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CULTURE IN BRITAIN & IT's SELF – REPRESENTATION

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CULTURE IN BRITAIN & IT'S SELF- REPRESENTATION

by James Woodall

It was Voltaire who in the 1730s called the English 'a nation of philosophers, in love with their liberty, cultivated and spiritual'.

Well, there's a surprise: the 18th- century's greatest Frenchman lavishing praise on, even finding a point of favourable comparison with, his country's oldest and persistently weird enemy. More weirdness in a minute. Voltaire was of course in intellectual revolt against France's tilt towards despotism under Louis XIV and XV, but himself the triumphant representative of an extraordinary cultural age d'or which gave us Molière, Racine, Corneille, the painters Watteau and Boucher, the composers Lully, Rameau and Couperin, amongst others. Nothing in that combination of artists existed in England, or ever would.

In a way, Voltaire was on safe ground. As he recognised, England was politically in the ascendant – and, as so often, at the expense of France's global ambitions. In the body politic, England's priority was now, in the 18th century, identifiably freedom (relative and slippery though that concept may be) : the 'philosophers' Voltaire referred to, perhaps not without irony, were the pacified inheritors of the massive civil distress of the previous century. Englishmen had fought hard for their version of freedom. It was an idea France was, until the blood began to clog the drains of Paris in 1792, decidedly feeble- minded about; and Voltaire rarely flinched from saying so.

But culturally, culturally, all the English had to boast about Shakespeare: not quite the mythic figure in the 1720s he is today, to be sure, and a playwright whose works had been mauled and adapted to suit the decorous tastes of early Hanoverian England – and whose tragedies were described by Voltaire as 'monstrous farces'. In 1776, he capped this insult by calling the plays 'a heap of dung'.

And then there were sports; the English were good at sports. (I say `were´, pointedly.) They invented most of them. King James I devoted an entire treatise to the subject in the early 1600s. But another Frenchman had had a warning. `Mistrust a man who takes games too seriously,´ wrote Montaigne, almost two centuries before Voltaire. `It means he doesn´t take life seriously enough.´ Heavy sounds the irony there four centuries on when we think that one of England´s most conspicuous contributions to its late 20th- century self-image has been that jocular ambassador of the sporting ideal, the soccer hooligan.

Back briefly to Shakespeare: boast hard as we might – though that actually didn´t come until some time later – the Bard was initially treated little better by his compatriots than by Voltaire. From 1680 on, a mere sixty-plus years after his death, eye-watering stage revisions of his editorially inchoate texts make the Dead Sea Scrolls look like charming spelling-tests: England, it seems, can´t cope with Shakespeare. His most ferocious tragedy, and masterpiece according to some, King Lear, was performed from the end of the 17th century until 1830 with the Fool written out altogether, and with the hero, Edgar, marrying the heroine, Cordelia (actually murdered in echt Shakespeare).

So what´s all this about? Muddle versus conviction. Taste versus artifice. Invention versus rules. Improvised content versus inviolable form. Shakespeare versus Racine. England versus France. It´s an old theme. As England settled into the 18th century, along came, for example, the author of Gulliver´s Travels, the Anglo-Irish Jonathan Swift – possibly the most dysfunctional seer visited upon any culture and a kind of demented precursor of Voltaire – and, then, a really wild thing called the Novel (listen to the word, `novel´, `new´: no respecter of any rules at all). From a French perspective, it might, indeed, have all seemed pretty weird.

By the 19th century, along with spawning reckless piles of what Henry James would later call `loose, baggy monsters´ (i.e. novels), the English had reclaimed the real Shakespeare and

made him very much the National Poet – partly as a response to all those French outrages against his name, and due also to the attentions lavished on him by certain Germans: Herder, Schiller, Goethe, Schlegel, Tieck. In a supreme irony of cultural history, England's greatest literary figure was accorded new critical respectability in the late 1700s through the hard graft of German intellectuals and poets; one of our weirdest and most wonderful poets, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, was the excited messenger who, after a visit to Germany in 1798.9, brought back the good news, particularly concerning Kant. This is not a phenomenon which, it won't astonish you to hear, has had wide exposure in my country since 1914...

Enough dates. Thoughts of Germany – and German – lead me to an anecdote which might illustrate what I'm trying to get across here, and in this talk in general: the severe difficulty the English, the British if you insist, have in making sense of or codifying and taking pride in their own culture.

Years ago, as a callow youth unclear about what I wanted to do to earn a living, I was taken by a family friend to lunch at a famously pompous London club. This chap, a lord, wasn't himself short on pomposity either and was a – I hate the word - 'distinguished' commentator in the political affairs (perhaps one of Voltaire's philosophers?). I had a vague idea I wanted to write, become a journalist, something like that; I thought the arts – theatre, music, books – was an area in which I might have something to offer, though I had no obvious qualifications for the job. Could this wise man help? Why had I agreed to bore him for an hour, and perhaps be bored? In truth, I wasn't at all convinced his bill at the club was worth adding to my account. Still, I explained my interests.

'Ah,' said this distinguished peer of the realm, 'so you're interested in Kultur.'

Kultur. He used the German word. He used the word several times. Kultur. He thought it was funny. He thought, from a journalistic point of view, my aspirations irretrievably wishy-washy. Humour accepted, his use of the word was also, I have no doubt, to denote a certain inferiority, a dilettantism, in my ambitions. It held me back for years!

‘Cultur’, in English, is not politics. It is not history. It is not seen as particularly grown-up; in those dark days of Thatcherism, it was certainly not what you did if you wanted to get on in life and be taken seriously. ‘Culture’, in the horrid language of England’s inevitable 20th-century foe, could easily become just ‘Kultur’ (of which more anon).

But what about the word ‘culture’? In general, the English find it embarrassing to deal with. It suggests something to do with chaps in tights or rhyming couplets or being antisocial or – as one English actor memorably put it – ‘being a luvvie an shouting in the evening’. Culture is, surely – sparing your blushes over such politically incorrect language – for girlies and poofs. For a vivid taste of this loutishness, check out Stephen Daldry’s new film Billy Elliot, about a boy from a tough working-class background in England who wants to become a ballet dancer...

The British don’t really talk about ‘culture’. They prefer entertainment. The nation which unleashed on the world Monty Python and the pantomime and Noël Coward and the farce No Sex Please, We’re British and boy bands and the Spice Girls and Posh’n’Becks, God help us, is a nation now prouder of its oftpraised TV produce than anything as tedious as a cultural ‘tradition’. (And I’m sure I can say this without fear of grave contradiction in the country which has described England as ‘Das Land ohne Musik’.) Henry Fieldings and Jane Austen and Charles Dickens are today far, far more popular on TV, in endless permutations of that curse on English literature, ‘the costume drama’, than on the page – and thus they become of course, dread phrase, ‘accessible to all’. The death of the word in Britain arguably occurred long before the advent of the Internet.

More commonly the English. The British, refer, if they have to refer to anything at all, to 'the arts'. The 'arts' covers a multitude of sins: everything from amateur theatricals to quiz shows to Boulez conducting on London's South Bank to, I don't know, flower-arranging. The minister in Her Majesty's Government responsible for such things – a new post, by the way – has, in his or her portfolio, rather daringly, 'Culture, Media and Sport': a hopelessly unspecific, typically British half-way hodgepodge. Why media and sport too? Why does culture have to be crammed in with two features of British life which crawl all over us everyday like a sort of rampant poison ivy? Cultural activity has, I'm bound to say, no place of privilege in Britain's political life; we have no such things as 'cultural policy' – it'd be laughed out of court. The arts – alright, 'culture', as Minister Chris Smith is determined to have it – clog the works. The arts- and that is the word we're more familiar with – are silly and cost too much. The arts should take care of themselves. The arts, indeed, returning to semantics, very quickly become 'arty-farty': elitists, self-indulgent, superfluous to requirements. The word 'culture' itself is quickly subsumed into a phrase bristling with contempt: 'culture-vulture' – someone who not so much enjoys or values going to the theatre, exhibitions, concerts and so on, as one who feeds off the aesthetic equivalent of rotting flesh.

Not long ago, in Berlin; I bumped into an outgoing director of a well-known institution charged with promoting Britain abroad. I was on my way to see the new director of said institution. Outgoing director was aware I had a penchant for the arts, books, theatre, that sort of thing. (Writing about them is now, largely, what I do as a profession. I do Kultur...) 'So', he said, 'I suppose you're off to talk about the importance of culture and literature and all that.'

No, I was off to talk about the persistently pig-ignorant treatment of Germany in the British press and to see what, if anything, might be done about it, but that's another story.

`Culture´ and `literature´: both words in this encounter were enounced with bit of a sneer – that contempt again – and a leer, as if a belief in the value of culture and literature were tantamount to having dodgy sexual tastes. And this from a man whose institution supported work, in Berlin, on a German version of a contemporary British play entitled – excuse me – Shopping and Fucking. I don´t quite know how to characterise the contradiction here, but contradiction there was.

The British press: there´ll be no major digression here on this perennially vexing subject and I´m sure other Deutsch- Englische- Gesellschaft lecturers have addressed or will address it far more expertly than I can. But in passing I want to allude to A. A. Gill. There´s no reason why you should have heard of him, though perhaps some of you have. He´s a London journalist employed by the Sunday Times to tickle the tastebuds of the paper´s readers each week with restaurant reports and bulletins on the glories of British TV. He´s droll, metropolitan figure with a high- profile role in the entertainment industry that passes for Sunday journalism in the UK.

Some bright spark on the Sunday Times Magazine clearly came up with an idea for a jolly jape for A. A. Gill: send him to Germany. He´d come back, guaranteed, with as rude an article about the country and its habitants as could be hoped for by those bright sparks at the Sunday Times – a paper owned by Rupert Murdoch, a media mogul in the vanguard of Anglo- Saxon Europe- haters (Australian by birth and an American national), resolutely opposed to anything that might tie Britain into unseemly alliances with those funny French and joyless Germans.

The article Gill published was predictably bilious, long on opinion and short on data: a piece by a clown to flatter the prejudices of Murdoch´s circus-goers. Those prejudices rest,

you`ll have guessed, on a certainty that Germany - and, in this article, Berlin – are best defined by the war, and the war only. I want to quote one section. Here it is (nonsensical fourth sentence uncorrected) :

Germans are very big on culture, big and smug and arrogant. They have Kultur with a capital K. Everything from sausages to Schiller fills the Teutonic heart with pride. They have the most profound writers, romantic poets, incisive philosophers and mobil-Christmas-decoration woodcarvers. And above everything, they have music. No other country in the world can hold a tuning fork to German music. A to Z they only have to get to the Bs and Germany has [and note the waggish sporting analogy here] a globe- trouncing team with Wagner still on the subs` bench. But they see culture as divorced from history; parallel but separate. We, on the other hand, understand our culture as being inextricably entwined with events. Indeed for us, culture and history are almost interchangeable words – not for Germans, and with good reason.

Well, as I`ve tried to demonstrate, `culture` and `history` are emphatically not interchangeable words `for us`, not even `almost`. Culture is only vaguely defined in the English language and, when used, hedged about with qualifications and the embarrassment factor. `Culture` – also a term from biology – simply does not have the status of the French `culture` or the German `Kultur`. History, by contrast, is overwhelmingly present in British life, in everything from the White Cliffs of Dover to gardening to the Imperial War Museum to London Underground bomb scares to Poppy Day to pub-licensing laws...You know the sort of thing. I could go on but I won`t.

Gill`s greater sin is to despise German culture because of the war and to suggest that Britain`s culture, whatever that may mean, has to be far healthier because, yes, `we won`.

That was the thrust of his piece: a derivative and grotesquely simplistic line of argument, knee-jerk nationalism any journalist worth his salt should by definition of his profession be suspicious of. Gill may have a grouse about history but culture is his Achilles heel. This is a commentator who probably wouldn't know a Shakespeare soliloquy if it hit him in the face, and who has not, moreover, done his Hausaufgabe on difficult and prickly and critical, and distinctly anti-war, 20th-century artists such as Kurt Schwitters, or George Grosz, or Joseph Beuys, or, crucially, Bertolt Brecht.

Indeed, contrary to what Gill and his ilk might like to believe – God knows, there are millions of them – one of the key moments in post-war European culture took place (in my view) in Germany on a January night in 1949. Writes one of Brecht's biographers of the Berlin premiere of Mother courage and Her Children:

'Those who were there that first night remember that when the curtain finally closed, the audience sat in a mesmerised silence, broken only by sobbing.'

*

Joseph Beuys, meanwhile, gives us an interesting clue as to how a culture allows certain artists to flourish, or not...

I think one theme of post-war British life which has never been properly explored is that of exhaustion. Britain had, somehow, like pretty well every other European country, to pick up the pieces after the calamity of 1939 – 45, and various noble enterprises took root to help in a massive exercise of cultural regeneration. The Arts Council was one such scheme, a publicly-funded body traditionally functioning on an ‘arm’s-length’ principle from government, serving as an intermediary between the Exchequer and artists – however they are to be defined. The Arts Council – once ‘of Great Britain’ and now segmented into its appropriately devolved regional parts, England, Scotland, Wales etc – has not enjoyed great kudos in recent decades, largely because it seems to have outlived its purpose. It is not a ministry and has never had a broad national remit in the way fully-fledged ministries of culture in say France or Spain have: it is not and cannot be, to echo my earlier point, the ‘Culture Council’. It’s therefore been easy to see the Arts Council as a slush-fund for feckless artists who, in the wake of the great Thatcherite revolution, should now seek sponsors or other means of self-finance – in other words, take care of themselves. Yet one thing which can be universally agreed upon is that the Arts Council has too often backed mediocre art, because more often than not mediocrity is what you get when you brand creativity with officialdom. A simple point.

Joseph Beuys: now I’ve been trying hard not to turn this talk into a series of potshots at compatriots, but unfortunately I have to go on the offensive once again. A predecessor on this lecture circuit gave a remarkable talk earlier in the year about – I think it was loosely about Modernism. I heard this talk in Berlin, in which the speaker somehow managed to leap from Edward Lear’s limericks to Rilke to abstractions to, finally, Joseph Beuys, or artists like him who have, as he proposed, embraced gibberish, incomprehensibility and irrationality; what, this speaker implied – and this is to paraphrase - what art should return

to is the certainty of the Middle ages when we all sat around in churches communally enjoying frescoes.

It was the point about 'irrationality' that bugged me most. Beuy's 'rocks' in the Tate Gallery, for instance: what, he asked, was all that about? Well of course he had no idea because he knew nothing about Beuys, and didn't want to know. The mere name was enough to deter him. I can't claim to know much about Beuys either, but I have long been intrigued by this iconoclasm, his strangeness, the titles of his art works, and the fact that he was German. Baselitz and Kiefer and Penck are or were, I guess, all pretty big on the international scene, but Beuys seems to embody something quintessential about post-war experience. The war, and post-war Germany, were essential for Beuys; he had lived through a cataclysm of irrationality and spent much of his working life giving horror a voice, a shape, however amorphous, however bizarre.

So after this man`s talk, I looked Beuys up and found this:

The human condition [said Beuys] is Auschwitz, and the principle of Auschwitz finds its perpetuation in our understanding of science and political systems, in the delegation of responsibility to groups of specialists and the silence of intellectuals and artists. I have found myself in permanent struggle with this condition and its roots. I find for instance that we are now experiencing Auschwitz in its contemporary character... Ability and creativity are burnt out: a form of spiritual execution, the creation of a climate of fear perhaps even more dangerous because it is so refined.

What Beuys – and what am I – saying here? Nothing too overbearing, I trust. Perhaps I am pushing towards an idea of the artist`s relationship with nation, or with – for want of a better phrase – `official culture`.

The Beuys- Germany model seems to me an instructive one. A principle of challenge, of discomfiture, of defiance, of struggle, such as Beuys`s – and one could cite the examples of other figures such as Oscar Wilde, Albert Camus, Luis Bunuel, Thomas Bernhard, Bob Dylan, all of whom share a bracing determinatuion to remain `outside` - this principle is surely the one that could and should better define `culture` in all post- war, dare I say post-Auschwitz?, societies than any dreamt up by politicians, quangos, advertising agencies, newspapers, or, God forbid, commentators...

Britain, by the way, has never produced a figure even remotely resembling Joseph Beuys.

*

In the 1960s, Britain rocked. The 1960s were the best thing that ever happened to a country. The social upheavals were as comprehensive as the cultural, and much needed. The dour fifties became the unzipped sixties. Pop which wasn't American was British. The Beatles were awarded their gongs – MBEs – at Buckingham Palace in 1965, a pioneering moment in which the Establishment acknowledged that pop had, surely, given the nation a new face. The Beatles were great for Britain, and that's naturally a truism these days. But, as I'd like to suggest to you, those were the days: the 1960s, across a broad range of the arts in particular, landed on Britain like a tropical storm. Exhaustion was finally replaced by dynamism, however chaotic. In purely monetary terms – and some might argue that that's all the pop industry has now become – a similar moment to the MBEs at Buck House occurred five years later when a rather meaner outfit than the Beatles got the thumbs-up from the new Tory government under Edward Heath: in October 1970, Led Zeppelin were thanked for, and I quote, their 'substantial contribution to the country's healthy balance of exports'. Led Zeppelin were no doubt bigger than Minis, Penguin paperbacks and PG Tips put together. Pop music, pop art, pop culture, pop business – pop has always meant big money, capitalism: suddenly, in around 1970, Britain, not bad at capitalism, became very good at the business of pop and rock, and has remained very good at it. And that, to skip a decade and a half, is what the exhibition 'Sensation' was all about. The nasty little shocker came to Berlin's Hamburger Bahnhof Museum in January 1999: some of you may have seen it – Damien Hirst's pickled shark and chopped cow, Tracey Emin's love-tent, pictures by Turner Prize-winning Chris Ofili featuring elephant-dung – all of it pop art, extremely amusing, extremely expensive and extremely unchallenging. Desperate to shock, Brit Art has borrowed the tried and tested techniques of all pop – bright, brash, instantly consumable, able to cause and instant smile – and has had the good fortune both to have been associated with Brit Pop and received the stamp of the Establishment: you don't get

more distinguished and traditional than London's Royal Academy of Arts, where the exhibition opened in 1997. (1997 was of course that year, the 'New Labour' year.) And I was vastly amused to hear Norman Rosenthal, the Academy's director, talk recently about the successor show to 'Sensation', called 'Apocalypse' – it's just opened in London – with yet more German! I don't know what it is about English culture, but even the guardians of the supposedly higher orders of it reach for foreign terms to justify the seriousness of their endeavours. 'Apocalypse' deals, said Rosenthal, with what the Germans call the 'Abgrund': the 'abyss'.

My theme is, I think, the relationship between the individual creative impulse and the 'bigger' national image. Can this, should this, be codified? Let's look briefly at New Labour. The fantasy quotient which entered public life in Britain after Labour took office became, for a while, almost as damaging to perceptions of the country as hideous invocations of a bellicose Britain were in the Thatcher's 1980s: I refer, of course, to this preposterous thing called 'Cool Britannia'.

The term was used in an article in Newsweek magazine, in craven imitation of Time magazine's equally silly, touristic 'city of the decade', or Swinging London, of April 1966. New Labour was very pleased about 'Cool Britannia'. A body of British groovers called Panel 2000 was set up by Foreign Secretary Robin Cook to address the business of representing Britain abroad. An exhibition called 'Powerhouse: UK' emerged in London in April 1998 with excruciating sub-sections such as 'Lifestyle' and 'Networking'. Tony Blair invited Noel and Liam Gallagher of the pop group Oasis to Number 10 Downing Street and not long after, wonderfully, his deputy, John Prescott, got a bucket of water thrown over him at a music-awards ceremony by friends of that same pop group: now that's the right spirit – cool, positively, drenched, Britannia indeed.

It was all part of something known as 're-branding Britain'. I'd call borrowing from better times. 'In the mid-1960s,' wrote the Beatles biographer Philip Norman in the Sunday Times 'under old Labour's Harold Wilson, Britain became the coolest nation on earth thanks to an explosion of creativity among a young generation unwinnowed by world war... But the point about the Swinging Sixties was that they happened by accident and against all expectations; as a kind of cultural spontaneous combustion. This modern attempt to make Britain swing by government edict, to create cool by committee and cabinet memorandum, has the sort of grim heavy-handedness we once used to mock in the Germans.' (My apologies, again.)

This is what Blair said: 'Some critics say that you cannot "rebrand" a country as you can a product. This is obviously true. Identity is complex and cannot be handed down by politicians. But countries do have an identity. Say "France" and we all have an immediate impression. Say "Germany" and we have an different one. When people visit this country they take away an impression. When businesses choose where to open a new plant, the perception of a country matters. That means we should show a face of Britain that is forward looking.'

Ah. It's perfectly clear that the prime minister is talking about how to make the country richer under Labour and therefore how, despite what he says, to market its identity, its profile, as you would market anything you desire to sell. Fine. That's what secular, democratic governments are for: to enrich the citizenry. To do that, you have to advertise, buff up your image – create a fantasy which outsiders will fall for and join. But Blair was also, worryingly in this text, happy to rely on first impressions, which I was always taught to suspect. He seemed to be advocating the primacy of cliché – say 'France', say 'Germany'. It is of course the clichés attached to nations, the promotion of and dealing in stereotypes,

which lead to strife, stupidity and paucity of quality in international life. It's usually politicians and the heads of governments and, in some cases, as in Britain, the media who cause this.

A commentator called Hugh Aldersey-Williams got it right in the British weekly, The New Statesman. He wrote:

Although the obsessiveness of the government's tampering with the national image may seem frightening, what's happening is different from superficial historical parallels. Fascist and communist regimes constructed their iconography. This is a reverse process, in which a government tries on the raiment of its people in order to win their favour. It claims to be about modernity, but in reality it's about popularity. It is Noel Gallagher and not, say, Thomas Adés (a much vaunted contemporary British composer), with whom Blair is photographed sharing a joke.

What's new is the appropriation of ready-made icons. And what's amazing is the relentless, indiscriminate way it is being done. Anything that could conceivably represent Cool Britannia is quickly clasped to the new Labour bosom.

That was, admittedly, written back in 1997, But if 'Cool Britannia' showed anything, it was that Britain, as defined by media and government, was actually as insecure about its 'identity' – another word, like 'distinguished', I rather hate – as it had been since the war. To have a country promoted through its designers, pop stars, TV chefs and Stock Market – indexed soccer teams provides but narrow conduit into the state of its soul.

It is all bad news? Well, I fear it's not that good. The British Council's current campaign, for instance, is to fix pictures to its office walls showing two images bisected straight down the middle: George Stubbs/ Damien Hirst, Shakespeare/ Tom Stoppard and the like – old and new, Rule Britannia and Cool Britannia. It's actually not such a terrible idea – it recalls an advert for Time Out, London's listings magazines, posted in the Tube some years ago which

featured the head, in profile, of one of those red-coated soldiers with a bearskin and, next to him, also in profile, a punk with a mohican haircut: 'We can show you London. Or we can show you London' ran the caption underneath. That was an advert. In the offices of so venerable a promoter of Britain as the British Council, one is led irresistibly to the conclusion that a minor dose of schizophrenia has attacked the institution's designers back home; a single statement won't do, continuity is suspect, let' puzzle rather than enlighten our visitors.

'Dumbing down'? I don't know that the British Council can be accused of that precisely, but 'dumbing down' is a phrase you regularly hear at the moment, followed by 'of Britain'. Some voices worth listening to have spoken out. Writer V.S. Naipaul, of India descent an originally from Trinidad, and often described as the finest writer of English prose today, is one such. In July, in a magazine article, he was in positively, funeral mood:

It is terrible, this is very plebeian culture, an aggressively plebeian culture that celebrates itself for being plebeian. It means the plebeian culture is imposed on the country. For the first time, in fifty years of living here, I feel depressed by a government...

Creating a cultural void will have a long-term effect on the economy. Despite being so anti-elitists, the Prime Minister talks about the great geniuses of this country, as if somehow there is something going on... There is nothing going on. It is over...

They [the government] think they are fighting for the common man, whereas they are demeaning the entire country. They don't know what they are doing, but somehow think this is a magical world in which you can have intellectual decadence and cultural lowness and somehow industry will creak away and money will spin.

I'm sure the champion of Damien Hirst, cohorts of celebrity chefs, legions of Sunday newspaper columnists, fans of the Spice Girls and Manchester United, and of course Chris Smith himself would utterly disagree with V.S. Naipaul. I wonder, however, whether his words wouldn't strike a deep chord in the hearts of people such as theatre director Peter Brook, painter David Hockney, novelist Muriel Spark and writer John Berger, and even a certain John Lydon – made a bit of a cultural splash in 1976 as the front man for a group called the Sex Pistols (aka Johnny Rotten) – each of whom is British, each of whom has played a significant and memorable part in those 'fifty years' Naipaul refers to, and each of whom does not live or work in Britain, and has not for many years.

I'd really like to end on an optimistic note! I'd like to say, for example, that Britain is at the height of a new Elizabethan age, revelling in the fruits of the enterprise, prosperity and innovation which so characterised the first Elizabethan age. At the height of the first Elizabethan age lay Shakespeare. On London's South Bank in our age lies the new Globe Theatre. I wish I could leave you with unbridled enthusiasms about this project – an attempt at reconstruction of the theatre where, from 1599 on, Shakespeare's plays were first performed; and while I absolutely love that building, the productions are generally so feeble, directors so troubled by the space, the acting so mediocre, and the whole thing so wrapped up in the heritage and tourist industries that I am unable to be nice even about this noble dream. The Globe's artistic director, Mark Rylance, has even gone on the record as saying that Shakespeare's plays weren't written Shakespeare but by Francis Bacon: this from the man who runs Britain's premier Shakespeare theatre. Oh God. I come perhaps to bury British culture, not to praise it. But I will go out with a bang. Plenty of Brits, particularly with the UK experiencing the effects of devolved power to its constituent parts for the first time in centuries, question the need for the current National Anthem.

Thank you for listening to me, and here to delight your ears further is my suggestion for a new British National Anthem.

CD: 'Won't Get Fooled Again', The Who

Overhead: Picture of The Who.

Won't Get Fooled Again

We'll be fighting in the streets
With our children at our feet
And the morals that they worship will be gone
And the men who spurred us on
Sit in judgement of all wrong
They decide and the shotgun sings the song

I'll tip my hat to the new constitution
Take a bow for the new revolution
Smile and grin at the change all around
Pick up my guitar and play
Just like yesterday
Then I'll on my knees and pray
We don't get fooled again

The change, it had to come
We knew it all along
We were liberated from the fold, that's all
And the world looks just the same And history ain'n changed
'Cause the banners, they are flown in the next war

I'll tip my hat to the new constitution
Take a bow for the new revolution
Smile and grin at the change all around
Pick up my guitar and play
Just like yesterday
Then I'll on my knees and pray
We don't get fooled again
No, no!

I'll move myself and my family aside
If we happen to be left half alive
I'll get all my papers and smile at the sky
Thought I know that the hypnotized never lie
Do Ya?

There' nothing in the streets
Looks any different to me
And the slogans are replaced, by-the-bye
And the parting on the left
Are now parting on the right
And the beards have all grown longer overnight

I'll tip my hat to the new constitution
Take a bow for the new revolution
Smile and grin at the change all around
Pick up my guitar and play
Just like yesterday
Then I'll on my knees and pray
We don't get fooled again
No, no!

Yeaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!

Meet the new boss
Same as the old boss