a poisoned chalice. To have a marital status may well mean having increased responsibilities without any observable benefits. The only remaining question, given these circumstances, is why the wise institution of Parliament should have taken upon itself to propose a new law to alter some of the key words in the language to the detriment of both gay and straight members of our society.

As is very often the case, when Parliament engages itself to change or enlarge the law, it is moved by events and moods of the present rather than trying to envisage the much longer term effects of its proposed legislation. It is exactly because of this 'short term' view that the House of Lords survived so surprisingly long. It has served us well precisely because it could effectively consider, oppose and improve the proposals of the Commons, taking better account of the more distant future.

Changing the law to include gays in the marital stakes is very good instance of what tends to happen. For this opportunistic venture proposed by our Prime Minister has not been mentioned by the extensive pamphlets of any of the parties before the general elections. Not Labour, Liberals or Conservatives thought for a moment to consult the electorate. But they all kept wide awake on any opportunity that was relatively simple, certainly cheap and could be popular with the unthinking masses. The present mood is to appear conciliatory, recognising our past misdeeds, apologise and embrace the suffering remnants. Almost nothing serves better, as an appropriate subject of this mood, than the world of the gays.

Until and beyond the world war, homosexuality, in all its manifestations, was part of the criminal code. I remember a well known figure being arrested and tried, some fifty years ago, as a result of a few words being exchanged between gays in a public lavatory of Kensington Gardens. The criminal code and public attitudes have been transformed gradually but quite quickly in the few intervening years. It is now felt that that our society was unjust and even cruel to the homosexuals in our midst. We are expected somehow to atone for our past sins. Being extra generous to gays and trying to eliminate any distinction between them and the bulk of our populace is thought to remedy the past. This seems to be what drives the current moves in Parliament.

But pretending to give something of no intrinsic value to gays whilst trying to violate the meaning of key words in our vocabulary, will harm rather than help past victims. It also reveals a profuse misunderstanding of the purpose and function of our Parliament.

22 February 2013

Semi-Detached Britain

Broadly speaking there are three major types of houses in this country: (1) those ranged closely next to each other, forming complete streets, (2) those standing on their own with a surrounding garden or piece of land, (3) those married into a couple, sharing a central wall and a very similar appearance. When I came to this country on a ship that docked in Southampton some sixty years ago and travelled on by rail to London, I was surprised to see a massive sequence of dwellings squeezed together into streets to what appeared to me an endless succession of towns. I never anticipated seeing such sites anywhere in the world beforehand. A few days later I found myself as a guest in the Murrayfield district of Edinburgh. Every house there stood in its own generous garden, displaying the wealth and status of the owners. The contrast between the two types of abode was striking. It was a little later that I came across the vast tracts of typical British homes, married two at a time, in tracts of semi-detached habitations, almost unique to this country.

Throughout the many years that I lived here my residence was either in a street or in a building standing on its own, surrounded by a substantial piece of land, far away from other houses. At the same time, I could be not unaware of the massive tracts of semi detached dwellings spread all over place. I saw them, got to know people who lived in them and spent a considerable time in their midst. And despite their, more or less, constant presence their real significance never exercised my mind. It seemed quite natural that people should live in different types of accommodation, according their preference.

But then, unexpectedly, I woke up one morning with a staggering realisation. I had asked myself why this semi detached architecture was so popular here and virtually absent in most other civilisations. The semi detached format is mostly absent everywhere else. European civilisation, Rome, Paris, Vienna, St Petersburg Spain and Holland, for example, are all devoid of it. In Japan, China, India, the whole of Africa and wherever British culture has not exercised its influence, there is virtually no sample of the semi detached. It is natural that people of the Arctic should live in igloos and many millions of Africans be satisfied with mud huts. It needs no explanation to understand why the inhabitants of periodically flooded areas should build their dwellings on stilts. It is, on the other hand, quite remarkable that the inhabitants of this large island have chosen to build a uniquely semi detached environment.

It must be tempting to attribute the semi detached architectural phenomenon to various simple factors: relative shortage of building land, the attraction of more

generous breathing space, the gaining of relative independence. All these features may be part of the equation but they could equally apply in the whole of Europe and other continental tracts. So we must conclude that the emergence of the semi detached architecture is principally a uniquely British format.

Thus we are lead inevitably to the next question: if semi detached habitations are particularly British, what is there in our lives to foster this semi detached dimension? The answer is breathtakingly obvious. We are a pretty substantial island in close proximity to Europe. We are part, and not quite part of, this important continent. We are Europeans but not quite as obviously France, Spain, Italy or Holland. We are, in one profound sense, both belonging and not belonging, to this historically pre-eminent continent. In other words, we are semi detached.

Once we hit upon the idea of semi detached-ness as a general state, not confined to architecture only, a great deal of our history assumes a much clearer light. For since the eleventh century this island was never occupied and almost for the same period of time she was highly circumspect in allowing her troops to occupy permanently any part of the European continent. At the margins, the Northern and Western edge of France, the perimeter of Portugal, was as far as English or British armed forces secured a more permanent and lasting occupation. Africa, Northern America, Australia and the land mass of Asia tell a different story. Some islands of the Mediterranean, like Malta, Cyprus and the rock of Gibraltar are the very minor exceptions of the more or less permanent acquisitions.

The recognition of this semi detached status becomes ever more critical if we take even a mere glance at the historic relationship between this country and the continent of Europe. The military and political events over these centuries have resulted in a frequent re-drawing of the boundaries, and even the very existence, of the European states. Today's Spain becomes the country it is only after the gradual expulsion of the Moslem presence at around the time of the discovery of America. France expands stage by stage from its central provinces around Paris over four or five centuries. The peninsula that is today's Italy comes into being as a state less than two centuries ago. The German state that occupies now centre stage emerges with Bismarck at the middle of the nineteenth century. Holland becomes Holland after a bitter struggle with the Spanish dominion just before the Thirty Years upheaval and Belgium comes into being by the artificial insemination of Britain as late as 1832. Scandinavia turns into the current states of Norway, Sweden and Denmark after successive dominations by one or the other less than two hundred years ago. Austria shrinks from being one of the major superpowers into its present diminutive dimensions only after the First World War. Poland leads an ethereal existence, squeezed between mighty Russia and Austria, until the beginning of the last century.

In historical terms, with the exception of Hungary, the other states are more recent and wobbly still.

While all these substantial events were taking place, all through almost a whole millennium, the boundaries of our island remained the same and, with the exception of Scotland, assumed the parameters of one, single, state. Although on a few occasions troops of ours took an active part in continental struggles, these ventures were relatively short termed, leaving the British physically un-encumbered in the fortunes of the continent. The progressive French expansion, the shrinking of the Spanish dominion, the disastrous Thirty Years war, the Napoleonic phenomena, the two more recent world wars, drew our arms into battle, but we almost never left them on the continent for the purposes of any kind of permanent occupation. Sea, air or land, we withdrew our forces to this island as soon as practicably possible, whatever the fate of the physical confrontation was. The most important lesson to draw is that it all was meant to ensure our permanently semi detached status! A good example of the kind of relationship we are talking about is presented before, during and after, the Napoleonic saga. Years before the climactic episode, Britain was financing the Prussian military efforts without having a single British soldier involved. We have surveyed the revolution, the execution of the King, the rise of a formidable tyrant and the expansion of the French domain, carefully avoiding an explicit war. Even at the peak of the confrontation, when both Europe and Britain were physically closed to each other, we were content to support the enemies of Napoleon with our money but not our men. A little later, and after much political opposition, Wellington was allowed to operate from Portugal, a minimal event in the vast context of a continent in flames. After Waterloo, and an interesting settling of accounts, all British forces returned home, leaving the Germans, Russians and the French to sort out Europe and prepare the First World War in the expectations of the following century. This is exactly how a semi detached neighbour would naturally behave.

The next dimension of this relationship concerns language. At this point in time there are some thirty two official languages that govern equally each step of the EU. There has been nothing even vaguely similar in our history. On the contrary, English has three major roots: Saxon, Latin and Breton. Over many centuries the current language absorbed a great deal from these roots. This long process of assimilation followed no prescribed rules, no authoritarian or superior body, to decide what was permissible and what was not. As a consequence there is almost no coherent English grammar and no rational rules of spelling, but a tremendous amount of near duplication as well as a fantastically rich vocabulary. The editor of the authoritative Oxford dictionary retired very recently after twenty years of unceasing labour during which time span 60,000 new words were added to the language. These last additions far exceed even the most voluminous French or German dictionaries.

The importance of these differences assumes a far greater significance in the witnessing of a monumental transformation in the linguistic realities of our world. For the first time ever a single language is on the brink of becoming the universal means of communication between the world's human inhabitants. To some measure, in bygone days, Latin had this status, but this comprised only the 'learned' and only in most of Europe. Spanish and Mandarin will probably continue for quite awhile longer but computers comprising most essentials will principally be in the English language for, at least linguistically, understanding each other. So neighbours as we are, and living in a semi detached neighbourhood, we are also significantly different, cultivating the only veritable source of meaningful communication.

Strangely enough, this relative uniqueness does not diminish our semi detached standing. On the contrary, it reinforces it. Nobody else is geographically semi detached, nobody else has half an independence, and nobody else cultivates a universal language. This is all true, very obvious and need not have been stated. What makes it urgently relevant is the intense pre-occupation with our current and future relationship with the European Union. The fundamental question is quite simple. Should we leave things as they are, should we try to re-shape our 'belonging' or should we detach our self from the complexities of the EU altogether. A decision must be made in the closely coming years or possibly even months, and the political parties are already lining up for a polling day promised on this very crucial subject.

The future is massively uncertain but two of the possible outcomes may be dismissed with relative ease. Despite the beliefs of a few heavy weights, like Clarke, Heseltine and Richard Branson, the EU cannot survive in its present form. Any serious economic association of different bodies must pre-suppose a sufficient similarity between them to embrace or to endure inevitable upheavals. At present the EU is experiencing enormous world-wide pressures with her Northern and Southern parts in diametric divergence. Greece, Italy, Spain, Portugal and possibly even France, have massive deficits and unbearably growing unemployment. On the other hand, Germany, Holland, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Poland, and possibly even the UK, are in a significantly different state on both counts: debt and unemployment. The two halves just do not mesh, and reality must, sooner rather later, prevail.

On the other hand, on the opposite side of the divide, UKIP is also on untenable ground. It is powerful, simple and credible, to herald our imminent total departure from the European Union. It is tantamount to saying that we cease to be semi detached or live in a semi detached house or move to a habitation with many acres of land where we could walk and play freely to our heart's content. Unfortunately this is much less simple than it sounds. If we were Australia, America, Russia or China such a trans-figuration is indeed would be more naturally possible. Unfortunately,

we are neither a continent nor a country of continental dimensions. What a China or a Russia can or cannot do, we cannot match. Our civilisation, culture and history is inherently wound up with this continent and so must continue to be in the future.

The UKIP proposition amounts to nothing less than a divorce. And divorces are seldom simple and rarely easy. The total departure from the EU would require the re-drawing of hundreds of the current laws from simple traffic regulations to all physical movements, financial transactions and commercial ventures. All this would involve not just authorities of bodies of our own but the entire Brussels bureaucracy. The divorce would be a long, difficult and laborious project but then almost all divorces are. And assuming even that the divorce would be relatively simple, it would take many, many years of labour, effort and confusion.

Even if an eventually limited destructive economic period yielded a completely independent Britain, what would we have gained? Certainly, a great deal of annoying, unnecessary, and even undemocratic rules, laws and regulations would be dumped in the cemetery of utter waste. Probably, we would have other ones less in number and voted through a much more democratic parliament. At the same time, some of the commercial advantages, gained through a significantly larger and more powerful Europe, would be lost. More importantly, economic and democratic Europe would be the serious loser both in the political and the commercial realities. Opinions, at to gains and losses, vary greatly and it is not possible to predict with any confidence the eventual outcome of a referendum. It is a risk that I would not recommend to take.

This leaves two remaining options: the first is driving hard for a significantly different accord between the EU and Britain. This is what Cameron and the majority of the Conservative party appear to favour and are currently actively engaged in trying to bring about. It is difficult to expect the southern half of the continent, including above all, France to go along willingly with any such idea. They are sinking too deep in their misery to help a resurgent North, particularly accompanied by Britain, to facilitate such a massive, and to them detrimental, transformation.

So it seems at first sight that none of the three options would or could deliver us out of the current morass. And this is certainly true given the factors ranged alongside as they are now. If the EU stays as it is, if the German political establishment remains profoundly split, if France remains a key player, an uncertain Britain cannot make the difference. But what are the chances of a more satisfactory outcome if reality takes over. If the EU can no longer stay as it is, if Germany assumes the political as well as the economic leadership of the continent, if France is relegated to a secondary position and Britain begins to draw fully on her financial, linguistic, military and political resource, what then?

These hypothetical's have to be taken seriously simply because they are on the point of becoming facts. The EU cannot hold economically together with one half sinking in a sea of unemployment and debt while the other half is flourishing. Economic and political strengths are inter-dependant, neither can subsist on her own. France is already slipping fast behind Germany almost on all counts, while Britain will eventually make use of being a financial centre, a potent military force, and having a stable and democratic framework with a language fast assuming global proportions.

Thus it is not really difficult to forecast what will happen tomorrow or on the ever faster moving days to come. In terms of economics and the currency related to them, Southern and Northern Europe will separate. The Northern sector will have a currency strong increasing in value (Euro,1) while the Southern sector will resort to a weaker EURO (Euro, 2) de-valued further every few years in line with the inevitable inflation. It will take a year or two to assimilate the realities of the two currencies but the commercial community knows well how to distinguish between a strong and weak currency. Once the first shock is over the weaker Euro will help the South to recover, decrease unemployment and debt while the exporters of the North will have to work even harder and more ingeniously than they are doing today. On the other hand, Germany will need no longer support a ramshackle economy with loans that do not have a chance of being repaid.

France will have to face, of course, a most uncomfortable choice: trying to maintain a strong currency from a lower ranked position or being the leader of much lower ranked economies. Neither choice is easy but France has demonstrated over the last two centuries her political skills. How otherwise to understand her survival and rise, three times in succession right in front of our eyes. Monsieur Holland is no De Gaul and the trick cannot work for the fourth time.

What I anticipate and what I search to understand in this essay has not happened yet but its likelihood appears so logical that we cannot stand idly by waiting impotently for the story to unfold. We must put right now in place a British-German living alliance, devote ourselves to the tuition of the English tongue, explore all potential export opportunities and maintain the centrality of our financial services. This is all urgent and indispensable.

May, 2013

The Classical Essay

Miguel de Montaigne is generally credited with inventing the modern form of the essay. Irrespective of the historical judgement of literary origins, it is more of an indisputable fact that its massive popularity and principal residence took place within the English tongue. We have now reached a state of affairs when a vast amount of non-fiction writing is spread about everywhere in our literary environment, claiming the status of an essay. From the work of University undergraduates, through newspaper articles, to long academic expositions and various scientific papers, all may aspire, superficially perhaps, to being called essays. This is very much in keeping with the English culture where the boundaries of word and meaning are loose, and loosely speaking, the map of these boundaries is continuing to expand and change all the time. This is, of course, true of all languages but the dimensions of them in English far, far exceeds the others.

Nevertheless, it is sometime useful and necessary to move in the opposite direction. There may be occasions when it is appropriate to restrict and redefine the reaches of a term. This is precisely one of these options. The 'essay' has had a long and profound history. In attempting to bring back its literary lustre we have to contract its boundaries and create, or recreate, a vastly narrower and more precise meaning. This is precisely the intention here.

In the broadest terms, most literary output of men, in all epochs and all languages, has three distinct chapters: a beginning, a middle and a conclusion. Adam and Eve live at peace in the garden of Eden, the snake seduces them to eat the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge, they are banished forever from the garden of Eden. David is shepherding the family's herd of sheep, he kills the giant in an unequal combat, he becomes the king. The Jews rebel against their Assyrian overlords, Jerusalem and the sacred temple are destroyed in the subsequent war, the Jews are enslaved in Assyria. Hamlet discovers that his uncle murdered his father, he takes his revenge, he dies. In the Christmas story of Dickens, the central figure is a nasty, uxurious individual who is eventually the victim of terrifying nightmares that transform him into a kind, thoughtful and conscientious benefactor.

The novels of Jane Austin all follow the same classical format. A stable and unremarkable family situation is followed by a dramatic sequence of events leading eventually to a happy conclusion of a wedding in a church. Going abroad, to perhaps the greatest story teller, we find the same underlying triangle in Dostoyevsky's novels, one after another, be it Crime and Punishment, The Idiot or Brothers Karamasov.

There are, of course, major significant exceptions, like Kafka's *The Castle* or *The Trial*, where there are no conclusive endings and the stories drift away, defused into a mysterious far distance. Even so, we tell or write stories, from childhood tales to most sophisticated fiction, guarding the sequence from an unchallengeable beginning, through a rich, eventful and novel middle, to a simple, final and definite conclusion.

Thus it is with all works of fiction but never, or almost never, with poetry. But then poets seldom tell a story in the full sense of narration when inspiration strikes and carries them along intuitive byways both below and above rational byways. To make matters a little more complicated there are many poems that take the narrative form and narratives that are expressed poetically. Petöfy, the great and untranslatable Hungarian poet produced a great array of verses, some narrative and others just glimpses of poetic insight. There is a wealthy plethora ranging across the narrative field, Shakespeare and Milton among them, stretching from a simple sonnet to Dantes recount of both paradise and hell in most intimate detail.

More or less in the same way, on the opposite side of the spectrum, essays are equally distinct from academic expositions even if these borrow the essayistic length and more dense style. Generally speaking, the inhabitants of the upper tiers of universities tend to focus on isolated bits of the universe, trying to demonstrate some observation or theory of their own, construed to modify or eliminate altogether other existing perceptions or judgements of the subject in hand. Their primary objective is to eliminate, as far as possible, all that is subjective, debatable or stand counter to their point of view. We should never forget what happened to the astronomer who insisted that it was our planet the circled the sun, not vice versa.

So, if essays are intrinsically not narratives, not poems, not scientific papers, not desertions, how are we to describe or define them? My first encounter with the medium took place at the philosophy department of Edinburgh University, when an Oxford don opened the term with a request for a written essay to be submitted in a couple of weeks. Its subject, heavily emphasized, was to be absolutely arbitrary. My own effort took almost a whole term and resulted in a sixty page homily for my ideas at the time. The don told me that he could not mark my work since it was not an essay but something approaching a thesis or a disorganised dissertation. Nevertheless, many weeks later I had my work back with most detailed questions and suggested corrections followed by a long afternoon of discussions on the day that Drobny won the Wimbeldon tennis title. The central idea was the relationship between personal 'pleasure' and personal 'pain'. I contended that each of them depended on the other, that one measured the extent of the one with the extent of the other, and the 'extents' had be equal.

I believe now as I believed then: the experience of pain and pleasure are exactly inter-dependent. My don asked me for a reference to this idea, where exactly did I find it. I told him I could not give a reference since it came straight out of my head. The expression on his face was one of disbelief. This tiny but true incident has a great relevance to all that follows.

First, the writing and reading of the attempted essay took place between two individuals who shared the meaning of terms even though one of them expressed passionately a belief, while the other doubted the basic assertion. The discussion and debate that followed could not have taken place otherwise.

This is particularly true of the British periodical essayists, starting with Addison and Steele in *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* (early 1700s), who essentially wrote for their friends in London's clubs and coffeehouses, confident that the rest of the nation's provincial readers aspired to be like them. It was similarly true of the nineteenth century Romantic periodicalists, like Leigh Hunt, who, in the first issue of his *Examiner* in January 1808, described himself as trying to 'make acquaintance' with the reader so that he may then speak as he would to a friend. It is notable, similarly, that Hazlitt called his collected essays of 1821-22 'Table Talk' – matching your image of two men with their beers.

The very title of Thomas Paine's pamphlet essay 'Common Sense' (1776), as well as its subtitle 'Addressed to the Inhabitants of America...' showed that he was assuming fellowship with his audience, at least as a strategy of rhetoric.

Max Beerbohm's comic essay 'How Shall I Word It?' (1910) assumed that the reader would share his self-consciously ignorant perspective on the less literate lower orders. He wonders at the existence of people who would need to buy a manual to provide templates for letter-writing, saying: 'Not you nor I can plumb the abyss at the bottom of which such humility is possible. Nevertheless, as we know by that great and constant 'demand', there the abyss is and there multitudes are at the bottom of it. Let's peer down...No, all is darkness.'

Second, writer and reader shared an awareness and interest in the subject matter of the essay, although that subject matter was given a free reign. Within the parameters of philosophy, the core of every essay is permitted. What determined it was nothing better than my own preoccupation and the seductive attraction of the central idea. The freedom granted us was not an accident or a piece of thoughtless negligence. No other faculty of the university could have set such an undefined task.

One could write a volume on the diversity of subjects that extended itself across the 'essay' field but here are some cursory samples typical of the essayistic reach.

- William Hazlitt's 'On the Pleasure of Hating' (1826) opens with a description of his instinctive antipathy for a spider, but gradually unveils the essay's true subject to be the state of political and personal disillusionment.
- Montaigne's 'On the Lame' (1595) starts by talking about the relativistic nature of time, before unveiling its central subject to be (via an anecdote about having had sex with a lame woman) our universal human tendency to self-deception.
- Charles Lamb, 'A Chapter on Ears' (1821): 'When therefore I say that I have no ear, you will understand me to mean – for music.'

Third, the spelling, grammar, terminology and references, all fell easily under the critical hammer of the don. What caused him the only real problem was the tracing of the origin of the pain/pleasure principle. He went to great length trying to find an acceptable source, to no avail. True or false, reasonable or irrational, profound or superficial, important or negligible, the central idea was original. It formulated itself and emerged from own head. Historically speaking, here are some references to primary thoughts that have a universal and enduring quality.

- Francis Bacon, 'Of Superstition' (1612/1625) in which he expresses his commitment to rationalist skepticism, vs the religious fanaticism of his time.
- James Baldwin, 'Down at the Cross' (1963) in which he wrote about the current issues of the Civil Rights Movement, but in a way which still has relevance to race relations today.
- Virginia Woolf, 'Professions for Women' (1942) in which she confesses the internal (rather than social) obstacles she faced as a female writer.

Fourth, everything in the essay must derive from, and relate closely to a central idea. What I performed in my excessive youth, filling sixty pages round the central idea, of pain and pleasure, goes against the spirit of the essay. It is not just the quantity of words, the meandering argument, the irrelevance of multiple themes. It is the compactness and coherence of the content that counts for the quality of the work.

- Cicero, 'On Old Age' or De Senectute (45BC) – advice essay, the wisdom of which still applies, with a couple medically dated exceptions.
- Isaiah Berlin, 'The Hedgehog and the Fox' (1953) – on all great writers falling into two categories re styles of thinking.
- George Orwell, 'Reflections on Ghandi' (1949) – which is of its time, in worrying about the growth of totalitarianism, but is really about an eternal division between those who strive for 'inhuman' perfection and those who do not.

The setting of any essay ought to be something simple, easily grasped and unarguably clear to the contemporaries of the writer. Surveying its classical history we are immediately aware of the writer's proximity to his intended audience. Right from the very beginning essay authors write to people who not only live in the same society, and at the same time, but also share the same intellectual space. But, in addition to all that, and in counter distinction to it, the really great essays stretch deeper and wider to enrich philosophical thoughts.

The image springing to mind is of two characters sitting at the same table, at the same time, one of them is slowly expounding an idea, the other one listening quietly and nodding his head in agreement or waving his arms in protest. Most of these encounters led nowhere and left no worthwhile literary memory. But a few of the others went two or three steps beyond and helped to create a most interesting genre. It is these select pieces that form the foundation, and the classic format, of the ideal 'essay'. It is they that inspire these thoughts and lead to these conclusions.

Once homogeneity of language between speaker and listener is confirmed, and the introduction is over, the originator unveils the subject of the essay. This may take more than one step but, restricted or expanded, it is a clearly identifiable move in the classical essay.

Having met, shaken hands, sat down, shared a drink of beer, and the essayist having indicated what he wants to talk about, we come to the matter of the dialogue's true content. As essays have been written on all subjects under the sun, we are entering into a virtually inexhaustible field. Even so, a few critical distinctions do narrow the field. By far the vast majority of essays deal with subjects which can have no general interest. The collection of odd fragments of rubbish in 18th century London, or detailed and interesting study on the behaviour of fleas, or an excellent portray of ladies fashion in the first quarter of the 19th century, no matter how well written are

not what this is about. This is so because, excellent as they may be, they are anchored to a very narrow and specialised niche.

But even if the subject of the essay is of greater public interest, this in itself is not enough. For that interest, as passionate as it may be, could well be confined to a situation relevant only to a certain time, to a specific place or to a limited segment of the population.

What we are seeking to embody in the foremost classical essay is beginning to take shape. Its heart has to lie in the common consciousness of the language and culture. It has to rivet the writer and reader. It should focus on verities across the ages, and touch on matters of universal relevance. It matters not whether the reader agrees or not. A great essay may well, and very often does, divide opinions. The best way to consider it is as an outpouring of a very personal point of view that may, or should, attract universal and long lasting appreciation.

Having made clearly its principal theme, the classical essay should return to the point of its departure. That is to say, after unfolding and elaborating the main idea, the great essay should be brought to a conclusion with a simple, brief and easily grasped meaning. The essayist stands up, shakes the hand of his audience, and departs with a most wonderful, final gesture, leaving only an empty beer glass on the table.

This is not necessarily how all the great essays have been written or even read. But we are centuries behind their illustrious heyday, trying to save and re-introduce the best of this literary format. These days, words are tumbling, cascading, flooding all over the air and the printed page, filling newspapers, books and libraries. All non-fiction literary output tends now to be bestowed with the 'essay' title. In many ways it is precisely the opportune moment to return to the essence of this format and create, or re-create, a new, clearer definition of what a classical essay is, or should be.

Widworthy, May 2013

The Sexual Divide

The sexual divide is far deeper than ever imagined. We are all conscious only of the obvious. The erect penis and the receptive vagina. The erect penis is forever doomed to seek entrance to an accommodating opening so as to discharge his content. The receptive vagina is equally doomed to seek the same entrance to her receptive self and accommodate the seed she needs to commence the act of creation. So it is, so it has been from the beginning, so it will be for the foreseeable future.

All this is clear and obvious in the image of the simple actual sex act itself. But this decisive act itself endures only for an occasional and very brief period of our lives. Even in the lives of notorious Don Juans and nymphomaniac prostitutes the sexual act itself occupies rarely more than a very limited time-segment of their overall living activities.

On the other hand, this apparently simple, brief and occasional act has the power to exercise a monumental presence in the rest of all our lives. The desire to partake in that act, first of all, far exceeds the actual performance. Walking in the street, taking a bus, shopping, being in an office or looking out of a window, almost inevitably involves coming across members of the opposite sex. Age, clothing and general appearance are all constraining factors but even so the thought of a possible sexual encounter, no matter how brief, off putting and superficial, is often enough there. So much so that beyond the whistling of building workers on the passing by of a young woman, we are never really aware of its multiple presence.

But beyond the obvious, when daydreaming about when and how such an encounter could and would be engineered, the profound sexual encounter, and more interestingly, the gender divide has not been given its rightful recognition. Freud was perhaps the first professional to give the sex divide a significantly wider field of application when, in his analysis of dreams, any blade, church tower or even a pen, was allowed to assume a substitution for the male prick. But his rationalisation of the observed phenomena barely touched the most basic condition of our being.

Whatever we may think today, a century after the Freudian breakthrough, of the more outrageous of his equivalences, I am afraid he barely touched the surface. Having been so preoccupied with the phenomena of repression he was oblivious to the simpler, and much more decisive, distinction in our psyche. He was primarily and essentially a medical man so what struck him from the beginning with such an elemental force was the capacity of the psyche to circumnavigate the overtly sexual

areas in his patient's experience. In other words Freud was so impressed with the ability of the psyche to invent quite complex stories, in dreams or in subsequent analytical sessions, to link a blade, or a pencil, or a church tower, to the repressed prick that he ignored the earlier, and substantial, network of associations that accompanies naturally the mental development of every human being.

A too great a portion of my life has been devoted to the invention of hundreds of toys and games. One of the abiding realisations of my participation in an industry related primarily to children of a wide age group has been the sharp divide between little boys and little girls. From time to time many leading figures in that domain have tried to introduce articles they hoped would apply equally to children of both sexes. If you ever looked at any of the substantial catalogues of the major players in this field, you would have seen at once the degree of their failure. Despite the repeated efforts of the entire industry these catalogues demonstrate most impressively that little girls are drawn to a world of objects quite distinct from those that attract the immediate attention, and ownership desire, of the same age boys.

Anything that moves, that shoots or launches, anything that involves taking apart and putting together again, anything that requires intense competition, games like football and cricket with their accessories, as well as guns or swords or uniforms are part and parcel of one category.

Dolls, dresses, jewels, pets of one sort or another, babies and households, all the paraphernalia that goes with make up gear, dresses of all sorts, baking and cooking utensils, secret diaries, social games of a kind, are part of a different category and occupy another section of these catalogues.

The third category is made up of toys and games that reach across this sexual divide. Craft items of many sorts, crayons, plasticene, dough, painting material, gymnastic equipment, balls that are thrown and caught, are, generally speaking, sex neutral.

It goes without saying that there many girls into toys primarily intended for boys and much fewer instances of boys taking an interest in items clearly apportioned for girls. Even so, the upper echelons of the industry, whose commercial life depends on financial success or failure, have accepted the sex divide as intrinsically, and relevantly, unchangeable. All attempts to ignore this divide, and there have been quite a number, have ended in failure. As a matter of interest, the two giants of the world toy industry, Mattel and Hasbro, had both to reconcile themselves to the virtual impossibility of crossing this barrier. Mattel, with their dominant Barbie world, have tried and failed many times to acquire a boy's game or toy to challenge

Hasbro. And, quite symmetrically, Hasbro found it equally frustrating to find or develop a doll line to challenge the dominance of Barbie.

The same differentiation applies, even more substantially, to the choice of colours. Many attempts have been made by the same leaderships, in the same industries, to override, somehow or other, the colour orientation of girls and boys. To no avail. The many variations of pink and red remained forever in the female domain, whilst blue and the darker versions of brown retained their dominance throughout the range of toys in the opposite camp.

There have been many psychologists, and other learned heads, who tried to convince parents, the industry, and the population in general, that this leaning to such different colours was substantially due to the adult generations who merely passed on their innate habits to their offspring. They tried to advance the view that if somehow parents reversed their natural instinct and chose pink toys for boys and blue ones for girls, this distinction would eventually disappear. Their contribution, in the egalitarian age currently so fashionable, was welcome but utterly ineffective. The fundamental colour orientation is just too profound. It is something that not only we are forced to accept, but, more importantly, it could be a useful starting point in our attempt understand the sex divide.

I am fully aware that these lines are written at the beginning of the 21st century, a century that is likely to be seen as the period of the great change over. It may well be the historical moment when the female sex begins to acquire the ascendancy enjoyed by the males over many thousands of years. It will be remembered as the time when the African females ceased to belong body and soul to the males who took them, more or less willy-nilly, whenever the natural need and opportunity offered itself. It will be recalled as the epoch when in certain parts of Asia women started to occupy socially and economically important positions. It will be logged, even more significantly, as the culmination of a principally male political leadership in countries of Northern Europe and the United States.

This tectonic turn in the sexual climate is taking place now universally, everywhere, and at a fabulous rate. Although the revolution is going on in the front of our eyes and we are all part of it, its enormity is protecting us from understanding and acknowledging its substantial ramifications. We are busy measuring the paltry, and fast vanishing, differences between male and female working income and, at the same time, we take no serious account of the much more profound difference between a woman and young mother of today and her counterpart at the outset of the last century. Women right across the social scale were then almost wholly absorbed in the life of their families. When they were gainfully employed, they brought home a

fraction of the money needed to maintain a family of six or eight children. Women with no family responsibilities were prostitutes, servants or oddities. Somehow or other society felt that they missed out, that they failed to fulfil the role naturally bestowed on them.

This feeling is omnipresent in the literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Almost no novel of the period exists without 'pitiable' characters of women who did not, and could not, fit into the reproductive process. The classic tragic circumstance almost always involved a woman who was deprived of a happy marriage and an ensuing family by the usually unexpected loss of the intended male. He may have been a soldier who fell in a war, or a man who died of a heart attack, or a drunkard who went potty, or a man stolen by a rival, or someone who fled to India for whatever reason, but in every case what mattered was the non-fulfilment of the heroine's original intended destiny.

Over the last hundred years or so a new woman emerged in our midst. She has evolved at a furious pace and from this point onward it should be increasingly clear to us exactly where we are heading. From the kindergarten to doctorates at the university she has proved at least the equal of, if not superior to, her male counterpart. In the greater part of the job market, she has progressed from junior positions to the upper strata with incredible speed. Around the political arena, at least in the West, with Thatcher and Merkel and some of the Scandinavian prime ministers she has climbed to the very summit. The legal world has raised her from the state of subservience and dependence granting her, in most places, full autonomy and absolute equality.

But the most relevant transformation of the sexual divide occurred in the sex realm itself. With the introduction of highly effective female contraception directly through the female herself, the culminating sexual act was irretrievably severed from the critical subsistence of the human race. What has been the single guarantor of race continuation from the beginning of humanity, has suddenly acquired another, and in many ways, a more important dimension. A very minute portion of the basic act is now to do with the continued existence of our race. Sex by act, by interest, preoccupation, practice, thought and deed, superseded substantially its role of being merely a reproductive need. The Church of England, all the Protestant faiths elsewhere, the Catholic religion worldwide, have all done their best to restrict the sexual component of our lives to the survival of the race. Even the rabbinical Jews specified the days allowed for sexual intercourse to coincide with likely conception. Of all the major religions they have been the most aware, and least denying, of the importance of the erotic in our lives. But even for them, the essential link between sex and breeding had never been broken.

The religious, social and practical boundaries of sex, kept good for many thousands of years, are now ruptured. At the very least in the West, sexual freedom is either established, or on the way to being given a free reign, everywhere. In fact, if and when, a profound history of the human race is set in print, the time of our own life, the present period of a hundred years, will be seen as a turning point in the history of our race. It will be considered, and remembered, as a transition period in the fate of the human race, with the male/female sexual divide redrawn forever.

The current woman in the West, setting the agenda and tone of the new social order in the making, is easily discernable to us all. She is rarely a virgin, having discarded the protection of her hymen before the late teens, who is well familiar with the details of available contraception and adept at employing it. She may, or may not, be married but is definitely the beneficiary of a few, more or less successful and more or less serious, relations with men. She has a meaningful job, or even a carrier, that occupies the major part of the working day and sets an ambitious target for her future. Whether married or not, she is likely to have children rather late, in her late thirties and early forties. Being a mother while pursuing a carrier imposes serious tensions of a kind virtually unknown until the twentieth century. She is likely to contribute a fair share to the family's financial well being and take an active role in organising the daily administration of at least the children's life.

But the most radical and relevant difference between the women of our day and her predecessors lies precisely on the critical dividing line between the two sexes. To the end of the Victorian age it was the accepted wisdom that the sexual urge, its pursuit and satisfaction belonged exclusively to the male. He was essentially subject to these physical demands the satisfaction of which drove him almost throughout his life. In complete contrast, the general belief, at least in all its overt expression, confined females to the reluctant acceptance of pleasure-less sex, endured always for the maintenance of the family and the procreation of children. A woman who did not, at least overtly, conform to this dictum had to be accorded the status of a whore. At the beginning of the last century, at least in the Anglo-Saxon world this distinction was paramount. Respectability and relegation were the only two categories available and a surgical line divided the two. From childhood onwards virtually all women knew and accepted that there was only one choice, family and motherhood or utter social oblivion. The prime objective of the whole society was geared to guide the womenfolk to the first and prevent at all cost the second.

While the underlying reality of the overt sex relationship was shattered, the more profound and absolute difference between the sexes remained, of course, the same. Whilst the social, economic and legal situation of females, both within and outside the family structure, changed almost beyond recognition, at the most basic level

of being, today's woman remains the same female as the one our race has been familiar with over the last thousand decades. At the youngest age she will generally prefer light pink to dark blue among the colours, moving wheels of tractors or trains will leave her cold while dolls and soft incarnations of rabbits, bears and dogs will at once draw her attention. A little later on, make-up, fake jewellery of all kinds and dresses of all sorts will inevitably confront the arrows, swords and masks of all description forming the toy armoury of little boys. Moving on a little more, a world of bikes, footballs and at times pocket knives, will inhabit the boy's corner, leaving everything to do with baking, gymnastics, dancing and generally decorating, almost exclusively with the girls.

Thus crossing the vast terrains of the toy industry, we have unconvertible evidence, should we need it, that despite the massive transformation of the sex divide over the last one hundred years, a deeper and more pertinent distinction between the sexes still remains. Women will decorate themselves, prepare a welcoming nest, practice attractive movements in gymnastic and dance, to attract a male in the creation and maintenance of the next generation.

No doubt, in years still to come, in the near future, women will achieve the full equality in the economic, social and political worlds, they have set their hearts on. Very likely they will go further than that and achieve some sort of supremacy over the males of their race. This is already happening in education, where girls are well ahead of boys, and the shift in earning power will inevitably follow next. I keep telling my daughters that this is their century.

But, as a general rule, nature seldom gives something without taking something back in return. At first sight it would seem that women have gained, in one century, a monumental amount. At least in the West, women have risen from very much a subject class, dominated by the male, to a position of relative equality in almost all respects, everywhere. What is the price?

We know pretty well the immutable realities. Conception depends on the male entering a protected, or at least sheltered, domain. That is followed by pregnancy, delivery, nursery and upbringing of the infant conceived. We all know that all this falls wholly, or at least mostly, in the female court. So the question is how is she able to cope at once with all that is newly acquired and all that she has always had?! In other words, how can a mother, with the family squarely on her shoulders, go out and earn the bread on more or less equal terms with her male counterpart. Almost all of us have come across the working mother and asked ourselves this very question. Very few of us have ever had a conclusive and satisfactory answer.

Not quite similarly, there is also a severe doubt the role of the male in the new constellation. Some men, especially among the self-employed, have willingly taken over some responsibilities previously allocated to the opposite sex. They are cleaning the family home, cooking the family meals, taking the children to and fro, and generally participating in running the family life. But few would disagree that the male of today has lost a great deal of his dominance. The unanswered question asks what, if anything, has taken its place?! Is the competitive instinct among men more pronounced or diminished even further?! Has it taken other forms or chosen different targets?!

The female form is no longer hidden by Victorian attires, the search for an available male is quite easy and open. The actual act of sex, and the invitation for it, are now freely advertised. The penetration and reception are, however, exactly the same as they have ever been. What will happen next?!

The St. Bernard

Not that long ago I had a good friend who felt always easy in my company. We talked to each other without inhibitions about a whole range of diverse subjects. He lived in a fine Somerset house about one and a half hours drive from our own home in Devon. We saw each other at least two or three times every year. He reached us always in the same unforgettable, open Rolls of a vintage period irrespective the weather. On the back seat, warmly arrayed in fine rugs in a queenly fashion sat his wife of many years. On the front seat, to his left, his massive St Bernard dog sat surveying the surrounding scene. My good friend, in charge of the steering, always cheerful, tended to wave from some distance before parking the car noisily at our front door. He would then jump off, throw an affectionate arm over his dog to begin our customary walk. He, the dog and I formed a cohesive group bestriding our own richly wooded hills.

His wife, wrapped in the intimate warmth of the covering rugs, was left alone to make her way to the door of our house. Never a glance back either from him or from the dog. On the last occasion we met, a few weeks ago, suddenly and unexpectedly, my friend threw a veritable hand grenade. Although not aimed at me, the explosion shattered almost all that I thought sane, ordered and reasonable. In a perfectly calm voice, my friend announced that his marriage ended and divorce proceedings ran their course. So that he would be free to marry again. And then, looking straight in my eyes and continuing in the same calm voice, he said he intended to marry Elisabeth next.

At first, just for a moment, I was confused. Paging mentally through a list of all our joint acquaintances I could not identify who fitted that name. No Elisabeth came to mind. I repeated the name softly and questionably more than once. My friend stared at my bewildered face for a very long moment before bringing the dog close to him into a passionate embrace.

‘Lizzy, Lizzy, I do not think he understands...and this is really sad... I assumed he, of all people, would be the first to pat me on the back...’ These words struck home. I could not quite believe he meant what he said. I was more confused, embarrassed and even profoundly shocked. I could not avert my eyes from the two of them, man and dog, in what appeared to be a close, loving union. A difficult silence enveloped all of us, a slightly panting St Bernard, a preoccupied friend and me, not quite part of the scene.

Eventually I could not bear the silence any longer and asked my friend to explain himself. He did not really think that any explanation was needed. Calm and relaxed, playing gently with his dog, he obviously thought there was nothing more to say. So the onus of any conversation was clearly left to me. I approached the subject with all the delicacy reserved to communication with madmen, stating, in many more ways than one, that marriages are, and have always been, between a man and a woman.

At some point of my patient flow of words, my friend interrupted the forbearing speech. At ease, leaning on his left elbow, he pointed out just how wrong I was. Wrong and completely out of date. Have I not realised that marriage was no longer a union between man and woman. Men could be married to each other and so could women too. Nothing was easier, nothing more open, nothing more welcome. Have I not seen on television many such unisex couples, so happy, so fulfilled, walking out from a marriage ceremony in each other's arms?!

Judging the way things are moving, I had to admit, of course, the possibility, or perhaps the likelihood, of gay marriages becoming the order of the day. In our part of the world the cry for uniformity and equality grows and louder by day after day. Parliament is heavily engaged in preparing legislation to re-define 'marriage' so that gays should not be deprived of partaking in this wonderful institution. Like many others in our society I have my own views on gay marriage but on this occasion I refrained to bring them into the discussion. After all, what has gay marriage to do with marrying a dog?!

How wrong I was. As soon as the subject was thrown open my good and life-long friend went on the attack. He wanted to know how, where and why his intended marriage to Elisabeth varied from the approaching marriages of gays. First, of course, came the question of children. This was dismissed with a languid gesture of the arm, underlined and enforced by an impatient wave of the hand. Gays have no offspring, nor shall we. So no difference there.

But any marriage has at least to be consummated, otherwise it is not a marriage at all. Even the pope accepted that principle and acted within it on quite a few occasions in the past. 'Ah, my friend, do you really know what this means? Are you intimate enough with male or female gays, to know exactly what really takes place?! Can you say for certain what happens at night? What do gay men do to consummate their marriage with exactly what physical act? And what about gay women, what can they do in the absence of a protruding organ to penetrate and fill any yawning cavity?!

I was taken aback by such a crude, downright and vicious onslaught. I never expected the intimate physical details to be thrown in my face. I took some deep inhalations and looked askew to collect my thoughts. Being not gay myself, I never ventured to explore, or imagine, their particular, personal nights. Having lived most of my life in the second half of the twentieth century, of course I could not be unaware of the vast, possible scope of sexual activities. I could see with my inner eye all kind of variations on the same dominant theme. Men, women and beasts, in all types of imaginable combinations, could come together under the wide range of the sexual screen. But, on reflecting for a quick moment, I realised with absolute clarity that marriage and sex are not interchangeable terms. And furthermore, while sex occupies a larger terrain of which marriage is but a relatively minor part, marriage must participate and bathe itself most profoundly within the sea of sex to have any meaning at all. In more simple language, marriage must have sex, but sex lives and flourishes magnificently well even without marriage.

‘So let me try to understand what you are trying to say’ my friend turned his head towards me, and stroking Elisabeth diligently on her back he threw a few more words into the uneasy silence that cut us off: ‘Do you find it so hard to accept that Elisabeth loves me so completely that she needs to share my company almost all the time... that she rubs herself against my body whenever she feels she can... that we sleep together in the same bed every single night... or, what may be even more difficult for you to absorb, that I find her body next to mine, her warm and wet licking of my face, her obvious appreciation of every move I make, utterly irresistible. Is that all too much for you?’

I did not know what to say. It was not easy for me to reply. I could not deny simply what I have just seen. The St Bernard and my friend obviously loved each other intensely. Nevertheless, I could not ignore the fact that she was a dog and he was a man. The idea of a marriage between the two of them was preposterous. I also realised slowly that any further discussion between us touching on emotions would be of no avail. Love is not only unpredictable, it is unknowable too. Who is to say whether one love is deeper, more tangible, more real, more enduring than another. Whether a love between two human beings or a human being and a dog must be richer, or more meaningful, or more enduring than the other, who is to say.

So I moved on. Leaving aside emotion, I raised the practical question of property. I tried to explain to my friend the infinitely complex matter of dividing the family fortune between husband and wife in the case of divorce. If such a division is a devil of a task between husband and wife, how much more is it likely to be so when the division to be made is between a human being and a dog?! My question was dismissed with a simple wave of a hand. ‘Oh, no problem at all. I have left

everything we have in common to Elisabeth. After all we own it all between us even now, while we are still both alive.'

It was at this point that I realised there was no future in going on. My friend was madly in love with his lady St. Bernard and determined to marry her. There was nothing I could do to change his mind and give up the insane idea of this kind of a god forsaken marriage. And yet, even worse, a terrible suspicion entered my mind. I simply could find no logical ground to separate his idea of marriage from the currently proposed marriage of gays. If neither kind of bonding produced infant heirs, if the benefits of physical goods could equally be shared, if love held together the pair, if the couple lived in close proximity together breathing the same air, by what earthly right can you maintain that one relationship is entitled to be called a marriage while the other one, that between two races, has not the same, equal right.

The more I reflected on the subject, the more was I lost. For if marriage, as we now know it, originated by a union to maintain the race, if it became the prime factor in our survival, if it has been the central avenue for reuniting the sperm and the egg, how is it possible to take away from its meaning the re-unification of the two opposing but complimentary sexes, the male and the female. This idea, striking me in a flash, brought with it consequences very hard to accommodate. For I was forced to admit to myself that my friend and his female St. Bernard had a greater right to marriage than any of the so loud clamouring gays.

I know that more or less every one, in my community, state and even culture, will never agree to accept this vision and will not place my friend and his female companion above gay couples in any marriage stakes. But I am even more convinced that the male/female principle in its full universality ranks way above any consideration of mere race. Some time, very long ago, we ceased to be self-fertilising. Unlike some more primitive creatures we can no longer hold recreation within one body. The entire human history is unintelligible if it does not refer to the female hiding the egg, the male being forced to break in, and life to take, once more, its predestined course.

The Teaching of History

We are told that the Minister of Education, Michael Gove, is currently engaged in re-thinking the syllabus of History to be taught everywhere, ranging from primary schools to A-levels. It would appear that he sees the subject covering the period from the stone ages to our current days. The three critical aspects of the suggested tuition plan are an emphasis on the British story, on accuracy of names and dates, and on facts rather than theories. Obviously, the teaching unions, universities and the media, will have something to say before the curriculum takes such a drastic overhaul. , the establishment In the meanwhile, the challenge is profound enough to make it worthwhile digging a little deeper when turning over this venture.

Even a shallow first step makes it immediately clear that we are treading on an uneven terrain. More than five thousand years of a past does not allow much detail. Restricting the story to our country helps but what is supposed to have happened in other continents or neighbouring countries with diverse peoples or common religions often makes the difference. Exact dates and heroic names may well matter less than the drastic events and the given conditions that shaped our history,

Comparing the study of History with the learning of Physics, Chemistry, Geography, Mathematics, Languages or Medicine for example makes the vagaries of the subjects and the distinctions clearly palpable. History stands on its own, in contrast with all the other subjects. Whoever teaches Maths and wherever it is taught the subject remains the same. With History the case is reversed. The teacher, whenever and wherever he teaches, becomes the exorbitant part of the equation. His upbringing, his views, the traditions of his country and the political age of his pronouncements are just as important as the subject matter taught. History taught in Communist Russia, in medieval Europe, in Nazi Germany, in crumbling Rome or Biblical Israel, demonstrates the inordinate dimension of the teacher.

I was born and brought up in Transylvania, a place with two histories: a Romanian and a Hungarian. Both cover the same ground but any resemblance between them is only marginal. The Romanians appeared there first at the beginning of the 18th century but they claim some sort of relationship with the ancient and almost mythical Dacians who fought Rome 17 centuries ago. The Hungarians inhabited the region from Attila's time but lost sovereignty to the Turks and then to the Austrians for a few hundred years. So neither studies bears and meaningful reference to the kind of History Michael Gove has in mind. Of course, in a country unoccupied for eight hundred consecutive years such a distinction is less obvious. We have the good

fortune to living in a country passionately devoted, at least in her academic circles, to the elimination of the subjective factor. The life of the Tudor monarchs for example, ranging from Henry the Seventh to Elisabeth the First, is researched, recounted and refined in an unending stream of creditable accounts, each one vying for an acknowledgement as the final objective rendering. Naturally, after every publication there is a quire of dissenting voices helping to create an ongoing, unending historical interpretation of the very few agreed facts.

So how does the state of affairs affect the Michael Gove enterprise? To answer this question let us begin at the very beginning. All scholarly enterprise has its roots at a very early age. We start our maths by counting with our fingers. We commence any kind of linguistics with learning to speak and advance to the next stage by struggling to read. With Geography we first explore our garden, the neighbouring streets, play fields and then advance further by exploring the neighbouring countryside, rivers, forests and hills. We pry open the insides of various bugs to enter the fields of biology and set alight some fires to come across the first few ranks of chemistry. All maths, sciences, languages and skills required in drawing and music have their childhood origins. What about the origins of learning history?!

All the other subjects arise naturally from the earliest point of departure, moving from the nursery through evident and measurable stages to the universities. All the other subjects have an obvious and immediate relevance to our practical, day to day, lives. All the other subjects relate to an objective reality about which there are very few disputes. All the other subjects have a universal uniformity across the entire living world. All the other subjects carry their own evident syllabus. All the other subjects are pretty independent of the progress of time. It is not so with History.

We move from counting loud numbers with our fingers to the wonders of Algebra over more than a decade of increasing complexities but know at every stage how to apply what we are learning to the surrounding world of facts. We walk in the woods examining the leaves of the trees and drawing maps that more or less primitively represent the ins and outs of the five continents. We start by a recognition of the shape of some simple and frequent words and advance to the appreciation of the higher linguistic forms. What turns into the study of Chemistry or Physics applies equally to the schools all over the world. There are no significant differences within the syllabus of Biology in line with geographic or political distinctions across the world.

The earliest traces of learning the past would probably be through stories of your grand parents selectively told by your father or mother from time to arbitrary time. Such anecdotes, as we well know, not only vary from one family to the other, they

are almost always subject to the vagaries of parental selection and often guided, however unsuccessfully, by the intention of a mother or father to guide children to the right path. Such stories may well prove inspirational, planting in the child's head a never to be forgotten memory, or detrimental in discouraging a child to try something difficult and worthwhile. What is certain on the one hand is the reality that they could never form the initial steps of the study of History. Unlike in all the other subjects, the first tentative steps can never lead to the later study. On the contrary, family stories draw their strength precisely from a particularity that distinguishes us from our neighbours. These family stories stand in the mind by showing how our family, and thus our origin, takes us away from the general mass.

So that when we come to consider, or re-consider, our new syllabus of History it is critical to understand that who we are, where we live, what we believe, our traditions and culture, are all part and parcel of the equation. To the degree that these factors are allocated their fundamental relevance, helping to determine what we study, to that degree the teaching of History can approach the objectivity of the other subjects. But no matter what weight we give the teacher in the syllabus, the learning of History will retain its contrast with the study of all other subjects. We are most fortunate in this country to be presented with a rich variety of versions and widely varying points of view when absorbing the tale. Our reach for objectivity, in comparison with others, is our hallmark in educational circles world wide, even if the subject of History must always stand out on its own.

Having lived on this island for some six centuries, it is not possible to be unaware of the substantial efforts invested in establishing something like the 'objective' presentation of this vexed subject. The two decades beforehand was spent in other parts of Europe, Middle East and Africa, under the cosh of having to study quite different Histories, more attuned to various national centres of gravity. Beyond the stark divide between Romanian and Hungarian histories of Transylvania I had to battle with stories of the Old Testament, Aristotle's versions of the Greek wars, Cesar's accounts of his victorious campaigns, the Medieval invasion of Jerusalem, the long years of Papal dominion across the whole of our continent, the break-up of the Catholic faith, the thirty years war, the rise of the British Empire, the emergence and decline of of Marxism, the terrible world wars in our own time, the list is more or less eve-lasting.

In almost all cases of the events recorded, there remains the hallmark of the place and time of the recording, the eyes of the beholder and the specific interests of the audience addressed. The same, of course, applies to the British sources creating the histories. Who could ignore the norms of the Elizabethan epoch, or the circumstances of the Indian conquest, or Nelson and the industrialisation of the country? Perhaps

up to the nineteenth century the national focus was dominant everywhere. But from thereafter, slowly and gradually, the historical context started to change. Of course, even well before then occasional signs of English particularity began to show themselves. From the Magna Carta onwards, through the Elizabethan age, the establishment of a powerful and independent parliament, the execution of a king, the growth of a popular and fundamental legal world, the reforms of Wilberforce, the compulsory education introduced by Balfour and the emergence of a leader like Churchill are all pretty unique features of this country, especially if they are viewed as successive steps towards the democracy we are enjoying today.

Not that similar events are virtually absent from the histories of other people. They are simply more isolated, less coherent, less effective and less continuous, compared with what happened hereabouts. The Spanish, Austrian and Russian empires have their own fascinating histories but none of them have nine hundred years of uninterrupted existence, leading inexorably towards the democracies of today. It is worthwhile to mention here two or three other comparable entities: Germany, France and the Venetian republic. Germany was unified by Bismarck in the second half of nineteenth century. France had a traumatic transition from an absolute Monarchy, through a bloody revolution and Napoleonic dictatorship, to a sharply divided and declining society. Venice alone had eight hundred years of unoccupied and independent reality with strong democratic features.

After the European disturbances of the mid-century Bismarck came to power suddenly and the Prussian parliament found itself divided between a majority wishing to pursue a democratic path and a strong minority determined to use all the state's resources to reinforce the army. Against a weak and uncoordinated majority Bismarck held sway. He it was who won and was able to launch a trajectory that led to the defeat of a much richer and stronger Austria, to the absorption of Bavaria and other Germanic states, so creating a military power capable to defeat an arch-rival France and eventually launch two fatal world wars. When the revolution erupted in France, it quickly became a deadly confrontation between an aristocracy holding all the power most of the land on the one hand and the vast majority without land and virtually no power, on the other. The bloody show down brought, almost inevitably, a dictatorship remarkable enough to create a new architecture, a currency and an educational system based on ability not on birth. Even so the international dimension of France has shrunk and is even now on a definitely declining path.

But what should be of great interest to us here and now is the virtual impossibility of envisaging a similar historic development taking place in Britain. There could well be an argument of why this is so but not one on the evident contrast. It may be because we are an island, or because we have never been overrun in nine consequent

centuries, or because we tend to have a natural resistance against any imposition forcing compliance. It does not matter why, we are as we are and have to understand and interpret everything accordingly. The one political state that resembled our own is the republic of Venice. Although not an island, her territory was at least as difficult to encroach as that of any major island. Attila, among others, camped at her borders with his mighty forces before deciding not to try and enter. The wild, marshy terrain with the rapidly changing tides of the surrounding sea made any approach too treacherous even for the Huns. These natural barriers gave the country the time and space to develop a stable political system not completely unlike the veritable democracies of today. If your name was registered in the golden book you had the opportunity to aspire to the highest stakes in the land. But the ultimate choice of leaders depended on a more or less arbitrary draw of lucky dices to make absolutely certain that no dictatorship could ever take over. At the same time the position mayor was reserved for citizens not listed in the Golden Book. The political balances were even more democratic than our own House of Commons with the House of Lords.

These few examples are sufficient to demonstrate the vast differences there must be in teaching the subject. It would be negligent and counter-productive to conceive of history as we rightly do with almost all the other subjects where it matters relatively little who is their teacher, or where and how they are taught. Science, in all its manifold forms, engineering in the variety of its applications, medicine in the great multiplicity of its ramifications, languages in their grammar, vocabulary and the quality of expression, are all ultimately subject to a strict yes or no, a correct or an incorrect. History simply is not. Thus when Michael Gove, the minister of Education, comes to reorganise his domain, he will have to take on board this critical distinction. He will have to consider the teaching of History on its own.

There are only three clear options on the table. We could pretend to ourselves that there is no fundamental distinction between History and the rest. We could drop History entirely from the syllabus of our education. We could devise a more realistic approach to the subject, recognising its unique value and requirement for special treatment. Ignoring this distinction has been the prevailing attitude more or less everywhere. After all our grandfathers are very different, their memory is selective, they chose to tell us very little and what is being told is sometimes meant to guide us one way or another. The second option is to isolate the subject so that it does not interfere with the factual and theoretical foundation of our education. This would mean taking History out from our primary, secondary and university tuition. Neither of these first two options is practicable. No nation would be ready to give up the attempt to paint the past in her favourite colours. Similarly, no educational trade union would be prepared to sacrifice a significant portion of her membership. History, however subjective, will have to stay.

This leaves us with the third option, namely re-defining the special character of History as an educational subject with a discipline of her own. In other words, we will have to accommodate the character and intention of our grandparents within the basic definition. This is not going to be easy given the widespread dimensions of our fore-bearers. Not easy but not impossible. What I suggest here is somewhat fantastic but achievable. All we will have to do is to include a reference in every fragment of history taught.

For example, the recounting of the banishment of Adam and Eve from the original paradise will be referred to the Old Testament in its least credible factual format. While the account of the Israeli conquest of Palestine will carry the same reference with a more objective attribution and the virtual elimination of the tribe of Benjamin through a single act of multiple rape could carry an even closer likelihood to the factual reality of the epoch.

A good many years ago I was sitting opposite one of the Venetian canals with one of my oldest and most intelligent friends. The subject of a heated argument between us concerned a magnificent 18th century edifice on the edge of the canal. My friend, of left leaning disposition, talked about the hardship the building workers while I focused on the architecture and the exceptional quality of the building. As usual, we never succeeded to convince the other about the fundamental truth of our position. We ere, of course, both right. The building workers of the epoch never had an easy time but the quality of the design remained manifest even after three centuries. Both stories of the past had merit and both positions had a legitimacy. The difference lay in the historians, not in the histories.

A few months ago we published a book about the bombing of Dresden near the end of the Second World War. The allied air forces, more or less, eliminated this well known German city. The devastation was massive. No German air force had remained in existence by that time. No German anti aircraft defences were any longer effective. The entire aerial attack assumed the proportion of a sophisticated execution. We have no reason to doubt of any of the details. It seems simply a straight forward bit of history. And yet and yet. Taking the entire war, with all the ramifications, into account, the destruction of Dresden becomes a minimal event. Some twenty million Russians died in the defence of their country, about six million Jews perished in concentration camps for no better reason than that they were Jews. Many millions of Germans lost their lives and their country. Massive numbers of British casualties forfeited their lives. The people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were wiped out with an American atom bomb. In that context we lose sight of Dresden as a memorable bit of history. What is even more interesting and relevant here is the Historian, for no Russian, German and Briton can be placed side by side with each other, fulfilling the same function.

We cannot expect historians of so different settings to construct the same histories. More than that, even historians living at the same time and breathing the same environment would inevitably produce wildly different versions of the same age and the same events. As close as many of us are to the Thatcher government in the declining years of the 20th century, we all have to accept the wildly diverging views of the future historians as they sharpen their pens to paint her both as a destroyer of our society and a saver of our country. A uniform presentation of history being impossible what is useful to demand is the identification of the source of the accounts. We cannot expect History to be taught as the sciences or languages are. To keep a semblance of historical verities we should request its true source, and wherever appropriate, the identification, the basic orientation and political leaning of its teacher.

Thus every bit of historical teaching should begin with a brief statement of the source. Such as, for example: 'according to the Old Testament, chapter x' or 'following Aristotle' or 'in Cesar's letters from today's Germany' or 'from the Papal diary just before the holy crusade for the conquest of Jerusalem' or 'as the journals of Henry the Eights demonstrate' or 'transcribing the parliamentary papers of Cromwell' or 'quoting more recently from materials relating to the First or Second World Wars'. Such introductions of sources would serve a number of key understandings in the learning of History, demonstrating the uniqueness of the subject and its critical divergence from Science and other Humanities.

As we study the more recent events of the twentieth century this qualitative differentiation and its consequences become at once decisive. For we ought easily to grasp that the Histories of these two wars must largely depend from who and from where they emanate. The Russians, Japanese, French, American, British, Germans and Jews, must have a widely different standpoint from which they saw and recorded the past. The rise and fall of Communism lies at the heart of the Russian perception. The atom bombs that obliterated all resistance has to be imprinted on each Japanese mind. The guilt for the shattering and sudden collapse of France must inform all French politics. The rise of the US to a decisively premier rank in world domination through the two wars is taken for granted in the American mind. No German can be unaware of their countries contribution to the fatal two engagements, their catastrophic defeat and the six million Jews who were systematically exterminated. And the realisation of the Jews of the massacre of half their race and the re-creation of their country after more than two thousand of years of exile.

It is not that there are all these histories of the same events, events quite close to us. It is simply that the histories cannot be chronicled with a disregard of where and how the same events are seen, recorded and recounted. It is perhaps the British

who come closest to some kind of 'objectivity', both in their preoccupation with the more distant past and by the massive extent of presenting their adversaries on some sort of equal footing. The questionable destruction of Dresden is still never left alone.

April, 2013

Uniformity and Diversity

In the climate of the current financial crisis the fate of the EURO is being considered in purely economic terms. The scenario is pictured with the Mediterranean countries and Ireland on one side and Germany with her Northern neighbours on the other. It is plain that the economies and financial conditions in the Southern half of Europe are drastically diverging from their Northern counterpart. The troubles of Greece, Portugal, Ireland, Spain and Italy are in a spectacular contrast with what is happening in Holland, Denmark, Sweden and above all, of course, in Germany. The first lot are substantially over-borrowed while their counterpart is sound, stable and relatively well balanced. This state of affairs is not under dispute.

The market is well aware of this distinction and prices of bonds for each country reflect quite accurately the position. Spain and Italy, for example, pay an interest close to 7% on their borrowings whilst Germany pays just over 1%. There may well be many professional views of how this situation was allowed to occur and even more theories of what should be done to redress this unsustainable reality. Unfortunately, what matters is much more serious and the bare facts are the only secure guides that can help us to envisage the future. And the most substantial fact is that the Greeks are not Germans and the Spanish differ from the Dutch.

Towards the end of this century historians may well look back and wonder just how has it been possible for our generation to ignore such an obvious and plain distinction. Those future professionals would have perused the records of the various European people and find it astonishing that the vital differences had been politically utterly obliterated. How had it been possible for knowledgeable leaders, they would ask themselves, to believe that all of a sudden the Greeks would behave like the German and the Spanish become Dutch. We, who live now and will have mostly disappeared by then, know the answer to the question posed. We are the living witnesses, or the children and grandchildren of those who partook and suffered in the annals of the great continental wars. Therefore we understand quite well the huge political drive to unite the European continent and eliminate any conceivable wars between states within it.

It has been an enchanting idea for us, the varied people of this hugely complex piece of land, to live together as one enormous family, sharing our wealth without the intricacies of conflict and bloody encounters. This is, after all, the monumental EU promise which underpins the common currency and so is the source of the financial crisis. The trouble is that principal members of this family, like those of

many other families, are not readily compatible. Those who travelled widely or engaged themselves on many diverse fronts, are very familiar with the crucial and pertinent differences between the Southern and Northern European states. In the South current forms of democracy are almost recent. None goes beyond five decades and even in their current configuration they cannot be considered settled and stable. In contra- distinction the North has countries of well established democracies going back at least a few centuries. Germany, France and the Check republic, occupying the middle of the continent belong neither to the South nor the North and need, in any case, a separate consideration.

In the routine of our daily life we are now in the habit of crossing national boundaries within this continent with remarkable ease. We still have to display our passports but they are rarely accorded more than a courtesy glance by the relevant police. Sunning ourselves on any Spanish beach, eating a light lunch in an Italian villa or traversing the Rhine valley in a German train, we barely notice that we are abroad. This is exactly how it should be within the confines of a family, in the broadest sense of that term. This is one of the major reasons why we find it so hard to understand, to appreciate and to absorb the massive economic and financial differences between the South and the North of the same continent. How can our uncles and aunts, siblings and cousins, have such diverging attitudes when it comes to the basics of life?!

The creation of the European common currency, the EURO, followed precisely the opposite trajectory to almost all the currency creations in human history. Currencies, as we well know, came into being once there already was in being a viable political entity well established at their base. The English Pound Sterling achieved its international status long after it had a state and a national bank to give it justification and meaning. The same applies to the French frank, the Austrian shilling, the Dutch guilder, the German mart, the US dollar and any other form of money that was ever usefully employed in international markets. In recognition of this fact, and so give a useful barter value to the money, a facsimile of the ruling monarch, or in monarchic absence any other meaningful symbol, was affixed to one side of the coin guarantying its worth. This meant that all traders using a currency to transact their commerce could rest assured in the knowledge of precisely how much gold or silver was at stake in any sale or purchase of traded items on the market. In other words, there were no doubts about the value of the money that was the safe cornerstone of each and every deal.

Even as late as the fourth quarter of the last century the remnants of the crucial bond between the noble metal and the various manifestations of currencies still survived. But today the real value of currencies barely depends on the quantity of gold held

safely in the depth of government cellars. In effect, our great magician of finance, Gordon Brown, sold off a large portion of our physical gold at less than a third of its current value. There was never quite straightforward to determine the exact value of any currency but the market always had the benefit of a shrewd idea considering the wealth and productivity of the state behind its money. The value of each currency thus depended largely on the economic substance of the state of its owner. This still the case for the US Dollar, the British Pound, the Chinese Yuan and the Russian Rouble. The trouble with the EURO, and one the principal sources of the world wide malaise, is the simple a-symmetry between a currency and the non-existence of one state with a single, uniform and comprehensible economy standing at its base.

There are only two possible guarantors for the ongoing value of any currency: the possession of a certain proportion of gold or the obvious ability to repay any borrowing in a reasonable and acceptable time-frame. The immediate and dangerous crisis invading all our lives is the absence both of gold and a reasonable time-frame of debt repayment by the countries of Southern Europe. This is not a supposition it is a bare and sad fact.

As far we know, none of the Southern European countries has a meaningful amount of hidden gold and none of them is in a position to repay its debt in a timely fashion. We are drowning in a sea of words, printed on the pages of newspapers and spoken on all channels of the media, telling us how we came to where we are and by what means we should try to survive. Professionals in the field are tracking the past and trying to forecast various possible futures. Politicians are busy keeping straight faces, attend endless inconclusive meetings to emerge with solutions which may or may not work. So it is hardly surprising that the public should be at a loss about what actually happened, where we are and how we should try to resolve and untenable situation.

Yet the answers to these questions are not nearly as difficult and complicated as they first appear. The very first question to address is surely this: why have we created the EURO in the first place? What was the matter with the seventeen currencies that the EURO had replaced? The Dutch Guilder, the German Mark and the money base of some of the other, smaller North European ones were in a reasonable state, so none of these currencies needed replacement. The financial state of the Southern European countries, Portugal, Greece, Spain and Italy, in contrast, was parlous at the conversion time. The conversion of these currencies was something of a God sent. They were gifted a currency which was stable and did no longer needed a re-valuation every five years or so. The relationship between the economies of these countries and their financial status was broken and replaced instead by the less estimable European economy and the EURO.

So the initial impulse for the replacement could not have been engendered by economic or financial reasons. In fact, as we have always known, the idea of a common currency has been a major ambition of the EU proponents long before the Maastricht Treaty. They always regarded the creation of the EURO as a critical step in the march to a single and comprehensive European state. They knew perfectly well the erratic and divergent behaviour of the seventeen currencies but the new coin held for them a hope on both its sides. On the front of the coin there was the likely possibility that the weaker currencies would retain their customary and gradual decrease of value. After all you cannot alter the economy of a country and the centuries old habits of its people by simply changing the currency. This obvious fact never bothered the creators of the Euro because they considered the other side of the new coin as even more valuable to their purpose. For the protagonists of a single European state looked forward to the worsening disparity of values and the consequent crisis we are experiencing today. It was their belief from the beginning of the long drawn out saga that every crisis within Europe would inevitably lead to creation of a single European state. It is sufficient to listen to the remarks of Angela Merkel, not even one of the leading pro-integrationists, to comprehend exactly where Europe is heading.

Thus the origin of the EURO, its *raison d'être*, and the political forces ranged behind the creation of this groundless currency, are clear enough. Beyond looking at its emergence and its midwives, the next question to address is the position of the EURO in the financial world of today. If there is something wrong with our bodies, it is customary to call at the local surgery and meet a doctor willing and ready to prescribe a treatment for our ailment. The doctor will be familiar with our anatomy and have some experience in suggesting an appropriate treatment. The same applies, or should apply, to troubles with our money. We should be ready and prepared to call on our financiers to tell us what is wrong and what we should be doing about it. But here is the rub: the EURO is not a function of any single state economy. It is one of a kind, never seen or experienced before. So to take the metaphor a step further, it is like asking the doctor about an organ of the body, never seen or experienced before.

The way we are used to evaluate currencies more or less from the beginning of their history was to relate them to the economy of their guarantor state. The financial markets judged the Drachma in its relation to the Greek economy, the Mark in its relation with the German economy, the Pound Sterling in its relation with the British economy, and so on. The value of the Euro, similarly, ought to be dependent on the economy of a single state. The insoluble problem is that there is no such state. The difficulty arose because, in direct contrast to the expectations, of the midwives the economies of the Southern states diverged even more from those of their Northern

counterparts since the introduction of the Euro. The political leadership of the forces ranged to drive the European entity into one single state have embarked on a win-win strategy. It would have been to their advantage, of course, for the European economies to converge. But, amazingly enough, their falling further apart could suit them even better. For what we are hearing more and more loudly from them is that the crisis is bad enough to demand, for its final resolution, the provision of a single European economy. And that uniform single economy is the principal condition to the erection of their long desired single, unified European state.

The creation of such a state, envisaged between the two world wars by Monet, is not to be accomplished by one generation. The federalists have always been patient, dogged and determined. They have compensated every single disappointment, and there were countless over almost a century, with a religious faith that brooked no rational interference. True to form they are at this moment revelling in the disastrous situation, convinced that this crisis, as every other European upheaval, brings us a few steps closer to the realisation of their dreams. It is more useful therefore to take an analytic view of the present before plotting the possible outcomes.

On the face of it the crisis, at the most obvious level, is about a financial debt the Southern countries in Europe are incapable of repaying in a timely and orderly fashion. As a result the financial markets are not providing further loans to help out these countries by providing further loans with an interest rate of under six per cent. But borrowing at that rate the Greeks will very shortly go bankrupt, the solvency of Portugal and Ireland are in doubt, the Spanish and the Italians are finding it increasingly difficult to borrow a required amount of money. These threats are even clouding over the French horizon after the three credit agencies demoted the safety level of the country's credit rating from a comfortable 'A' to a humiliating and anxious 'B'.

Three or four years ago Anatole Kaletsky, perhaps one of the brainiest commentator of the *Times*, wrote a series of articles highlighting the precipitate decline of prices in the financial markets, in varying degrees, worldwide. His principal theme has been the volatile and unpredictable character of the market, with its hysterical response to a world swirling wildly around the entities traded and governments falling right and left with great frequency. Therefore, according to Kaletsky, it was the great mistake of the pre-crisis period to take account of the market, allowing governments, banks and even industries to land us all in an economic crisis of massive proportions. He was very excited about what he thought he had discovered and the trumpet call emanating from his articles sounded like this: the great majority of the economists, within and without the government, the banks and the commercial world, misjudged the market and thus created the current crisis. In essence, Kaletsky concluded that

the market cannot give any firm indication of the financial state or the economic condition ruling the world.

I have found Kaletsky's journalistic output almost always interesting, original and clearly expressed. Unlike most of his professional brethren he tried to think for himself instead of reflecting any well known general view. But in this instance, I believe, he has fallen prey to one general and critical misconception. The 'market', in the common parlance of today, refers to a few financial centres, in New York, London, Beijing and Hon-Kong among others, where currencies, shares, bonds, and basic commodities are traded all along the working hours of the five days' week. These centres are so monumental, diverse and complex that no single human intelligence can be said to handle them. When trading professionals, hectoring in the minutia of daily deals, refer to the 'market' they usually refer to a minor and secluded section of it. The market simply varies too far in its substances and trading centres to allow for any intelligent general reference.

Nevertheless it was not only Kaletsky who chose to speak about the 'market'. The term became recently most popular in political circles, academic views and even private conversations of people claiming to know what is what. Why the 'market' achieved such popularity is not too difficult to decipher. Living for years in a crisis, suffering inflated unemployment, insecure currency values and stagnant economies, it has been convenient and necessary to find something somewhere to take most of the blame. We know, of course, that banks have been responsible to lend too easily and far too much money. We are also aware that too many businesses and private people borrowed far too much money. And we are very conscious that the government had not bothered to balance its own books and did nothing to discourage the rampage of lending and borrowing no economy could possibly sustain. But the banks and bankers form a healthy portion of our economy even if some of the top tier is awarded excessive salaries. As far as the excessive borrowing is concerned, at least in some measure, most of us are guilty of such a crime. Governments, at least in vocal democracies, are always responsible for whatever goes wrong. It is a privilege we have accorded ourselves but with so much going wrong, so much of the time, blaming it becomes a matter of habit.

To blame the 'market' in the present crisis is like a second nature. It has the priceless advantage of having no one to defend it, no one to have the interest of formulating a counterclaim, no one to say 'I am the market and what you say about me is profoundly misconceived.' The 'market', huge and complex as it is, still lives and functions as markets always did and will do for all the time to come. You bring your cow to the market and will try to sell it for the best price you can have. Whoever tries to buy it will try to pay you as little as possible. You will argue, bargain and

come to a deal. Of course, the final price may be influenced by how many other cows are around and how many men want a cow. But the market itself will have nothing to do with the price. The seller and buyer will probably pay a little for using the facilities and other sellers and buyers of cows at that moment may have an influence but the market itself will remain absolutely neutral. It will have nothing to contribute to the transaction.

The simplest way to understand the role of the market is to visualise it as a football referee. The metaphor is almost ideal. The only imperfection lies in the fact that a camera may show that a goal was not a goal because the ball did not cross the base line. Even so the goal always stays with the referee's whistle blown at the critical moment. In the case of the 'market' there is no camera to record an alternative scenario. Thus the market transaction is even more unique and final. But in any case there is no reprieve, the referee's whistle and the market transaction are equally final. At this difficult economic moment it is more critical than ever to realise the exact position and true function of the market. The raging political debate about what country should do what, is in the end an attempt to change the perception of the market about where we are today. In other words, the political options on the table are not about how to make the economies of the Southern European states competitive. They are principally about how to raise enough money, in enough time, to allow market dealers to deal with economically fragile entities. As a matter of course politicians of all persuasion talk about the underlying basics of an economy but all these hectic conferences appearing on the pages of newspapers and on TV screens are displaying leaders deeply absorbed in the desperate search for money needed right now. If that money is not found immediately, from somewhere somehow, the world's entire financial edifice may collapse. At least this is on the menu.

If this is a possible outcome, even if it is not to be our fate, we live in very strange universe. Greece forms less than 2% of the EU's economy and it cannot be more than a fraction of 1% of the planet's financial well being. If its present troubles can be apportioned to cause such an overwhelming collapse we must try to survive in a world hanging by the shallowest of threads. I do not believe that any scenario of a Greek financial collapse corresponds to such a possible reality. Very few rational human beings think differently. How is it possible then, we must ask ourselves, for such a hysteria to infect the minds of our most distinguished politicians. How come we find some leading journalists raising such spectres? What can be a credible explanation of serious academics considering and even propagating these ideas? After all, Greece and even its larger Southern European neighbours, like Spain and Italy, still constitute a very small segment of the world's economic and financial mass.

The answer to these formidable questions may appear as equally formidable. But again we must have recourse to a brutally simplified approach and our crudest of metaphors. For the market is still the same market and referee's whistle has still the ultimate authority. But there are now a number of pitches where different games are played at the same time and the result of these games have a bearing on each other. The markets of Tokyo, Hong-Kong, London and Wall Street operate from different hymn sheets but they do have a bearing on each other. Leading teams and key players cost now phantasmagorical sums just as certain leading shares have reached phenomenal levels. But essentially all is still the same as before and our original metaphor still has a part to play. Except in two respects: the complexity and the wide ranging reach of the market makes a single overview almost impossible and the massive financial interference of the market by governments has to distort the picture drawn from that overview. Thus our referee has to officiate at several matches at the same time and the availability of virtually unlimited sums of money will inevitably influence the result of matches to come.

The metaphor is still helpful but the two exceptional features need to be taken into account. Unfortunately they matter a great deal. The complexity and the wide ranging extensions of the market create a new kind of fear in the minds of analysts and leading political decision makers. The heavy hand of governmental intervention in massive financial manipulations inevitably distorts the daily workings of the market. Given these conditions, which inform the present, it requires a leap of faith when we turn our attention to the future. We know more or less where we are. The Greek state is informally bankrupt. Portugal and Ireland are heavily indebted for years to come and struggling to maintain an agreed schedule of interest payments. Spain and Italy are deep in debt, a continuous recess with untenable unemployment statistics and no economic prospects of an eventual recovery. France was just degraded to the status of a triple B by the three key lending agencies, its economy stagnant and a new government committed to reducing the retirement age with an inevitable enlargement of an already massive debt. The economic and financial stability of the Northern European states stands in key contrast to the travails of the South. The Euro, created with a promise of bringing all the participant states to a much closer economic and financial equality achieved precisely the opposite. The gap between the South and the North is now so vast that bringing them together in one currency must be a pipe dream.

So what about the future? Where do we go from here? What options do we really have? Let us evaluate them one at a time. The first possibility is to leave the fundamentals as they are, saving the ailing South with a massive cash injection from the North. This is what is happening right now with Ireland, Portugal and Greece, of course. The current round of talks, at the frequent EU conferences, seem to

revolve around the form and quantity of precisely such transfers. What the Union is trying to work out is how much money is sufficient, exactly which country should provide it, how and when are these loans expected to be repaid. These questions are far from easy to answer especially since huge amounts of money from banks throughout Europe are already at stake with their repayment in serious doubt. The final outcome of the effort to keep the South and North together, in one currency, is not resolved. Greece is about to pack its bags, Portugal and Ireland are struggling, Spain and Italy find life hard enough but are desperate to stay the course. With the demise of Greece, the imminent danger of Portugal and Ireland, and the ailing Italy and Spain, the break up of the Euro is only a matter of time. It is unable to survive, in its present form, beyond two or three years but a dramatic end-game may come even sooner than that.

If the South and the North cannot be kept together, the second option is to let each country within the Euro zone revert back to its own currency. Changing the currency of a state is not an easy matter. When the Euro was brought in, seventeen countries decided to make the change. To the great surprise of many of us, the transition was much easier than expected. Everything was well organised and there were remarkably few instances of serious frustration either for individuals or banks. There is no reason to believe that the reverse technically will be any different. There is though one crucial between moving from Drachma or Lira to the Euro and going back to Drachma and Lira from the common currency. It is exactly the same difference as between moving from the sunlit day to the dark night and returning from the night time darkness to the clarity of a bright day. Dealing in darkness allowed, even encouraged, the Southerners to being blind to the value of their economy. Bringing them into the daytime, will force them to experience reality again. It will make it impossible, and impermissible, to deal for them in a currency unrelated to their actual economy.

This is precisely what most average politicians are afraid of and the few outstanding statesmen are driven to embrace. The difference is obvious: it is easy to ride the prevailing tide, it is infinitely harder to turn the tide around. Churchill and Thatcher, Roosevelt, De Gaul and Hitler come to mind when we are thinking of the giants who changed radically the public mood instead of drifting, more or less capably, on its back. As no such leader, in any country, is on the horizon, we can safely dismiss the second option. The Euro will not suddenly disintegrate by its internal incoherence. If there is no outstanding political leader in charge of Germany, or even in France, the disintegration of the currency, left to its diminishing strength, will take a few more convulsive years and a few more crises. But there can be no longer any doubt that in the absence of a decisive intervention the Euro, in its present form, is doomed. No currency can possibly survive if it is based on a number of divergent economies.

This is a truth recognised even by the pro-European integrationist political forces. It is why they are desperate to use the common currency to bring the conflicting economies into a single line. Their trouble is that a common economy may succeed in giving birth to a unified currency but an artificially unified currency will never help on its own create a common economy.

So is there a third alternative, other than a sudden, complete disintegration or a more gradual but equally final decline? If we really believe that every healthy currency has to reflect a common economy at its base, the answer to this question may well give us the only true indication of what is likely to happen. For the Southerners, as well the Northerners, each do have economies close enough to bear the brunt of a single common currency. The Mediterranean belt, of Greece, Portugal, Spain and Italy, have remarkably close enough economic profiles to partake in a much weaker Euro. Such a Euro may well be subject to the same periodic revaluations that these countries currencies have always enjoyed. Let us call this currency Euro No 2. Similarly, the economies of Germany, Austria, Holland, Sweden, Denmark, Finland and the Czech Republic, are also sufficiently close to each other to form the common ground to one currency. Let us call this the Euro No.1. The division of the Euro to two distinct kinds, for the Southern and Northern Europe, would be less traumatic than its gradual or sudden disintegration. More importantly, the relationships of the two currencies to the two diverse, but comprehensible, economies would give them true substance and help them to survive in an ever more complex financial world.

So now we come to the elephant in the room. What about France? How does she fit into a divided Europe? The short answer to these questions is simple: she doesn't naturally fit into either the Southern or the Northern portion of the equation. But there is nothing new here for the particular situation of France in Europe has been the same for almost two hundred years. Ever since the demise of the Napoleonic glory years France lost the ability to maintain its prime position in the continent, relying solely on her own strength. The spectacular defeat by the emerging Germany in 1872, when even Paris fell within a few weeks into the conqueror's arms, set the pattern. Although the world could clearly see the Bismarck inspired transformation of the continent and the fundamental erosion of the French position, the political ramifications of this fundamental change took many years to unfold.

Thus we come to the turn of the century and the one critical event that, imperceptibly, set the stage for what was to happen to Europe in the following one hundred years. The Entrant Cordial, signed by Balfour and Clemenceau in 1904, has never been given its deserved monumental status by historians ever since. Yet that one accord set the world scene for a century. If Britain and France had been no allies the first world war would have been a brief local conflagration raising Germany

to the pinnacle of Europe. If no WW1, no emergence of Hitler and certainly no WW2. If no WW2, we would not have a European Union in its current form. If no EU, then no Euro. If no Euro, probably, no crisis, certainly no crisis of the current dimensions.

Arthur James Balfour is the great-uncle of my wife. He has achieved a great deal both in Politics and way beyond. He had been one of the key figures in the creation of Israel and his famous declaration is an almost unique example of a document that so vastly changed the kernel of world history. So I have to say with a heavy heart that the consequences of the Entrant Cordial were, simply and massively, tragic. Even today, when considering the intrinsic difficulties of the position of France, we have to hark back to the unfortunate Entrant as the original, and sinful, cause.

So what are the possibilities in front of France, given a Southern/Northern division? To be part of the North she will have to accept the undisputed leadership of Germany. To be the pre-evident head of the South she will have to accept being part of a lower level economic existence. Neither choice is very attractive to a political class in the habit of living at the top. But economic and financial realities cannot be forever denied. They will still determine the final configuration of any continent. Fortunately the upper tiers of French political life is trained to have the ability to survive and function even in the most challenging environment. It would be no surprise to see a France of considerable power and influence survive in either of the two segments. But whatever is achieved will be due to her narrow and exceptional political class.