HOW THE ENGLISH SEE THE FRENCH

a personal view

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Michael Gorman

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> *A Frenchman must be always talking, whether he knows anything of the matter or not; an Englishman is content to say nothing when he has nothing to say—Samuel Johnson (1790)*

I have made a small but significant change in the title of this talk. I have entitled it "*How the English [not "the British"] see the French*." I should begin by emphasizing that, when I speak of the English, I am definitely not speaking of the Welsh, Scotch, or Irish inhabitants of the British Isles. Nor am I speaking of any class of persons defined by ethnicity or "race." Perhaps this might help: Oxford professor Terry Eagleton wrote, " 'British' is a political concept, 'English' a cultural concept. Britain means Crown, State, and Empire. England means teashops, lager louts, and sun-drenched cathedral closes."

I was born in England (one of the four countries that make up the United Kingdom, and one of the three that inhabit the largest of the British Isles—the island that is properly known as "Great Britain")—six of my great-grandparents were Irish, one was English and Welsh, and one was Welsh—but, nevertheless, I consider myself an Englishman. I have an English accent (of

the lower middle class South-Eastern variety), I like warm ale, and I follow the very English sport of cricket with an enduring passion. I know exactly where I, and any other English person, fit in to the complex class structure of English life and have always voted in accordance with that class position. In short, I am a typical Englishman of some decades ago who feels increasingly out of place when visiting my ever-changing native country. My alienation was summed up on my last visit when I visited a favorite pub to drink a pint of Young's Special Ale (a drink that is to Englishmen of a certain age what Dom Perignon is to French champagne lovers). Three men came in and ordered, not that finest of beers, but bottled Budweiser (a drink barely recognizable as beer) which they proceeded to drink from the bottle. Did I mention that they were in their 30s and all wore baseball caps on backwards? James Joyce wrote of silence, exile, and cunning as the fate of the writer. I still hope against hope that I will be able to profit from the unique fate of the expatriate—which is to be deeply knowledgeable about two or more countries and truly at home in none.

I do not dislike the French from the vulgar antipathy between neighbouring nations, but for their insolent and unfounded airs of superiority—Horace Walpole, 4th earl of Orford (1787)

The English/French thing all began, I suppose in 1066, when one of the basic English myths was born. The mythology, expressed in stories, books, and movies over the centuries, was of cruel, swarthy "French" invaders stealing the land, riches, and women of the stouthearted, democratic, "Saxons." Never mind that the Normans were odd sorts of French people—being the Scandinavians who had conquered Normandy in the previous century (one wonders where their legendary swarthiness came from)—and never mind that the "Saxons" were odd sorts of English people—being descendants of the Germanic Angles, Jutes, and Saxons who had conquered and pillaged most of England (but not Wales or Scotland) from the fifth century onward. Never mind too, that the Norman invasion was a question of warring ruling classes and which of them could best oppress and extort the wretched peasants, serfs, slaves, and other assorted miserables of the earth. Sir Walter Scott has a lot to answer for. His historical novels of chivalry and its dooms were largely responsible for the myths of the American South that contributed to the Civil War and its ghastly consequences. Moreover, his novel *Ivanhoe* and others (not to mention the thousands of sub-Scott imitators—see for example Kingsley's *Hereward the Wake*) were the most elaborate codification of the myth of the cunning French (and by extension, continental Europeans) and the gallant, trustworthy "Saxons" that was the subtext of Victorian imperialism—a system responsible for more misery and death than any other and a system whose

consequences echo chillingly down the years to our own day. What we are talking about here is, of course, racism—the idea that there is something inherently superior about having, in this case, "Saxon blood;" something that entitles the carriers of that "blood" to oppress, despise, and exploit those who are not so favored. See, for example, the poet laureate of British imperialism, Rudyard Kipling. His *England's answer* begins:

> Truly ye come of The Blood, slower to bless than to ban
> Little used to lying down at the bidding of any man—
> Flesh of the flesh that I bred, bone of the bone that I bear …

And his notorious:

> Take up the White Man's burden,
> Send forth the best ye breed
> Go bind your sons to exile
> To serve your captives' need
> To wait in heavy harness
> On fluttered folk and wild
> Your new caught, sullen peoples,
> Half devil and half child.

It should be noted that the latter was published in 1899 and referred to the US occupation of the Philippines—the Americans being, in Kipling's mind, honorary "Anglo-Saxons"—so we are a little far from the English and the

French but the fact is that we are still dealing with a fundamental English myth that rivals that of King Arthur in its enduring resonance.

The French are a logical people, which is one reason the English dislike them so intensely. The other is that they own France, a country that we have always judged to be much too good for them—Robert Morley (1974)

Norman French became the language of power in the centuries following 1066 and is one of the prime strands that have made English the richest language in the world—the other prime strand being the Germanic languages of the "Saxons." Language reflects power and almost all you need to know about relations between the Normans and the "Saxons" can be found in the English words for consumed animals and the meat they contributed to tables. The "Saxon" tended cows and the Norman ate beef (*boeuf*), the sheep on the moors became the mutton (*mouton*) on the Normans' plates, and on it goes—deer/venison, pig/pork, calf/veal, chicken/pullet, etc. The "Saxon" view of the French was that of cruel oppressors and of a large part of English history being dedicated to driving the French out of England in the first instance and subduing and dominating them in the second. Events and people in France, about France, and from France, dominate the rolls of history as learned by English schoolchildren until quite recent years. The myth of

“Frenchness” being resisted and driven back by “Englishness” is never shakier than when you look at the pervasive presence of that “Frenchness” in English culture. Those fine old sturdy English names like William, Robert, and Richard are, of course all derived from the French. The French language was the international language of civilization in the 12th, 13th, and 14th century and, if England was not formally a French colony, it was certainly a French cultural and linguistic colony. At the schoolboy history level, in the Middle Ages there were a series of French monarchs (from Normandy, Anjou, and Aquitaine) including the very French Richard, duke of Aquitaine, who has become mythicized as the very English “Richard the Lionheart” who returns, in the movie *Adventures of Robin Hood*, to free the Saxon nobles from the cruel reign of his evil brother John and his Norman henchmen. History has never been the strong point of Hollywood (or of historical novelists, come to that) but the sight of the Irish-Australian Errol Flynn playing the “Saxon” Robin of Locksley fighting Claude Rains and the quintessentially English Basil Rathbone (as evil Normans) in the service of King Richard I, who rarely visited England and could not speak English, is not without its comic aspects.

The mythologizing continues apace. At the battles of Crécy in the 1340s and Poitiers in the 1350s, it was said that the sturdy archers of England with their longbows trounced the Frenchmen with their crossbows. The “Saxon” archer is an emblematic figure—often referred to a “yeoman” (a freeholder and

“a member of the first and most respected class of common people”—Webster’s Third), presumably by contrast with the lowly French soldiers with their complicated “foreign” crossbows. These centuries of incessant warfare yielded no greater source of myth and what we would now call spin than the battle of Agincourt in 1415. Shakespeare, in his inspired piece of propaganda called *Henry V* (written in 1599), summons up images of Englishness—“On, on, you noblest English!” “And you, good yeoman, whose limbs were made in England,” and “Gentlemen in England, now abed, shall think themselves cursed they were not here.” One has one’s doubts about the prevalence of patriotic fervor or even of yeomen in this bloody battle and I doubt that many gentlemen would rather have participated in the carnage of Agincourt than stayed abed. Be that as it may, we are in the presence of enduring myth—see the wide popularity of Olivier’s film *Henry V* in 1944, another year in which English felt embattled—and a myth that, crucially, pits the noble English, with their supposed “Saxon” roots, against the perfidious French—those transcendent embodiments of foreignness.

Even after the Middle Ages had run their sanguinary course, the story of English-French relationships is full of battles between the two countries. They were at war under Charles I from 1626-1629 over a dynastic marriage dispute; in the early 18th century in the War of the Spanish Succession featuring the battle of Blenheim; from 1756-1763 in the Seven Years War; in Canada over

Québec featuring Wolfe's victory over Montcalm; and from 1793-1802 and then after a brief lull from 1803-1815. The French Revolution and the rise and fall of Bonaparte loomed large in the English imagination and, though the English ruling classes were firmly opposed to both the Revolution and Napoleon, there were many in England with sympathies for both. It is true that Nelson and Wellington became national heroes of the most enduring and mythic kind and the English Scarlet Pimpernel (created by the Polish Baroness Emmuska Orczy) regularly mocked and outwitted his dull-witted, fanatical French opponents, but there was something in *liberté, egalité, et fraternité* that appeals to another pervasive myth of the English—the idea of a fair, decent, honest, peaceful people. The English see themselves as Hobbits who only want to live in peace in their egalitarian society. Anyone who has seen a crowd of English soccer fans or a braying mob of English upper class Hooray Henries in full spate will readily understand that myth and reality are often far apart, but that notion of fairness is at the heart of the English self-image. Also, at the end of the day, who is to say whether modern France or modern Britain better embodies *liberté, egalité, et fraternité* despite the fact that they have reached their present states by very different routes?

If the French noblesse had been capable of playing cricket with their peasants, their chateaux would never have been burned—G.M. Trevelyan (1942)

One would think that the fact that the British and the French have been more or less on the same side in all the conflicts since the Crimean War in the 1850s would have eased the relationship and softened some of the edges of our mutual prejudices. One would be mistaken. Any student of British war films will soon learn that the British troops are portrayed as having respect for their German adversaries, whereas their French allies often provide the comic relief. My father, a soldier in the British Army for thirty years, had two older brothers who were killed in the last years of World War I. As an aside, I will just mention the terrible paradox embodied in their names—Charles Stewart Parnell Gorman and Desmond Wolfe Tone Gorman were named after Irish patriots and died in the most futile of British imperialist wars at 18 and 17 years of age respectively. To the end of his life, my father blamed their deaths not on the Germans or the criminally inept British generals, but on the wretched French *poilus* who mutinied against the abominable conditions in which they had to fight and die and, in his view, prolonged the Kaiser's War.

The British history and legends of the Second World War are full of negative images of the French. For every brave deed of the French resistance, there are stories of how "stiff-necked" and "difficult" the Free French and particularly Charles de Gaulle were, the craven behavior of the Vichy French, and the cynicism of the likes of Captain Louis Renault in *Casablanca* (Claude Rains again). Those images flicker to life even today when, for instance, the

British government (if not the British people) took the side of the US and participated in the invasion of Iraq while the French government and people opposed it. It was all too easy for the British gutter press to write about "surrender monkeys" and portray Chirac as a latter-day Petain.

Many things changed in the British/French cultural relationship after the Second World War. Elizabeth David wrote a series of cook books in the late 1940s and early 1950s that were, essentially an elaboration on the observation of the Marquis Domenico Caracciolo (1715-1789) that, in England, there are sixty different religions and only one sauce with the implicit contrast with France, a country with one religion and hundreds of sauces. I was a small child in the immediate post-War period but even I can recall the deprivations and austerity of that time of rationing, shortages, black outs, hunger, and want. When I hear about countries being "liberated" by conquest, those times come back to me and deepen my inherent skepticism that anyone wishes war to be waged upon him or her. The rigors of the time were summed up in Churchill's unfair but witty gibe against Attlee's Labour government in the late 1940s that "it takes a kind of genius to organize a shortage of coal and fish on an island that is made of the first and surrounded by the second." Elizabeth David became a species of prophet of a better way of living and eating and, as the shortages eased and rationing was phased out, Mediterranean and, especially French, food became a kind of ideal state, a Grail to which anyone who could

buy olive oil, fresh fish and vegetables, garlic, good meat, and an Elizabeth David Penguin book could aspire. This culinary enthusiasm for things French in the post-War years was in stark contrast to the attitudes of decades before. A.E. Benson, in his *As we were* (published in 1930) wrote of Victorian landowners. "Many of them had never crossed the Channel and were quite sure that no foreigner could ever be trusted and that outside England there was nothing fit to eat." I might mention that my friend Geoff Phelan married a beautiful Italian (a Lucchese) called Anna in the early 1960s and brought her to live for a while with his parents in Acton, a seedy West London suburb. When Geoff fell ill with a cold, his mother observed, "No wonder you are ill, what with that wife of yours feeding you worms." Her dim view of spaghetti was quite in line with the ideas of 19th century gentlemen.

Another positive image of the French came about in the 1950s and 1960s. Those of us who were young then knew, with the certainty of youth, that English life was stultifying and had to change and that there were two sometimes competing, sometimes complementary models for that change. The first was the America of Elvis Presley, vast cars, Camels, Hollywood, the beat generation, cocktails, and JFK. The second, and even more alluring to those of us with intellectual pretensions, was the France of the existentialists, Nouvelle Vague cinema, Brigitte Bardot, Gaulloises, chanteuses like Juliette Greco and Edith Piaf, and cheap red wine. The ones who succumbed to the American

model aspired to white sports jackets, ownership of a car (any car), drainpipe trousers and slicked back hair for men and toreador pants and bouffant hair for women. Those who were Francophiles wore black, wrote poetry, wore sunglasses indoors at night, sported long straight hair, and listened to records in smoky coffee bars. We also went to Jean Renoir retrospectives and were on to any Nouvelle Vague film as soon as it reached London. The French were clearly more intelligent, more handsome and beautiful, more stylish, better lovers, and had a far better approach to life than anything to be found in the London suburbs and England's provincial cities.

I have heard some say homosexual practices are allowed in France and other NATO Countries. We are not French and we are not other nationals. We are British, thank God!—Viscount Montgomery of Alamein (1965)

The first French people I ever met were Breton onion sellers. It is hard to believe now but these gentlemen (known to many as "Johnny Onions") would ride about the north London suburb in which I lived (and, I assume, all over London) on bicycles with many strings of fat yellow onions around their necks and in panniers ringing their bicycle bells calling out something that I now recognize as "Oignons!" stopping to sell them by the pound to housewives who called them from their front door steps. Even harder for a

modern audience to believe is the fact that they all sported berets, horizontally striped jerseys, and moustaches. Thinking that this had to be a false memory induced perhaps more by Monty Python than reality, I did some research and found that the onion sellers mostly came from the Breton town of Roscoff and were a common sight in British towns (especially in Wales, a country in which they could communicate in the closely related Breton) until the late 1960s. One source mentions specifically their bicycles, many strings of onions, and "blue and white striped jerseys that became something of a cliché." The upshot of it all is that my first encounters with real French people made it clear to me that more separated the English and French people than the 26 miles of the English Channel.

Then, more than a decade after my first sight of the Bretons, I crossed the Channel on the night train from Waterloo arriving at the *Gare du Nord* in the morning of July 1st, 1960. I had been working as a junior assistant in a London public library and was convinced that my destiny was to be a writer. I was also convinced that France in general, and Paris in particular, was the only possible place in which my genius could flower. All those films and books, all those Gaulloises and pictures of the Jeans-Paul (Sartre and Belmondo) persuaded me that Soho and Hampstead, the "arty," intellectual parts of London could not possibly substitute for the real thing. I told my family and friends that I was going to be a starving writer and experience real life for the

first time. As events turned out, I nailed the starving part but the flowering of my genius part eluded me. As for real life, my Francophilia took a few knocks in the coming months. I did learn a sort of French and was able to get by, though one of the lessons learned was that Parisians are less than helpful when meeting a non-French person attempting to communicate in French and generally adopt what could best be described as a mode of pitying, smiling incomprehension. I also remember as if it were yesterday, all the workingmen in their *bleus* (this was more than 40 years ago), the unique smell of the Paris Metro, the markets full of strange foods, the armed gesticulating policemen of various sorts, the taste of rough red wine (omnipresent despite the "*Jamais plus d'un litre par jour*" notices posted everywhere by the Prime Minister of the moment), and all the intensely foreign differences from daily life in London. Though my Francophilia was dented, it was not destroyed, and those forty-three year old memories are mostly *en rose* and have transcended all the good and bad experiences I have had in subsequent visits to Paris and other parts of France.

> *… that nation which, with but few exceptions, seems to be entirely devoid of truth, & to live upon vanity, deception, amusement, and self-glorification---Queen Victoria (1870)*

France is the only place in which you can make love in the afternoon without people hammering at your door—Barbara Cartland (1984)