

Oulipo group⁸ has recently constructed a matrix of all

possible murder-story situations and has found that there is still to be written a book in which the murderer is the reader.

⁸ *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*, organised by Queneau, Le Lyonnais, Perec, and others to produce literature by mathematical combinatory means.

Moral: there exist obsessive ideas, they are never personal; books talk among themselves, and any true detection should prove that we are the guilty party.

Encounter at a Greyhound Bus Station

If belief, like heaven, lies beyond the facts
what serpent flies with an ant between its teeth?

asked the over-bearded man with closed eyes.
Who are they who descend when they ascend?

this kabbalist with eyes closed, asked.
Are all men in disguise except those crying?

And what exists in a tree that doesn't exist,
its eggs looted by creatures not yet created?

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Partial to paradoxes, disliking riddles,
I hummed and I hawed, I advocated

the secrets of lucidity. Then said,
Some talk in their sleep, very few sing.

Abruptly, the unwashed one, opened his lids,
rattled one coin inside a tin.

I looked into the splendour of his eyes
and laid my hand upon my mouth.

*

Then he scoffed: you are like the deaf man
who knows nothing of music or of dance

yet blurts out, observing musicians play
and dancers dance—Stupid, how stupid

those who carve the air this way and that,
who blow out their cheeks to make them fat,

who mill about, clutch and maul each other
as if the very earth and all would fall.

*

And what could I, secular, say to that?
That I'm deaf to God but not in combat?

Cool pretensions of reason he'd dismiss
and if I threw stones he'd build a house.

Yet I begged: Dare to reveal, sir, not conceal;
not all, translucent, lose authority.

Fool, he replied, I'm empty, feed my tin,
which I did, of course, when the bus came in.

Dannie Abse

Michael Howard

Is Winston Churchill Still Relevant?

Crisis in the Era of National Unity



WHEN NATIONS commemorate great men, they nearly always choose those whose work was significant in the creation of the nation itself. We may count ourselves fortunate when a great artist or scholar or scientist is born an Englishman, but we seldom make it a matter for national rejoicing.

When we commemorate a great writer, it is usually one who, like Shakespeare in England or Robert Burns and Walter Scott in Scotland, has by his development of our language or his retailing of our history done something to forge a distinctively national culture. When we revere soldiers or sailors, Wellingtons or Nelsons (to choose no more recent and controversial figures), we do so not just because they were good at their jobs but because their victories were instrumental in preserving and enhancing the national community to which we belong.

So it is with statesmen. However much we admire their skills, whatever they may have done for our national efficiency and well-being, they are accorded the highest honours only if they have contributed in some spectacular way to the building and preservation of the nation as a whole. Sometimes we can identify a personality to whose courage and skill the nation owes its very existence: a George Washington, a Simon Bolivar, a Cavour, a Bismarck, a Gandhi, even in his way a Lenin. Older, more complex societies may excavate quasi-mythical figures—Hereward the Wake or Joan of Arc. And sometimes these older societies, conscious of early greatness and later decay or disintegration, can throw up a figure who somehow pulls them together, reminds them of past achievements, guides them through present dangers and sets them on their way with new confidence and resolve. One such was Abraham Lincoln; another was Charles de Gaulle; but preeminent among them was Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill.

It is the business of serious historians, not to create comfortable myths but to destroy them; to remind us that the past was not golden; that our ancestors were not geniuses; that previous eras tolerated a degree of inequity, misery, and suffering that we would find intolerable in our own societies and

are shocked to discover in others; that previous generations blundered their way through problems as blindly as we do today; that historical idols had feet, not perhaps of clay but certainly of flesh and blood. The achievements of Bismarck and Stalin remain a matter of record; but each new generation of historians uncovers horrifying new details of their pettiness or cruelty or vindictiveness. At the other extreme, the wisdom and good humour of a Lincoln or a Gandhi are so self-evident that we are often shocked to find that they were highly skilled political operators as well. We can admire all that de Gaulle did for his country without finding it in the least necessary to like him.

As for Churchill, he is near enough to us for his faults to be fresh in our minds. He was far too much of a romantic to be a successful politician or indeed a successful strategist. Deprived of power he could be outrageously irresponsible; equipped with it, a merciless bully. In peacetime politics he was not so much out of his depth as floundering in shallows like a stranded whale. In war and the whole business of war he found an uninhibited satisfaction which the High Victorians might have understood (Tennyson and Ruskin would certainly have appreciated it) but which to our own battle-scarred generation seems rather shocking. Robert Rhodes James was quite right in suggesting that, had he died in the 1930s, Churchill would have left a reputation much like that of his father, as a brilliant failure. But Churchill did not die in the 1930s. He lived to reunite a shaken and divided nation, rally it after catastrophic defeat, sustain it through ordeals unparalleled in its history and lead it to a victory which seemed to assure its survival as a great world power. That this victory did nothing of the sort; that the world had changed too drastically for Britain to continue to play the role in it which Churchill and his generation had always taken for granted: this was no fault of his.

IT IS PROBABLY as a great war leader that Churchill would wish to be remembered, and it is right that he should be. Ultimately it was he who bore the responsibility for Britain's conduct of the Second World War, for reconciling the differing views and interests of the various Services, commands and theatres, and harmonising them with those of our allies. It was he, also, who had to provide a constant fount of encouragement and inspiration to subordinates who, under-